Analyzing the Determinants of Group Identity among Aleviș in Turkey: A National Survey Study

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To cite this article: Çiğdem V. Şirin (2013): Analyzing the Determinants of Group Identity Among Alevis in Turkey: A National Survey Study, Turkish Studies, 14:1, 74-91

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2013.766983

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Analyzing the Determinants of Group Identity Among Alevis in Turkey: A National Survey Study

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ABSTRACT This study systematically explores the factors that affect collective identity associations within the Alevi community in Turkey by employing the social identity approach and examining survey data collected through fieldwork. The results show that Kurdish Alevis express lower levels of attachment to their religious identity as compared to Turkish Alevis. The results also indicate that personal experiences of discrimination tend to increase one’s prioritization of Alevi identity. Last, no significant differences are observed regarding group identity between Alevis who reside in urban areas and those who live in rural areas.

Introduction

Group identity is a key prerequisite for collective political action. The way in which a group’s identity is constructed and maintained along with the relative strength of such identity help shape how intergroup conflicts and their resolutions are likely to develop. As such, it is of vital importance to examine the factors that are related to the foundation, essentialization, and solidification of group identity associations in a society.

Although scholars have noted the importance of group identity in political behavior research, most studies have only focused on the USA and Europe. Therefore, it is necessary to extend this field of research to other cross-cultural contexts. In this regard, Turkey provides a rich setting of diverse socio-demographic structure with various combinations of different forms of collective identity, particularly with regard to ethnic and religious origins. Therein, the Alevi community—the largest religious minority group in Turkey with variations in ethnic descent (i.e. members who come from Kurdish and Turkish origins)—offers a unique contextual opportunity for cross-cultural investigations of minority attitudes and behavior. However, to date, there has been a lack of systematic research on Alevis in Turkey. Most works have
failed to adopt a theoretical framework to analyze Alevi group identity. Consequently, the literature has been inundated with a myriad of historical descriptive accounts of Alevis that have limited explanatory merit. Furthermore, most studies on the Alevi community have employed qualitative methodologies whereas the literature suffers from a dearth of quantitative works.

In order to address this gap in the literature, this study systematically explores the formation and perpetuation of group identity associations among Alevis by using survey data collected through fieldwork to test a set of hypotheses derived from the social identity approach (a seminal theory of group processes and intergroup relations, which evolved as a merger of social identity theory and self-categorization theory). This study thus constitutes a first endeavor to apply a theoretical framework and quantitatively analyze the determinants of Alevi identity. The key research question is whether and how ethnicity (Kurdish versus Turkish), personal experience of discrimination, and urban/rural residence affect the prioritization and strength of group identification within the Alevi community.

This study proceeds as follows. First, a brief historical overview of the Alevi community in Turkey is provided. Next, the theoretical framework and hypotheses are introduced, followed by a discussion of the empirical data and the research design that the study employs. The findings are then presented, their implications are discussed, and future avenues of research are identified.

The Case of Alevis in Turkey

While the majority population in Turkey is predominantly Sunni Muslim, Alevis are the second largest religious group. “Alevi” etymologically refers to a person who reveres Ali (the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammed) and his descendants, whom Alevis regard as the prophet’s legitimate successors—constituting the historical source of religious rupture for Alevis within the broader Islamic community. That said, it is difficult to categorize Alevis simply as a religious minority since they historically developed as an endogamous group, thereby gradually evolving into a quasi-ethnic community. In fact, most academic sources include ethnic, national, religious, and political criteria in their definitions of Alevi identity.

A vast majority of Alevis are of Turkish origin while approximately 20 percent are estimated to be of Kurdish descent. However, one should note that there is no official demographic information or scholarly consensus concerning the actual number of Alevis in Turkey. This is largely due to the fact that although Kurds and Alevis constitute the largest minority groups in Turkey, the Turkish state does not formally recognize them as minorities or classify them under separate categories in the census. Moreover, due to assimilative state policies dating back to Ottoman times, coupled with ongoing issues of social desirability and other concerns, Alevis have a tendency to hide their identities. These limitations notwithstanding, a number of academic sources estimate that Alevis constitute approximately 30 percent of the total population, which currently stands at around 75 million.
To understand the context behind the formation and development of Alevi identity, a brief historical overview is warranted. Under Ottoman rule, Alevi sparked religious persecution as a minority group. During that time, many Alevis retreated into the remote mountainous regions of Anatolia and into the confines of small, local, self-sufficient, and outwardly isolated communities where they developed not only independent theological reasoning but also a specific system of politico-religious institutions. Therein, Alevi practiced takiye (dissimulation), refraining from openly identifying as Alevis and even disguising themselves under the pretense of the mainstream population to avoid further persecution and ensure the survival of the community. Consequently, the utterance of “I am Alevi” in the public sphere was virtually absent for centuries.

For many Alevis, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the Turkish Republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk signified an end to religious persecution as the new state embarked on a campaign of secularization and modernization by initiating a series of reforms. The reforms had a radical impact on Alevis: roads were built through formerly isolated areas, compulsory schooling was introduced, and communications improved, each of which helped alleviate Alevi marginalization and allowed for more active engagement in social and political life. Consequently, many Alevis (particularly Turkish Alevis) became fervent supporters of Atatürk and his reforms.

However, following the death of Atatürk, the country experienced a resurgence of religious movements in Turkish society and politics, which undermined previous secularization efforts. As scholars Koçan and Öncü point out, Alevi have often considered such fundamentalist movements as a threat to their existence. The Alevi community’s suspicion toward ultra-nationalist religious movements turned into fear as the late-1970s marked an escalation of fundamentalist violence targeting Alevi across various parts of the country, including Maraş (1978), Malatya (1978), Sivas (1978), and Çorum (1980). Such violent attacks against the Alevi community continued into the early 1990s. For instance, during a cultural Alevi festival in Sivas (1993), a fundamentalist mob set fire to a hotel where many Alevi intellectuals and artists had taken refuge. Thirty-seven people were incinerated as a result of this attack. In March 1995, a violent assault on Alevi coffee houses in an Istanbul neighborhood called Gazi killed two people and left several others injured. The mass rally that followed the shooting quickly turned into a violent clash between police forces and protesters, ending with the death of more than 20 civilians. These events contributed to increased fear and anxiety among Alevis and severely hurt their trust toward non-Alevis, the state, and security forces.

In all, centuries of majority persecution, prejudice, and misconceptions resulted in a state of persistent social disparity affecting the Alevi community in Turkish society. The dominant discourse during Ottoman rule depicted Alevism as heretical and impure, thereby encouraging distorted perceptions of Alevis as sectarian “others,” branding Alevi with a stigma from which they still suffer today. Consequently, even in the present day, the practice of takiye continues to a certain extent among Alevi circles. For instance, Godzińska points out that it is not very
common for an Alevi student to openly acknowledge being Alevi out of fear that “a teacher who finds out that he is Alevi will start to discriminate against him.” 24 Similarly, many Alevi public officials choose to keep their religious identity undisclosed due to concerns about discrimination and negative reactions in the workplace.

With the start of Turkey’s accession efforts to gain European Union membership in the late 1990s, the prospects for making progress on the Alevi issue began to improve. Yet this new period also coincided with a Sunni-based conservative party, Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), coming to power in 2002 (and maintaining majority government control for three subsequent election terms to date), which cast into doubt whether any headway could be made concerning Alevi rights. Although AKP has made some gestures in response to the demands and needs of the Alevi community, many Alevis have found them purely symbolic and remain skeptical about the government’s intentions.25

In March 2012, Alevi’s level of trust for the state was further strained when, due to a statute of limitations issue, a court dropped a case against five people charged as perpetrators of the 1993 Sivas massacre. Alevis and civil rights activists argued that the trial process should have been exempt from the statute of limitations (particularly on the grounds that the massacre amounted to crimes against humanity). However, the court proceeded with the release of the defendants, consequently sparking widespread protests across Turkey.26

**Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses**

To examine collective identity associations within the Alevi community, this study employs the social identity approach as its theoretical framework. The social identity approach combines social identity theory and self-categorization theory. Although social identity theory and self-categorization theory share a number of common assumptions, they have different foci and emphases when it comes to self-conception, group membership, group processes, and intra- and intergroup relations.27 Social identity theory’s primary emphasis is on the role that psychological/motivational factors play in shaping the formation of one’s group identity and intergroup relations whereas self-categorization theory focuses more on intragroup processes and cognitive/contextual factors underlying the social categorization of oneself as part of a group.28 By bringing together the arguments of social identity theory and self-categorization theory under the umbrella of the social identity approach, one can effectively analyze collective identity associations as a combination of socio-historical, psychological/motivational, and cognitive/contextual processes.29

Social identity theory asserts that individuals yearn to belong to a social group and achieve higher self-esteem via group membership.30 Acquisition and maintenance of social identity is accompanied by in-group favoritism and out-group bias, hostility, and discrimination. Self-categorization theory adds to these arguments, suggesting that one’s self-categorization preferences are primarily contingent on the salience of personal versus group identity in a given social situation.31 As such, when group identity becomes salient due to certain contextual factors, individuals tend to
perceive themselves and their socio-political environment primarily within in-group terms. The salience of group categorization further stimulates intragroup and intergroup comparisons, which leads to the perceptual accentuation of in-group similarities and out-group differences.32

In applying this framework, the study analyzes whether and how socio-historical, psychological/motivational, and cognitive/contextual factors influence the prioritization and strength of Alevi identity. More specifically, the following factors are considered:

(1) Ethnic origin (that is, Kurdish versus Turkish Alevis) (as a socio-historical factor).
(2) Personal experience of discrimination (as a psychological/motivational factor).
(3) Urban/rural residence (as a cognitive/contextual factor).

The first factor under consideration is the role that ethnic origin (as a socio-historical factor) plays in shaping the salience of Alevi identity. Exploring this factor is important because no systematic investigation has been conducted on whether there are any significant differences between Kurdish versus Turkish Alevis regarding the prioritization of and attachment to their Alevi identity. Historically, Kurds enjoyed a great extent of autonomy under Ottoman rule, which allowed them to have their own organizations and internal institutions. On the other hand, Turkish Alevis never enjoyed such autonomy. After the founding of the Republic of Turkey, Kurds lost their autonomy due to the state’s homogenization policies that emerged as part of the nation-state building process. Consequently, threats to Kurdish rights, language, and culture led to intense grievances, which in turn essentialized Kurdish ethnic group solidarity.33 Through various in-group socialization processes such as the maintenance of a Kurdish collective memory through ethnocultural discourse, along with continuing efforts for extended recognition of Kurdish rights and demands, the effects of such socio-historical factors are expected to be transferred to and reflected in the psychological state of Kurdish Alevis. With these considerations in mind, the following are hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1a: Kurdish Alevis are more likely to prioritize their ethnic identity over their religious identity as compared to Turkish Alevis.

Hypothesis 1b: Kurdish Alevis are likely to express lower levels of attachment to their religious identity as compared to Turkish Alevis.

Second, the personal experience of discrimination is expected to be a key psychological/motivational factor that influences the salience of Alevi identity. In an early study, political scientist Parenti notes “Few things so effectively assure the persistence of in-group awareness as out-group rejection.”34 As previous research suggests, discrimination against minorities produces grievances and increases the importance of group identity.35 For instance, analyzing data on US public opinion, scholar Sanchez shows that exposure to discrimination substantially increases Latino group
consciousness. More specifically, Sanchez finds that Latinos who have personally experienced discrimination are significantly more likely to believe in group-based concepts (such as linked fate) and have a heightened sense of ethnic identity. In another recent study, political scientists Barreto and Pedraza demonstrate that discrimination increases the strength of social group identity and partisan unity among Latino voters. Several studies substantiate these findings in other cultural contexts. For example, psychologist Dion and his colleagues find that experiences of ethnic discrimination prompted stronger and more favorable feelings of ethnic identity among university students in Canada. These findings suggest that the higher the levels of perceived and real discrimination against a group, the more likely group members are to seek support from their in-group. Subsequently, negative social forces such as racism and discrimination may lead victimized members of a given community to develop a distrustful perception of the society and the political system they live in, which may further compel them to create subcultures to shield their sense of self and identity. With these considerations in mind, the following are hypothesized:

Hypothesis 2a: Members of the Alevi community who have personally experienced discrimination as Alevis are more likely to prioritize their religious identity over their ethnic identity.

Hypothesis 2b: Members of the Alevi community who have personally experienced discrimination as Alevis are likely to express higher levels of attachment to their religious identity.

A third factor that may affect the salience of one’s group identity within the Alevi community is urban/rural residence. As mentioned above, under Ottoman rule, Alevis generally hid their identities through the practice of takiye (dissimulation) and lived in small, isolated rural communities. However, once the secularization reforms of the modern Turkish state took effect, Alevis felt relatively less threatened by the Sunni majority. Some scholars suggest that the diminution of immediate existential danger coupled with the opening of a once-hidden community to the outside world contributed to the weakening of solidarity ties among Alevis. For example, according to scholar Zeidan, Alevi internal structural changes were accelerated by massive migration into cities wherein Alevis underwent a process of secularization and modernization, which broke traditional hereditary ties to the religious hierarchy. Religion lost its relevancy and some even practiced intermarriage. A new generation grew up in the 1960s that had not passed through initiation and was not familiar with the Alevi Way. This socio-historical context may lead one to expect a less salient Alevi identity among those who live in urban areas compared to those who live in a more endogenous rural community.
However, if one considers the effect of urban/rural residence on Alevi identity as a cognitive/contextual factor (in line with self-categorization theory), opposite expectations may ensue. To elaborate, self-categorization theory puts forth the principle of meta-contrast, which asserts that “a given set of stimuli is more likely to be categorized as a single entity if the intraclass differences between those items are seen to be smaller than the interclass differences between those items and others that are included in a given comparative context.” In other words, when a given context includes a comparable out-group, the salience of one’s in-group identity and perceptions of group homogeneity increase. By comparison, when such context mainly consists of the members of an in-group, the salience of that in-group and perceived group homogeneity decreases such that group identity gives way to personal identity along with accentuated intragroup individual differences. If that is the case, the salience of Alevi identity for urban Alevis is expected to be higher because they are likely to be in social contexts that contain both Alevis and Sunnis as compared to rural Alevis who tend to be generally surrounded by the members of their in-group while having less frequent encounters with the Sunni out-group. Accordingly, based on the insights derived from self-categorization theory, the following are hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3a: Members of the Alevi community who reside in urban areas of Turkey are more likely to prioritize their religious identity over their ethnic identity compared to those who reside in rural areas.

Hypothesis 3b: Members of the Alevi community who reside in urban areas of Turkey are likely to express higher levels of attachment to their religious identity compared to those who reside in rural areas.

Data and Research Design

To explore group identity associations within the Alevi community in Turkey, this study collected survey data compiled through field research across various cities and provinces, including Adiyaman, Ankara, Antalya, Bitlis, Bursa, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Eskişehir, İstanbul, İzmit, Muş, Ordu, Samsun, Tokat, Tunceli, Urfa, Yalova, and Van. To recruit participants for the survey, the snowball sampling methodology (also known as chain-referral sampling) was employed. More specifically, in visiting local Alevi cultural centers, neighborhoods, and villages within these cities and provinces, survey participants were randomly identified; they then provided access to a wider pool of respondents in order to help increase the number of observations. In all, 1000 surveys were distributed within the Alevi community. The response rate was approximately 58 percent, thus yielding a total of 580 observations.45

Ideally, collecting a nationally representative sample through complete random sampling is most desirable in survey research. However, such a sample of the Alevi community is not attainable for a variety of reasons. While there are more than 50 ethnic groups in Turkey, little is known about their size and spatial
distribution because the Turkish government does not collect such data. In fact, as mentioned above, the Turkish state neither formally recognizes Kurds and Alevis as minorities nor separately classifies them in its national census. Furthermore, as political scientist Çarkoğlu points out, there exists a tendency among the respondents who belong to these minority groups to hide their true ethnic and religious affiliations. Instead, driven by feelings of distrust, social desirability issues, and safety concerns, members of these minority groups are inclined to publicly claim the dominant Sunni/Turkish identity as a means to avoid discrimination and minimize any possible threats while appearing more socially acceptable. Accordingly, even though private survey companies at times collect national data by employing random selection techniques, empirical investigations that rely on such data can be misleading due to hidden and misreported information that may be given by minority respondents concerned with their security and social well-being.

Given the limitations that are inherent in obtaining a nationally representative randomized sample of minority groups in Turkey, the application of the snowball sampling method (SSM) for collecting data on the Alevi community serves as a fitting alternative. Indeed, many scholars consider the SSM to be the most effective sampling methodology for research conducted with hidden populations and marginalized groups, especially those living in conflict environments. As scholars Cohen and Arieli point out, “In addition to its effectiveness under conditions of conflict, SSM may, in some cases, actually make the difference between research conducted under constrained conditions and research not conducted at all.”

While snowball sampling is generally considered the most effective (and often the only available) methodology for studying hidden populations in conflict environments, one should nevertheless acknowledge that this method may raise certain external validity and selection bias concerns. These methodological concerns tend to arise since data collection efforts depend on chain referrals and the willingness of potential participants, which may lead to samples derived from relatively homogenous social networks—particularly when one relies on a single, concentrated residential area. In recruiting participants and compiling the data for this study, these potential drawbacks were minimized by relying on multiple referrals from different social networks across various parts of the country, thereby generating a large sample size with sufficient variation in the socioeconomic backgrounds of the respondents.

Variables

The first dependent variable is the prioritization of Alevi identity versus ethnic identity. To measure this variable, the respondents were asked: “When you think about your religion/sect/belief and ethnicity, which one best describes how you think of yourself most of the time?” The answers were coded as “1” for “my religion/sect/belief” and “0” for “my ethnicity.” The second dependent variable is the strength of group identification within the Alevi community. To measure this variable, the following question was asked: “To what extent do you identify with your religion/sect/
beliefs?" The responses to this question were coded as “5” for “very much,” “4” for “fairly,” “3” for “to some extent,” “2” for “very little,” and “1” for “not at all.”

The first main independent variable is the ethnicity of the respondent, coded as “0” if the respondent is Turkish and “1” if Kurdish. The second main independent variable is personal experience of discrimination. This variable was measured by asking the following question: “How often, if ever, have you felt you were treated unfairly in your personal life because you are Alevi?” The responses were coded as “5” for “just about always,” “4” for “very often,” “3” for “sometimes,” “2” for “not very often,” and “1” for “never.” The third main independent variable is the urban/rural residence of the respondent coded as “0” if the respondent resides in a rural area and “1” if the location of the respondent is in an urban area.

Apart from these main variables, key demographic, socioeconomic, and political factors were also controlled for. The survey included questions regarding the respondents’ age, gender, education level, ideological affiliation, and household income. Gender was coded as “0” if the respondent is female and “1” if the respondent is male. Education level was coded as “1” for “no formal education,” “2” for “primary school,” “3” for “middle school,” “4” for “high school,” and “5” for “college.” Regarding the variable “ideology,” a code of “1” was assigned if the respondent is leaning toward a leftist ideology and “0” otherwise. Household income (i.e. one’s average monthly household income for fiscal year 2011) was coded as “1” for “less than 500TL,” “2” for “between 500TL and just under 1000TL,” “3” for “between 1000TL and just under 2000TL,” “4” for “between 2000TL and just under 3000TL,” “5” for “between 3000TL and just under 4000TL,” “6” for “between 4000TL and just under 5000TL,” and “7” for “more than 5000TL.” The region that the survey respondents reside in was also controlled for. Specifically, a dummy variable was generated and coded as “1” if the survey was conducted in Western Turkey and “0” otherwise.52

As for the statistical models, binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to examine the prioritization of religious versus ethnic identity and ordered logistic regression analysis was employed for examining the strength of group identification within the Alevi community. Robust standard errors were used to avoid any unspecified heteroscedasticity. For both models, the more conservative two-tailed tests of significance were employed.

Results

Table 1 presents coefficients with robust standard errors for the binary logistic regression analysis regarding the prioritization of religious versus ethnic identity. The results indicate that ethnic origin has a statistically significant effect on the prioritization of one’s Alevi identity ($p < 0.01$). Specifically, Kurdish Alevis are less likely to prioritize their religious identity over their ethnic identity, which corroborates Hypothesis 1a. As well, one’s experience of discrimination as an Alevi exerts a positive and moderately significant effect on the prioritization of Alevi identity ($p < 0.10$), which is in line with Hypothesis 2a.
For exploratory purposes, an interaction term for ethnicity and discrimination was included in an additional analysis. The results demonstrate that even when such interaction is included in the model, Kurdish Alevis are still more likely to prioritize their ethnic identity (p < 0.01). At the same time, however, the positive and significant coefficient of the interaction variable indicates that Kurdish Alevis are likely to prioritize their religious identity over their ethnic identity if they are frequently subjected to discriminatory treatment as Alevis (p < 0.01).

In contrast to the significant results concerning the effects of ethnicity and personal experience of discrimination on the prioritization of Alevi identity, the urban/rural residence variable does not achieve statistical significance. Therefore, no support is found for Hypothesis 3a. One possible explanation for the insignificant results regarding the urban/rural residence variable is that although the principle of meta-contrast (i.e. increased salience of one’s in-group identity in the presence of comparable out-groups) may be at work for those living in urban areas, those who reside in more endogenous rural communities may be more frequently practicing Alevism as a religion and thus also have a heightened sense of being Alevi. As such, the effects of high religiosity in the rural context may cancel out the effects of perceived in-group homogeneity (due to out-group contrast) in the urban context, thereby resulting in similar levels of prioritized Alevi identity for both residence types.

Another reason for such diminished differences between urban and rural Alevis may be due to the fact that rural Alevis are no longer living in isolated communities. Specifically, with the expansion of communication and transportation technologies to

### Table 1. The Prioritization of Religious Versus Ethnic Identity Within the Alevi Community, Binary Logistic Regression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Coefficients (standard errors)</th>
<th>Changes in predicted probabilities (min → max)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic origin</td>
<td>−1.113*** (0.313)</td>
<td>−0.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>0.159* (0.092)</td>
<td>0.131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban/rural residence</td>
<td>−0.421 (0.341)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.005 (0.008)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−0.023 (0.099)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.161 (0.232)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.477 (0.434)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>−0.143* (0.079)</td>
<td>−0.181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>−0.409* (0.253)</td>
<td>−0.082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.308* (0.704)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>441</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log pseudolikelihood</td>
<td>−251.758</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < 0.01 level.
**p < 0.05 level.
*p < 0.10 level.
the rural regions of Turkey, Alevis residing in such areas have increasingly been exposed to the outside world. Indeed, just as urban Alevis may essentialize their in-group identity as they come into contact with out-groups, rural Alevis may also develop similar feelings via exposure to the mainstream media. Therefore, while for urban Alevis the principle of meta-contrast may be at work through physical contact with out-groups, the same principle may be applicable to rural Alevis through virtual contact with the same out-groups.

Table 1 also presents the changes in predicted probability that a respondent prioritizes his or her religious identity as each variable moves from its minimum to maximum value with all the other variables held constant at their mean or modal values. These values indicate that there is a 26 percent reduction in one’s likelihood of prioritizing his or her Alevi identity if the respondent is Kurdish rather than Turkish. By comparison, a shift from no personal experience of discrimination as an Alevi to the highest level of experiencing discrimination increases the likelihood of prioritizing one’s Alevi identity by about 13 percent. As such, the results demonstrate that the effects of ethnic origin and discrimination on the prioritization of Alevi identity are not only statistically significant but also substantively important.

Regarding the control variables, the respondents’ income and regional residence have a moderately significant influence on the prioritization of religious versus ethnic identity ($p < 0.10$). In particular, the results indicate that respondents with higher levels of income are less likely to prioritize their Alevi identity. This result is consistent with previous research, which finds that lower income individuals tend to express more devotion to their religion as a means to cope with the psychological effects of the financial adversities they often face. Similarly, respondents who reside in Western Anatolia are less prone to prioritize their Alevi identity. One probable reason for such regional differences is because non-Western regions of Turkey tend to be more conservative and may therefore accentuate one’s religious identity over his/her ethnic identity.

The results for the ordered logistic regression analysis regarding the strength of group identification within the Alevi community are provided in Table 2. Similar to the results concerning the prioritization of religious versus ethnic identity, Kurdish Alevis tend to identify less strongly with their religious identity than Turkish Alevis ($p < 0.01$). Indeed, the predicted probability of a respondent to identify “very strongly” with the Alevi community decreases by about fourteen percent if the respondent is Kurdish. These results substantiate Hypothesis 1b. However, neither personal experience of discrimination nor urban/rural residence demonstrates a statistically significant effect on the strength of one’s identification as an Alevi. Therefore, Hypotheses 2b and 3b are not supported. Further exploratory analyses indicate that there is no significant interaction between ethnicity and discrimination with respect to the strength of religious identification.

The results further indicate that age and education are statistically significant sociodemographic factors in determining the strength of Alevi identification. More specifically, older respondents tend to report weaker attachments to the Alevi identity ($p < 0.10$). This may be partly because ethnicity-based discourses are more prevalent in
Turkish politics and society (particularly due to the ongoing conflict between Turks and Kurds), which may in turn lead to a more heightened sense of one’s ethnic identity while lowering the salience of one’s religious identity as one’s exposure to such discourses increases with age. Meanwhile, respondents with higher levels of education are likely to report lower levels of group identification within the Alevi community ($p < 0.05$). This may be due to the fact that the education system in Turkey is geared toward promoting Turkish identity and national unity. Accordingly, the more one is exposed to such education, the less attached one may feel to his or her religious identity.

### Conclusion

This study systematically explored the factors that affect collective identity associations within the Alevi community in Turkey by employing the social identity approach and examining national survey data collected through fieldwork. The

### Table 2. The Strength of Group Identification Within the Alevi Community, Ordered Logistic Regression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Coefficients (standard errors)</th>
<th>Changes in predicted probabilities (min → max)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic origin</td>
<td>−0.679*** (0.259)</td>
<td>0.025 0.033 0.092 −0.011 −0.139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>0.010 (0.079)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban/rural residence</td>
<td>−0.368 (0.239)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.012* (0.006)</td>
<td>0.024 0.033 0.100 0.005 −0.164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−0.176** (0.079)</td>
<td>0.018 0.026 0.091 0.027 −0.163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.035 (0.182)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.330 (0.473)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>−0.064 (0.074)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>−0.006 (0.193)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut point 1</td>
<td>−4.809 (0.763)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut point 2</td>
<td>−3.842 (0.731)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut point 3</td>
<td>−2.252 (0.720)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut point 4</td>
<td>−0.717 (0.712)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>455</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log pseudolikelihood</td>
<td>−590.51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***$p < 0.01$ level.

**$p < 0.05$ level.

*p $p < 0.10$ level.
results show that Kurdish Alevis are less likely to prioritize their religious identity over their ethnic identity and express lower levels of identification with their religious identity as compared to Turkish Alevis. The results also indicate that personal experiences of discrimination tend to increase one’s prioritization of Alevi identity. Last, the results show no significant differences with respect to group identity between Alevis who reside in urban areas and those who live in rural areas.

The findings of this study not only provide new insights concerning key factors that influence the formation and persistence of Alevi identity, but also bear important policy implications for the course of the Alevi political movement, as well as for broader intergroup relations in Turkey. Although strong in-group identity can be a propellant for positive, progressive political action (particularly for voicing key group demands and interests), extreme levels of in-group identification (particularly in reaction to discriminatory treatment) may actually be more traumatizing than empowering and may result in a polarized society that is ripe for intergroup violence. Accordingly, substantive policies should be implemented toward addressing the demands and needs of Alevis as well as other at-risk minority groups.

The findings of this study also shed light on the primary collective identity of Kurdish Alevis. Scholars have had conflicting claims over this issue. Some suggest that Kurdish Alevis demonstrate greater allegiance to their religious affiliation, whereas others argue that Kurdish nationalism presides over their sectarian differences. Up to this point, no previous work had systematically demonstrated whether Alevi or Kurdish identity comes first for Alevi Kurds. However, the empirical evidence brought forth from this study suggests that Alevi Kurds prioritize their ethnic identity over their religious identity. Based on these findings, another implication of this study is that the promotion of Alevism does not necessarily act as a constraint on ethno-nationalist orientations within the Kurdish community.

These exploratory findings encourage further empirical investigations on the subject. As a future avenue of research, one may examine whether and to what extent the prioritization and strength of group identity among the members of the Alevi community can affect their levels of political participation, forms of political action, and intergroup relations. One may also investigate whether and why shifts in the prioritization of ethnic and religious identities may occur between Kurdish and Turkish Alevis. For example, the reason that Kurdish Alevis are more likely to prioritize their ethnic identity over their religious identity may be because they experience more discrimination as Kurds than as Alevis. A future survey study may further explore this possibility by including comparative questions about personal experience of discrimination due to ethnic versus religious origin. Another important avenue would be to extent the scope of the fieldwork by conducting surveys in additional parts of Turkey. One primary location to expand the existing data-set is Hatay with its large Arabic Alevi (a.k.a. Nusayri) community. Expanding the data in such way would provide scholars the opportunity to observe whether ethnic identity presides over religious identity for Arabic Alevis in a manner similar to Kurdish Alevis. One may also carry out further data collection efforts by surveying Alevi immigrants residing in various European countries, particularly in Germany.
questions surrounding urban/rural context, more nuanced survey questions may help reveal if the link between urban/rural residence and Alevi identity is mediated through one’s level of religiosity and/or contact with out-groups. Conducting survey experiments with innovative scenarios would also be highly useful. In all, further systematic research will help advance the accumulation of our knowledge in this area of study.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Arif and Gülsirin for their invaluable support throughout her field research in Turkey. The author would also like to thank Leonie Huddy, Kathy Staadt, José D. Villalobos, Cengiz Erişen, Başak Yavcan, Gizem Arıkan, and the anonymous reviewers for their instructive comments and suggestions, as well as Anna Haro for her research assistance.

Notes

3. Koçan and Öncü, “Citizen Alevi in Turkey,” 464–89 and Oçak, Türk Sıfıflığıne Bakıslar. Some of the differences that distinguish Alevis from Sunnis include the fact that Alevis (1) use wine and music for religious ceremonial functions, (2) do not observe the five daily prayers, Ramadan, and the Haj, (3) do not segregate women and men during worship, and (4) use cemevis instead of mosques as their place of worship. See Zeidan, “The Alevi of Anatolia,” 76.
18. Çelik, “Alevis, Kurds, Hemsehris.”
23. Ibid.
28. Huddy, “From Social to Political.”
32. Ibid.
33. Gürbey, “Peaceful Settlement,” 57–90; Eriten and Romine, “Instrumental and Symbolic Sources;” and Barkey and Fuller, Turkey’s Kurdish Question.
37. Ibid.
41. Peffley and Hurwitz, Justice in America.
42. Davey, “Ethnic Identification” and Kaspar and Noh, “Discrimination and Identity,” 1–70. Alternatively, as Kaspar and Noh, “Discrimination and Identity,” note, experience or anticipation of discrimination may prompt people to distance themselves from their in-group and develop negative perceptions of their own community. Thus, some individuals may choose to minimize the salience of their ethnic and/or religious identity to escape discriminatory treatment, gain acceptance by the dominant majority, and improve their socioeconomic status. However, individuals who choose this option may face double rejection by the dominant out-group that they seek to acculturate into as well as by their own in-group members who no longer perceive them as part of the community.
45. Mainly due to a number of missing observations within the 580 completed surveys, the final sample sizes dropped to some extent in the statistical analyses. One of the key reasons for such missing observations and the subsequent drop in sample size is that although the participants were informed that their responses would be completely anonymous, some of them were still hesitant to answer certain survey questions (especially questions concerning discrimination as well as questions inquiring about one’s socio-demographic information). This is understandable given the fact that the survey was conducted with members of a hidden minority population.
49. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. The reason that a regional dummy was included as a control is because Western Turkey is generally less conservative, more urbanized, more industrialized, and demographically diverse (due to the high
levels of immigration that this region attracts) as compared to other parts of the country, which may lead to cross-regional differences in collective identity associations among the Alevi community. The Western Turkey regional dummy variable consisted of surveys conducted in Bursa, Istanbul, Eskisehir, Izmit, and Yalova.

53. The author would like to thank İnan Keser, a sociologist from Dicle University, Turkey, for his insightful suggestions regarding this point.


57. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this important insight.


Notes on Contributor

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References


