

# Social Changes and the Practice of Secrecy in the Arab Alevi Society in Contemporary Turkey

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Place of fieldwork: Turkey

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## Research background

Arab Alevis, an Arabic speaking minority with an Ali-oriented Islamic faith as the name indicates, inhabit mainly the south-eastern part of Turkey facing the Mediterranean. In scholarly history, they have been better known as their general appellation in the Islamic world: Nusayris or Alawis. Today, this group has its communities mainly in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. Their religious doctrine is formed of concepts such as the divine trinity and the transmigration of souls with the deification of Ali, the prophet Muhammad's cousin, at the core. Due to these "heretical" beliefs, it is believed that the people of this sect have faced persecution by the majorities and Sunni rulers throughout their history and thus have adopted the principle of Taqiyya (secrecy) to preserve their lives and religious traditions.

## Research purpose and aim

Many of existing studies on Nusayris/Arawis have focused on revealing "facts" about their esoteric religious traditions or examining how outsiders have been recognizing them by making use of historical archives and their inner materials. In this study, I aim to reexamine unquestioned problems such as their position as minorities, or the meanings and realities behind the adoption of secrecy in the context of contemporary Turkish society. Methodologically, I will conduct field studies on people's practices of secrecy, and analyze the field data within the theoretical frameworks of studies on the relationships between secrecy and social groups. My study could be expected to contribute to the better understanding of religious sects as a social category in the contemporary Islamic world, and the diversity among the minority sects that have been commonly treated with essential views.

## Results and achievements of my fieldwork

My field research was carried out for about two months from August 2 to October 9. After having collected information from local academic sources in Istanbul, I conducted fieldwork in Hatay, a province with the largest Arab Alevi population in Turkey, which is located the south-eastern part of the country facing the Mediterranean. During my three-week stay in Hatay, I conducted informal interviews with people living in Antakya, the capital city of the area, on topics such as their identity, religious beliefs and the current status of the local communities. In addition, I visited local community groups organized by Arab Alevis to maintain the bond in the local society. I also visited Hızır makam, the most important pilgrimage site in Samandağ, a coastal town with a majority population of Arab Alevis. Through this field research, I observed some aspects of everyday religious practice and gathered valuable information on the current status of social organizations and the diversity of views in society.

## Implications and impacts on future research

Immediate priority for my study will be to look into the problem of secrecy by focusing on specific people or community groups. To do so, I will analyze and examine the activities, positions, and aims of local community groups through their publications and representations on the Internet. After that, I plan to expand the object of my study to the social movements in urban parts of the country organized by highly educated young Arab Alevis with the

aim of resisting assimilation to the Turkish nation. Making a comparison between their aims and views will be of great importance for my study because many local community groups are led by sheikhs as well as religious and social leaders of the Arab Alevi communities.



Location of the field



Photo 1: Hızır makam in Samandağ, district of Hatay, a local pilgrimage site for Arab Alevi, on the day of Gadīr hum



Photo 2: A man cooking the meat of sacrificed animals in a large pan. Arab Alevi in Hatay celebrate more than a hundred festivals each year.



Photo 3: A sight from a local marriage ceremony in Hatay. Women with headscarves were rare, reflecting their preference for a secular lifestyle.