

ARTICLE

# Uneasy Neighbors: The Making of Sectarian Difference and Alevi Precarity in Urban Turkey

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## Abstract

This study takes a critical perspective on the making of sectarian difference and Alevi precarity in contemporary Turkey. Drawing on our research from 2013 to 2016, we present an analysis of stories and conversations that took place amongst Alevi and Sunni focus group participants, primarily in Istanbul. These conversations illustrate how sectarian difference can be made in the relations between neighbors as differences become coded as sectarian and taken up within systems of power and domination. At the same time, our research also shows how, in the entangled relations between neighbors, questions of ethics and mutual responsibility arise, though these relations sometimes become uneasy or even unbearable. Finally, we show how the question of “knowing” difference is taken up within a power-laden discourse of sectarianism, one that is tied to the history of Alevis (and others) in Turkey while also extending well beyond this context.

**Keywords:** neighbors; sectarianism; difference; Alevis; Turkey

On January 25, 2021, in the Bağlarbaşı neighborhood of Yalova in western Turkey, residents awoke to find that five houses had been marked with red paint, a cross, and the word “Alevi” scrawled across their homes. The president of the local branch of a foundation supporting Alevis, Hacı Bektaş Veli Anatolian Culture Foundation, Fikret Demir, responded with a statement that aptly expressed the raw pain of these events: “They are playing with the nerve endings of society. We are against this racism that provokes Alevis.”<sup>1</sup> This was not the first incident of its kind in recent years.<sup>2</sup> When a similar incident occurred in the Akçadağ neighborhood in Malatya in January 2020, where Alevi houses were marked with a cross and the message, “Alevis leave; Turkey is for Muslims,” the perpetrator turned out to be a resident who wanted to communicate to his Alevi neighbors that “the neighborhood is not safe.”<sup>3</sup>

These events and others like them open the unhealed wounds of a violent past. The Turkish nationalizing project, from the late Ottoman period, has been premised on the suppression of ethnic and religious difference and punctuated by episodes of violence targeting

<sup>1</sup> “Yalova’da Alevilerin evleri işaretlendi,” *Cumhuriyet*, 25 January 2021, [www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/yalovada-alevilerin-evleri-isaretlendi-1808769](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/yalovada-alevilerin-evleri-isaretlendi-1808769).

<sup>2</sup> Between 2019 and 2021, Turkish newspapers have reported such incidents occurring in Istanbul, Adana, and Izmir.

<sup>3</sup> “Malatya’da Alevi yurttaşların evlerini işaretleyen kişi yakalandı,” *Birgün*, 3 January 2020, [www.birgun.net/haber/malatya-da-alevi-yurttaslarin-evlerini-isaretleyen-kisi-yakalandi-282571](http://www.birgun.net/haber/malatya-da-alevi-yurttaslarin-evlerini-isaretleyen-kisi-yakalandi-282571).

Christian, Jewish, Armenian, Alevi, and Kurdish populations. Since the mid-2000s, increasing authoritarian rule and the rise of right-wing ethno-religious nationalist politics have further exacerbated the precarity of Kurds, Alevis, LGBTQ people, leftists, and others.<sup>4</sup> Both historically and today, these politics have played out between neighbors and at the level of urban neighborhoods, reshaping the fabric of cities and the nature of dwelling together in mixed or more homogeneous areas.<sup>5</sup> The consequences have been especially acute for Alevis, whose neighborhoods in Istanbul, Malatya, and other cities have been the sites of state- and civilian-led massacres in the 1930s, 1970s, and 1990s. Indeed, it is apparent to this day that, during times of heightened political tension, “known” Alevi, Kurdish, leftist (and, increasingly, Syrian) neighbors living in mixed neighborhoods, as well as those neighborhoods associated with these groups, become targets of both civil and state violence.<sup>6</sup>

But it is not only that the marking of neighbors’ homes with the word Alevi reprises a history of suppression and violence against those cast as suspect by the rightist Sunni-Turkish state. These events also call forth another discourse, one with broad purchase and deadly significance: that of sectarianism. Alevis (whose practices include Sufi traditions and veneration of ‘Ali) comprise as much as 20 percent of the population in Sunni-(Hanafi)-dominated Turkey.<sup>7</sup> While the actual situation of Alevis in Turkey is not defined by this religious difference tout court—but more accurately at the intersection of secularist, Kurdish, and leftist politics—the targeting of Alevis qua Alevis takes up the mantle of Sunni-Shi‘a conflict and deploys its reductive logic within the Turkish context. The marking of houses to terrorize Alevis by making the neighborhood feel “not safe” for them thus must be understood in relation to a specific history of violence and in a broader sectarian register.

Our aim in this article is to work against the naturalization of sectarian discourse by demonstrating how a “politics of difference” arises within the ordinary relations of neighbors in urban Turkey. By politics of difference, we refer to the practices and discourses through which differences become known, are given meaning, and are taken up within systems of power and control. “Sectarianism” as a discursive formation consolidates difference along the lines of Alevi-Sunni in Turkey. Using this axis, sectarianism reinforces relations of domination and the precarity of those identified as Alevi in Turkish society. In taking this view of sectarianism as a politics of difference, we add our voices to those critically interrogating the basis of sectarianism as both a politics and an interpretive frame.<sup>8</sup> Our contribution is to provide a

<sup>4</sup> Evren Savcı, *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); Salih Can Açıksöz, *Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Amy Mills, *Streets of Memory: Landscape, Tolerance, and National Identity in Istanbul* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Berna Turam, *Gaining Freedoms: Claiming Space in Istanbul and Berlin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Nora Fisher-Onar, Susan C. Pearce, and E. Fuat Keyman, eds., *Istanbul: Living with Difference in a Global City* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018); Özlem Öz and Mine Eder, “‘Problem Spaces’ and Struggles over the Right to the City: Challenges of Living Differentially in a Gentrifying Istanbul Neighborhood,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no. 6 (2018): 1030–47.

<sup>6</sup> Deniz Yonucu, “Counterinsurgency in Istanbul: Provocative Counterorganization, Violent Interpellation and Sectarian Fears,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2021): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1880067>.

<sup>7</sup> Alevism is a contested category with roots in various mystical movements that converged in thirteenth-century Anatolia and took shape during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries of the Ottoman Empire. Alevis are ethnically diverse, including Turkish, Turkmen, Zaza, and Kurdish populations. Alevis’ profession of faith acknowledges the Twelve Imams (including ‘Ali) and the Prophet Muhammad. Alevi practices include worshiping at *cemevis*, the *semah* ceremony, and fasting during Muharram. Alevi populations live throughout Turkey, with strong concentrations in certain provinces in the east of the country and in major cities. See Servet Mutlu, “Population of Turkey by Ethnic Groups and Provinces,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 12 (1995): 33–60; Murat Es, “Alevis in Cemevis: Religion and Secularism in Turkey,” in *Topographies of Faith: Religion in Urban Spaces*, ed. Irene Becci, Marian Burchardt, and Jose Casanova (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 25–43; and Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, “The AKP, Sectarianism, and the Alevis’ Struggle for Equal Rights in Turkey,” *National Identities* 20, no. 1 (2018): 53–67.

<sup>8</sup> Mona Harb, “On Religiosity and Spatiality: Lessons from Hezbollah in Beirut,” in *The Fundamentalist City: Religiosity and the Remaking of Urban Space*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad and Mejgan Massumi (London: Routledge, 2010), 125–54; Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi‘ite South Beirut*

grounded analysis of how Alevi-Sunni difference arises and is contested in urban Turkey within the shifting relations between neighbors. By shifting our lens to these stories about the everyday entanglements of neighbors in urban Turkey, our aim is to open new avenues for considering the politics and ethics of difference beyond the discursive formation of sectarianism.

If the politics of difference refers to how difference is taken up within systems of power, the ethics of difference centers on the question of responsibility to others. This ethical question is unavoidable when one speaks of neighbors. Neighbors are expected to share “thick” social bonds.<sup>9</sup> This is certainly true in Turkey where relations with neighbors are characterized by expectations of reciprocal care and protection, hospitality, respect, and trust.<sup>10</sup> And yet, this image of the “good neighbor” is doubled by the figure of the neighbor as the one whose alterity is only made more disconcerting by their familiarity.<sup>11</sup> At this intersection between the literal and the figurative, encounters between neighbors create openings for receptive ethical engagement at the same time as they frequently collapse into anxious antagonisms that exacerbate the precarity of marginalized populations. By focusing on the contradictions, ambiguities, expectations, and responsibilities that inhere in relations between neighbors, we aim to draw attention to how difference is manifest and sometimes becomes “uneasy” (i.e. marked by fear, anxiety, or apprehension) or even “unbearable” within the proximate spaces and entangled lives of neighbors.

### Talking about Difference

The research presented here is part of a larger project that examines the role of religion in public life and how difference emerges in encounters between ordinary people as part of daily life in Turkey. The fieldwork took place between 2013 and 2016, a period marked by mass protests in the summer of 2013 and the aftermath of a coup attempt in July 2016. During this time, political tensions ran high as the AKP tightened its grip on power, bolstered its nationalist and Sunni Islamist rhetoric, and silenced and persecuted those it saw as a threat. President Erdoğan and other political leaders often targeted Alevis through “dog whistle” and explicitly anti-Alevi statements. Minorities, including Alevis, felt scrutinized, surveilled, and threatened by an increasingly authoritarian state.

Our study included a total of 32 focus groups with 315 participants in Istanbul, Konya, and Malatya. We selected and recruited participants for these focus groups based on survey responses. The focus groups were stratified according to roughly defined and porous categories: gender, class, age, and religion.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Alevis and Sunnis met in separate groups that were organized along lines of class, age, and gender in order to create, as much as we could,

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(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Joanne Randa Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Frederic M. Wehrey, ed., *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017); Lara Deeb, “Beyond Sectarianism: Inter-marriage and Social Difference in Lebanon,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 2 (2020): 215–28; Fanar Haddad, “‘Sectarianism’ and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East,” *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 3 (2017): 363–82.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Good Neighbors: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Jermaine S. Ma and Paul R. Hoard, “A Tale of Two Fears: Negotiating Trust and Neighborly Relations in Urbanizing Turkey,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 28, no. 3 (2020): 322–34.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Project for a Scientific Psychology (1950 [1895]),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume I (1886–1899): Pre-Psycho-Analytic Publications and Unpublished Drafts* (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 281–391; Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999); Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Class designation (lower or middle) was based on a range of socioeconomic indicators, including education, employment, and household income, though we recognize that these measures do not yield an objective class position and the groups were in fact diverse. Gender (man or woman) and religion (Alevi or Sunni) were based on self-identification—though we recognize that these categories are not binary, exhaustive, or fixed, and, once again, more

demographically similar groups within which participants would feel comfortable. Each group consisted of eight to ten participants who did not previously know one another and came from different parts of the city to ensure anonymity and to provide a cross-section of the diversity in each city. As such, this is not a study of one or more specific neighborhoods. Instead, this project draws on conversations and narratives about neighbors and neighboring that emerge from multiply situated perspectives on the city.

While focus group research has limitations (e.g. it is less intimate than ethnographic or individual interview methods), its strengths include providing a forum for the expression of diversity of opinion about controversial or sensitive topics.<sup>13</sup> Focus groups were therefore suitable for our project, which aimed to explore how difference, religion, and politics were being talked about in urban Turkey at a time when these topics were intensely debated. Our focus groups were semi-structured with a set of open-ended questions designed to foster discussion and organized around three topics: diversity and difference in urban life, religion and religiosity, and government policies regarding religion and religious education. The questions generated in-depth discussion that lasted two to two and a half hours. The lively discussion and debate in focus groups revealed both shared discourses, experiences, and feelings, and divergent attitudes and opinions among participants. The back-and-forth dialogue between participants encouraged the formulation of spontaneous ideas, the disclosure of personal and emotional stories, and the consideration of other points of view. There were often several outspoken people in a group who were the first to answer our questions, offer elaborate responses, tell stories, and engage in conversation with others. The moderator ensured that all participants had the chance to contribute to discussion by encouraging those who spoke less to talk and sometimes inviting them to answer a question.<sup>14</sup>

While our focus group participants quickly identified Alevi (Kurdish and/or leftist) neighborhoods in their city, most (whether Sunni or Alevi) lived in Sunni-dominated neighborhoods. The group discussions thus tended to reflect participants' experiences of living as or alongside a minority. Participants often spoke about how they navigate relationships with their neighbors and where they draw the lines of acceptable behavior and tolerable difference. The dialogues enabled comparisons and encouraged participants to take a position about what they considered "neighborly," what might be transgressive, and where the boundaries ought to be drawn. These narratives have multiple layers of meaning, often including coded or explicit references to past or current events. Sometimes what is left unsaid has as much meaning as what is said. Our analysis therefore pays attention to the silences, references, resonances, and tone of these narratives as well as the flow of the dialogue, interchange of ideas, expression of viewpoints and feelings, and shared stories.<sup>15</sup>

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diverse than these categories imply. "Older" groups included participants over the age of thirty-five, while younger groups included participants twenty to thirty-five years of age.

<sup>13</sup> David L. Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988); Sue Wilkinson, "Focus Groups: A Feminist Method," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1999): 221–44.

<sup>14</sup> This research was conducted with the help of the Istanbul-based Sosyal Araştırmalar Merkezi research group that has extensive experience in the field. Contracted through the National Science Foundation grant that funded the study, this group coordinated logistics (recruitment, setting up rooms and transportation for focus groups, providing tea and snacks for participants, and more) in the three cities where we conducted our research. During the focus groups, in addition to ourselves, two members of this team were present in the room: one as the moderator and the other attending to the audio recording and taking notes about who was speaking to aid with the challenging task of focus group transcription. Groups with women were moderated by a woman from the team, while the groups with men were moderated by a man (though we ourselves and the notetaker were women in the room). Like the two of us, members of the locally based research team would have been understood by our research subjects to be neither Alevi nor pious Sunnis, but rather "secular" and members of the professional class. This environment may have been a bit intimidating at first to our participants, but our skilled moderators put them at ease, as evidenced by the flow of conversation that generally ensued. Nonetheless, there were occasional moments of tension; we discuss one of these in the conclusion to this article.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, Wendy B. Dickinson, Nancy L. Leech, and Annmarie G. Zoran, "A Qualitative Framework for Collecting and Analyzing Data in Focus Group Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*

In this article, we focus primarily on conversations that took place in the Istanbul focus groups. Set in the largest and most diverse city of the country, these focus groups provided rich discussions about identity, religion, and difference. We also draw on findings from Malatya, where the atmosphere was noticeably tense in focus groups compared to in Istanbul (an issue of unease that we touch upon in the conclusion). In Konya, the Alevi-identifying population is very small and not publicly visible. In fact, our Sunni focus group participants did not know about or denied the existence of Alevis in Konya. An interesting discussion ensued when, in one focus group, one participant intervened in other participants' claims that there were no Alevis in the city to reveal that he was indeed an Alevi and not the only one in Konya. As an outspoken Alevi who confidently asserted his identity and engaged in debate in a Sunni group, he not only challenged the image of Konya as a city where there were no Alevis, but he also complicated the Alevi-Sunni distinction by sharing that he regularly went to Friday prayer at the mosque and fasted during Ramadan in addition to Alevi rituals. His intervention in this conversation highlights how the focus groups themselves functioned as never-neutral spaces of encounter and difference where questions of identity and belonging were being actively worked through in the stories and dialogues that ensued. In what follows, we draw on such moments to demonstrate how differences emerge and come to matter in everyday encounters between neighbors.

### The Making of Sectarian Difference in Turkey

Our study begins from critical work on sectarianism that has demonstrated how, as a political discourse, sectarianism shores up the domination of some groups over others, often in service of consolidating state power through the control and militarization of populations and territories. Just as Paul Gilroy writes regarding racism, the discourse of sectarianism has a "constitutive power," shaping and determining social, economic, and political relations.<sup>16</sup> Sectarianism, from this perspective, is a powerful bid to constrain difference, reducing it to a single dimension (sect) and often obscuring the ways that such identities have been constructed over time within systems of power and inequality.<sup>17</sup>

The significance of Alevi difference being taken up into discourses of sectarianism is trenchantly portrayed in Deniz Yonucu's study of the state violence that took place in the famous leftist Alevi/Kurdish Istanbul neighborhood of Gazi in 1995. In her words,

Within this frame, the violence of the police in Gazi, who shot at the crowd chanting "Death to Alevis!" was a violent interpellation in that it worked in two modes. The chant informed the protestors that in the eyes of the police, the embodiment of state sovereignty, they were all Alevis, despite their multiple and layered identities as Alevis, Kurds, Turks, workers, revolutionaries, leftists, atheists, feminists, women. The accompanying shots reminded Gazi residents, they were all killable subjects.<sup>18</sup>

8 no. 3 (2009): 1–21; Janet Smithson, "Using and Analyzing Focus Groups: Limitations and Possibilities," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 3, no. 2 (2000): 103–19; Sue Wilkinson, "Focus Group Research," in *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, ed. David Silverman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004), 177–99.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Gilroy, "Introduction: Race Is the Prism," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference: Stuart Hall*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 2. See also Deeb, "Beyond Sectarianism"; Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2000); Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Politics of Sectarianism: Rethinking Religion and Politics in the Middle East," *Middle East Law and Governance* 7, no. 1 (2015): 61–75; and Nader Hashemi, "Toward a Political Theory of Sectarianism in the Middle East: The Salience of Authoritarianism over Theology," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016): 65–76.

<sup>17</sup> Haddad, "Sectarianism."

<sup>18</sup> Yonucu, "Counterinsurgency," 12–13.



In other words, rather than representing a pre-accomplished social schism, Alevism as a site of sectarian threat emerged through what Yonucu calls a “violent interpellation” in which both populations and neighborhoods were marked and targeted as Alevi. This labeling of certain places and peoples along “sectarian” lines served (and continues to serve) to reinforce dominant nationalizing discourses and that make the expression of Alevi difference itself into a “problem” for the Turkish state.

Indeed, at the same time that nationalist narratives cast Alevis as keepers of authentic Turkic culture and paragons of the Republic, the Turkish state has patently regarded Alevis as a potential threat, placing them under a cloud of suspicion for being insufficiently (Sunni) Muslim, often leftist, and sometimes also Kurdish.<sup>19</sup> Alevis have been victims of violent attacks led directly by the state (such as the Dersim massacre of 1937–38 and the 1995 police attacks in the Istanbul Gazi neighborhood), or carried out by civilians with tacit or explicit state support, as in the massacres in Malatya (1978), Maraş (1978), Sivas (1978, 1993), and Çorum (1980). Moreover, the majority of deaths during the Gezi protests took place in Alevi neighborhoods, which then became sites of continued police deployment and the heavy use of riot control equipment (notably in Gazi, Okmeydanı, and Nuruosmaniye in Istanbul, and Paşaköşkü in Malatya among others). This history of state and civilian violence has neither been officially acknowledged nor condemned in Turkey.

In the context of this ongoing targeting, and despite the growth of Alevi voices in the public sphere associated with the “Alevi revival” since the 1980s, Alevi attempts to seek rights, recognition, or funding (e.g. from the state institution, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, that funds only Sunni mosques, personnel, and education and does not recognize Alevi *cemevîs* as places of worship) as a religious and/or ethnic group (as Alevis or as Alevi Kurds) continues to be interpreted by the state as divisive and sectarian, and therefore a threat. While the AKP led a brief “Alevi opening” (launched in 2007) that brought Alevism and Alevi identities further into public consciousness and political debates (much like the “Kurdish opening” in 2009), this initiative ultimately failed to address the discrimination, exclusion, and violence that the country’s second largest religious community continues to face.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the AKP regime has deepened the disenfranchisement of Alevis.<sup>21</sup> The ongoing war in neighboring Syria, Turkey’s role in this conflict, and the presence of over three million Syrian refugees in Turkey further exacerbate tensions within Turkish society and potentially amplify the precarity of those identified as Alevis in Turkey.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Haydar Gölbaşı and Ahmet Mazlum, “Çatışma Odağında Alevi-Sünni İlişkileri Ve ‘Öteki’ Algısı,” *Uluslararası İnsan Bilimleri Dergisi* 7, no. 2 (2010): 320–25; Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013); Elise Massicard, *The Alevis in Turkey and Europe: Identity and Managing Territorial Diversity* (London: Routledge, 2013); Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Emma Sinclair-Webb, “Sectarian Violence, the Alevi Minority and the Left: Kahramanmaraş 1978,” in *Turkey’s Alevi Enigma: A Comprehensive Overview*, ed. Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 215–35; Mehmet Ertan, “The Latent Politicization of Alevism: The Affiliation between Alevis and Leftist Politics (1960–1980),” *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no. 6 (2019): 932–44.

<sup>20</sup> Derya Özkul, “‘Alevi ‘Openings’ and Politicization of the ‘Alevi Issue’ during the AKP Rule,” *Turkish Studies* 16, no. 1 (2015): 80–96; Cemil Boyraz, “The Alevi Question and the Limits of Citizenship in Turkey,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 5 (2019): 767–80; Ceren Lord, “Rethinking the Justice and Development Party’s ‘Alevi Openings,’” *Turkish Studies* 18, no. 2 (2017): 278–96. In the fall of 2021, there were reports of the AKP sending representatives to *cemevîs* across Turkey, which has been interpreted as preparation for another Alevi “opening” before the 2023 elections. See, for example, “Reuters: AKP, Alevi Açılımı’na Hazırlanıyor,” *Cumhuriyet*, 25 November 2021, [www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/reuters-akp-alevi-acilimina-hazirlaniyor-1887579](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/reuters-akp-alevi-acilimina-hazirlaniyor-1887579).

<sup>21</sup> Karakaya-Stump, “The AKP.”

<sup>22</sup> The AKP has been clearly aligned with the Sunni groups fighting against the Asad regime in Syria, sometimes bringing up Asad’s belonging in the minority Alawite population. Some leftists, who also include Alevis, have come out in support of what they perceive as Asad’s anti-imperialist stance. Thus, the Syrian civil war and displaced Syrians have been understood through the prism of these political and religious divisions. See Rasim Ozan Kutahyalı, “Is Turkey Heading towards Alevi-Sunni clashes?” *Al Monitor*, 16 March 2014, [www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/03/turkey-alevi-sunni-clash-erdogan-secular-media.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/03/turkey-alevi-sunni-clash-erdogan-secular-media.html).

Finally, we acknowledge that the use of “Alevi” and “Sunni” to identify our research participants seems to begin from a “sectarian” assumption that we wish to destabilize: that is, the idea that these are the defining, politically significant attributes of our research participants. At the same time, our argument does not depend on these categories being integral, whole, or fixed, but rather takes as its central problematic how they function as though they have social, political, or religious meaning within Turkish society. As Yonucu writes regarding the violence of the 1990s in Sivas and Gazi, “being attacked as Alevis made many people feel a need to defend themselves as Alevis.”<sup>23</sup> However illusory it may be, after almost two centuries of non-linear construction, Alevism now carries social and political significance—for better or worse.<sup>24</sup>

## Neighbors and Neighborhoods

If sectarianism is a prism through which the category of “sect” is constructed and made to matter, one way to call this operation into question (as with racism) is to provide an “historically informed analysis of concrete situations” in which it occurs.<sup>25</sup> It is with this aim of denaturalizing and calling into question the frame of sectarianism that we turn to the role that relations between neighbors play in the making of sectarian difference. Such an approach builds upon a wider literature that foregrounds the everyday processes through which difference is produced and becomes political in the context of urban life in the Middle East.<sup>26</sup>

That this focus on neighborhood relations is pertinent for understanding the precarity of Alevi lives today is unfortunately borne out not only by the historical violence and ongoing threat to Alevis in Turkey, but also more broadly in the context of the global history of neighbor-on-neighbor violence from the late nineteenth century to the present. Such violence poses a challenge to the premise that neighborhood relations are sites of thick social bonds that might serve to enhance capacities for living together.<sup>27</sup> Archival and ethnographic studies have shown that such episodes cannot be attributed to long-standing (let alone “ancient”) hatreds or even to strong distinctions between populations. Instead, violence ripples across the surface of a coexistence characterized by the usual mix of neighborly relations—mutual aid and rivalry, friendships and feuds.<sup>28</sup> In our research, we find that this potential for harm—brutal violence, but also threatening acts such as marking houses or more mundane manifestations of prejudice—is a current that courses through even long-standing neighborly relations. As we emphasize in the sections to come, the violent events of the past are not forgotten; on the contrary, they are the historical and affective substrate of all that follows.

In Turkey as elsewhere, neighborhoods have often figured as spaces where the politics of difference plays out. Scholars of Turkey have emphasized, for example, how neighborhoods become sites of communal pressure (*mahalle baskısı*) in which the watchful gaze of neighbors works to impose a normative order and especially to police gender and sexuality.<sup>29</sup> Further, on a broader urban scale, neighborhoods have been understood to function as protective

<sup>23</sup> Yonucu, “Counterinsurgency,” 14.

<sup>24</sup> See also Deeb, “Beyond Sectarianism.”

<sup>25</sup> Gilroy, “Race,” 3.

<sup>26</sup> Harb, “Religiosity”; Deeb and Harb, *Leisurely Islam*; Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism*; Wehrey, *Beyond Sunni*.

<sup>27</sup> James S. Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): S95–S120; Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Şerif Mardin, *Mahalle Baskısı: Prof. Şerif Mardin’in Tezlerinden Hareketle Türkiye’de İslam, Cumhuriyet, Laiklik ve Demokrasi* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2008); Mills, *Streets*; Binnaz Toprak, *Being Different in Turkey: Religion, Conservatism,*

enclaves for shared identification, whether along lines of the *hemşehrilik* (shared provincial origin) of distinct rural-urban migrant neighborhoods or the (often related) dimensions of political (left/right), Kurdish, or Alevi difference.<sup>30</sup> However, despite the presence of such segregation with Turkish cities, a view of neighborhoods as sites of internally enforced or strategically chosen sameness elides the historical and often disavowed violence through which such (apparent) homogeneity has been achieved, and also underestimates the more widespread experience of dwelling in mixed neighborhoods with others different from oneself.<sup>31</sup>

Against this backdrop of shifting urban patterns of difference and homogeneity, our study is not one that foregrounds the local history or composition of particular neighborhoods in the cities where we conducted our fieldwork. Instead, we focus on the stories that city dwellers tell about their relations with neighbors. Neighborhood relations have a unique texture: the neighbor is proximate, familiar, and even intimate, calling forth a relationship of “difficult interrelatedness” that has its own set of ethical obligations and affective response.<sup>32</sup> This ambivalence resonates with the figure of the *Nebenmensch* that emerges in psychoanalytical and ethical thought: the Neighbor as the one who is at once recognized in their similarity and disavowed in their difference.<sup>33</sup> As both known and unknown to one another, neighbors encounter one another in liminal spaces: doorways, balconies, and other domestic spaces that are at once enclosed and illuminated in the fluctuations of curtains and light, sound and smell, comings and goings, rumors and revelations. With or without invitation, neighbors breach, defend, and recompose the membranes that connect and separate them. With this unbidden exposure, neighbors become vulnerable to one another; unable to hide certain aspects of their lives (e.g. the smell of food cooking during Ramadan), they face the possibility of betrayal. The entanglement of neighbor relations thus provides a concrete way of thinking through how differences are conceived, signified, and come to matter—not least by being taken up within a threatening discourse of sectarianism.<sup>34</sup>

### Uneasy Neighbors: “On the Night of the Coup, I Thought about Something”

In focus groups with Alevi women and men, participants expressed an awareness of the precarious positions they occupied in Turkey. The neighborhoods they lived in rarely provided a sense of security. Most tellingly of all, they often pointed to their own neighbors as those whom they feared. Under the tightening grip of the AKP government in the 2010s and the violent suppression of the Gezi uprising in 2013, tensions ran high about who belonged in the nation. Alevis, among other groups, became suspect because of their ethno-religious identity and alignment with leftist and secularist politics. The coup attempt by a military faction on July 15, 2016, led to heightened suspicions about critics of the government and those who were perceived to have a questionable place in or loyalty to the AKP-defined “national unity.” Crowds poured into the streets to confront the soldiers staging the coup that Friday night. Mixed with the sounds of explosive devices and sonic booms of fighter

and Otherization: Research Report on Neighbourhood Pressure (Istanbul: Boğaziçi University, Open Society Foundation, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Ertan, “Latent Politicization”; Şükrü Aslan, *1 Mayıs Mahallesi: 1980 Öncesi Toplumsal Mücadele ve Kent* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2004), 101–24; Şükrü Aslan and Besime Şen, “Politik Kimliğin Temsil Edici Mekanları: Çayan Mahallesi,” *Toplum ve Bilim*, no. 120 (2011): 113–23; Şükrü Aslan, “Bir Politik Mekan Olarak ‘Gül’ ve ‘Su’yun Mahallinde Toplumsal ve Kültürel Örüntülere Yolculuk,” *Arkitera*, October 11, 2010, [www.arkitera.com/gorus/bir-politik-mekan-olarak-gul-ve-suyun-mahallinde-toplumsal-ve-kulturel-oruntulere-tarihsel-yolculuk/](http://www.arkitera.com/gorus/bir-politik-mekan-olarak-gul-ve-suyun-mahallinde-toplumsal-ve-kulturel-oruntulere-tarihsel-yolculuk/).

<sup>31</sup> Fisher-Onar et al., *Istanbul: Mills, Streets*.

<sup>32</sup> Katherine McKittrick, “On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 8 (2011): 947–63. See also Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> Joe Painter, “The Politics of the Neighbor,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, no. 3 (2012): 515–33.

<sup>34</sup> Helen Wilson and Jonathan Darling, *The Possibilities of Encounter* (New York: Routledge, 2016).



jets, the calls to prayer and *sela* (a prayerful recitation of asking for forgiveness of Muslims who died) echoed all night outside of normalized Islamic ritual time, calling people to come out and fight, in Istanbul and other cities.<sup>35</sup> In a focus group discussion that took place in Istanbul just a few months after the coup attempt in September 2016, a group of lower-income, mostly working, older Alevi women compared their feelings of unease to their neighbors' and referenced the night of the coup.<sup>36</sup>

- Kadriye: We had [Armenian] neighbors; they weren't comfortable. Compared to them, we are much more comfortable. They're not. They are always alert. They never defend themselves. They never voice opinions. They have much more anxiety than us.
- Canser: They're more of a minority than us. We have anxiety [*tedirgin*] but they have it more.
- Kadriye: They are more afraid.
- Moderator: There's a discourse now about national unity; we've been hearing about it more often lately. Could we consider what you're saying, this anxiety, as a clue in relation to who belongs within this national unity and which groups the concept has trouble encompassing? Do you think that it includes you?
- Songül: We are included in national unity but we are not.
- Rahmiye: We are not accepted. On the night of the coup [July 15, 2016], I thought about something. When everyone is out on the street and these crowds are very easily controlled, you know? I thought about the massacre in Sivas or in Maraş. We are only two households in my neighborhood, you see. I thought this could very well be possible. I was afraid.
- Moderator: Two households?
- Rahmiye: There are two Alevi households. This can easily be taken advantage of. I thought about it that night.
- Canser: We think about these things in these kinds of situations.
- Rahmiye: Most of us thought about that. Most of us waited in fear that night.
- Moderator: Is there anyone else who felt that? Everyone was worried that night but maybe we can talk about something else here. Did you feel something similar?
- Rahmiye: It's based on my previous experiences. I don't have a specific experience but...Okay, I'm accepted but...I watched a documentary about Maraş and I shuddered. People said things like, "I saw my closest neighbor attacking me." Think about it, we eat at the same table, but suddenly, because of this thing called "religion," we become enemies. I thought about this that night.
- Kadriye: My sister-in-law was a nurse in Sivas. They actually marked the doors of Alevi houses back then and they had to bring the children to our village to leave them with us. They themselves had to sleep at the hospital.
- Moderator: When was this?
- Kadriye: In Sivas, during the period of the September 12 coup [1980]. It started before, just before the coup. It was around that time when a lot of Alevis were, well, massacred. Like in Maraş.
- Rahmiye: In a neighborhood in Malatya...Thankfully it was averted. I saw it online. There was an Alevi neighborhood, Konaklar or something. Some people

<sup>35</sup> Denise Gill, "Turkey's Coup and the Call to Prayer: Sounds of Violence Meet Islamic Devotionals," *The Conversation*, 10 August 2016, <https://theconversation.com/turkeys-coup-and-the-call-to-prayer-sounds-of-violence-meet-islamic-devotionals-63746>.

<sup>36</sup> All names of focus group participants are pseudonyms.

said, “Let’s head there” [on the night of July 15]. Thank God it didn’t happen.

Moderator: Now they are moving Syrians into Sivas and in Maraş. Are you aware of that? [All say “yes.”] What do you think about that?

Multiple voices: We don’t like it.

In the midst of a conversation about the silences and anxieties attendant to Alevi identification, Kadriye (a working mother in her forties who lives in Çeliktepe, a lower-income neighborhood with almost half a million residents in the Kağıthane district of central Istanbul) points out that there are differences that are even more difficult to bear.<sup>37</sup> If Alevis hold their cards close—selectively revealing themselves, watching for prejudice, stifling their own voices—Kadriye observes that, as the remnants of a population that Ottoman leadership decided to expel or massacre between 1915 and 1916, her Armenian neighbors live even more cautiously and fearfully than she does.<sup>38</sup> Kadriye recognizes her Armenian neighbors’ anxiety; it is legible to her on a continuum with her own, and this resonates with the other women in the focus group.

But unlike non-Muslim minorities, cast forever as “foreign” within Turkish national ideology, Alevis embody a proximate, domestic difference, one that has been shoehorned into national mythologies of Turkishness at the same time as it remains unaccommodated.<sup>39</sup> Songül asserts, “We are included in national unity but we are not.” She works and lives in Okmeydanı, a leftist working-class neighborhood with a large Alevi and Kurdish population that lies across Kağıthane and Şişli districts of central Istanbul, whose history is enmeshed with Alevi socialist organizing, and was the location of protests and deadly clashes with the police in 2014.<sup>40</sup> As a resident of this embattled neighborhood, she expresses succinctly what recent historiographies of Alevism have argued: that Kemalist and nationalist ideologies in Turkey have worked to keep Alevis (and Kurds) “within the discursive reach of the nation, explicitly defined as Turkish and implicitly as Muslim, while excluding them at the same time from its normative center.”<sup>41</sup>

There is a syncopation to the focus group discussion excerpted above, an “Okay...but...” On the one hand, the women express that they are included, accepted: They are part of a national discourse of belonging to a degree that pertains neither to their Armenian neighbors nor to the Syrian new arrivals. And yet our Alevi research participants (in this focus group and others) also describe an ever-present awareness that they and their communities

<sup>37</sup> Population figures are from [www.istanbul.gov.tr/ilcelerimiz](http://www.istanbul.gov.tr/ilcelerimiz).

<sup>38</sup> The Young Turk government’s systematic genocide of Armenian citizens in 1915 resulted in the deaths of over a million Armenians in Anatolia; see International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS), open letter to Prime Minister Erdogan, 13 June 2015, <https://genocidescholars.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Turkish-State-Denial-Open-Letter.pdf>. On the affective aftermath of the 2007 assassination of Hrant Dink, an Armenian journalist in Turkey, see Nora Tataryan, “Armenians Living in Turkey and the Assassination of Hrant Dink: Loss, Mourning and Melancholia” (PhD diss., Sabancı University, 2012), [http://research.sabanciuniv.edu/21669/1/425374\\_NoraTataryan.pdf](http://research.sabanciuniv.edu/21669/1/425374_NoraTataryan.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> In the aftermath of the twentieth-century expulsions, at most 1 percent of the Turkish population today is categorized as “non-Muslim” on the Turkish census and therefore as a “minority” according to the Republican constitution. Alevis have sought the rights and freedoms associated with minority status in Turkey but have also resisted being officially recategorized as a (non-Muslim) minority; see Bayram Ali Soner and Şule Toktaş, “Alevis and Alevism in the Changing Context of Turkish Politics: The Justice and Development Party’s Alevi Opening,” *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): 419–34.

<sup>40</sup> In the spring of 2014, protests in Okmeydanı erupted following the death of Berkin Elvan, an Alevi teenager who was hit by a tear gas canister fired by the police during the Gezi protests, was in a coma for months, and died in March, and in response to the Soma mine disaster that killed 301 people in Manisa in western Turkey in May 2014. See Barbaros Kayan, “In Photos: Fear and Death Takes Over Istanbul’s Okmeydanı Neighborhood,” *Vice*, 27 May 2014, [www.vice.com/en/article/bja3zv/in-photos-fear-and-death-takes-over-istanbuls-okmeydani-neighborhood](http://www.vice.com/en/article/bja3zv/in-photos-fear-and-death-takes-over-istanbuls-okmeydani-neighborhood). On Alevi youth in Okmeydanı, see Tolga Özata, “Visibility through Invisibility: Spatialized Political Subjectivities of Alevi Youth,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 62 (2020): 3–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2020.5>.

<sup>41</sup> Dressler, *Writing Religion*, xvii.

have historically been and might yet become the target of violence. This duality reflects what Kabir Tambar aptly refers to as the twentieth-century inscription of Alevis within “both a discourse of inclusion and a history of violence.”<sup>42</sup>

In July 2016, on the night of the coup attempt, demonstrators took to the streets and the past and the future collided in the event, surging through the emergent encounter as incipient, historically and geographically conditioned tendencies: what happened, what might have happened, or what might yet. With anti-coup demonstrators filling the streets, fifty-two-year-old Rahmiye (who lives and works in Gültepe, a working-class neighborhood located in Kağıthane district) describes waiting in fear, haunted by past moments of violence against Alevis. Others in the focus group share similar feelings, while others remain silent but nod in confirmation. When Rahmiye refers to her “previous experiences,” she refers explicitly to the events of 1978 (leading up to the 1980 coup) in which ultra-nationalist groups waged a campaign of terror that culminated in anti-Alevi pogroms in the central and eastern provinces of Sivas, Maraş, and Çorum, with smaller-scale confrontations erupting in towns throughout the region. In eliding this history with her own past, she incorporates into her own life story a communal history of victimization. It was not only in this focus group where we heard Alevis express the foreboding that the crowds sparked in them that night.

Such fears were not unwarranted. On Saturday night following the coup attempt, groups of demonstrators entered well-known Alevi and Kurdish neighborhoods, chanting against local residents in Gazi and Okmeydanı in Istanbul, Tuzluca in Ankara, and Armutlu in Antakya. By Sunday, when it was clear that Erdoğan would retain power, violent mobs descended on a Syrian neighborhood in Ankara, where they looted and vandalized Syrian-run businesses without police intervention. Meanwhile, that night in Malatya, nearly 1,000 Erdoğan supporters gathered in the Alevi neighborhood of Paşaköşkü where they chanted provocative anti-Alevi slogans and harassed resident women.<sup>43</sup> When fighting broke out, police were forced to intervene to prevent the anti-coup mob from storming the Alevi neighborhood. “In a neighborhood in Malatya—”: the ominous unsaid, the unactualized. In Rahmiye’s half-spoken narrative, this was where “it” didn’t happen. Some of our Alevi focus group participants remained convinced that if the coup had succeeded, they would have been massacred.

By describing their fear on the night of the coup, our participants try to explain to us—the researchers in the room, all of us non-Alevis—that this alertness to potential threat is ordinary for them; unease (fear, anxiety, and apprehension) is the affective fabric of their lives. Their profound sense of vulnerability is close to home, located not in some distant quarter but in their own neighborhoods; not only the well-known Alevi neighborhoods that were targeted by mobs the night following the coup, but in the perhaps more typical, mixed areas in which our participants often dwell. Living as a minority in a Sunni-dominated neighborhood, Rahmiye feared her own neighbors, the ones who know that Alevis are precariously present in their midst (“only two households”) and could potentially point them out to the mob. This fear arises in relation to an historical precedent (from Maraş, “I saw my closest neighbor attacking me”) that is always present, unresolved and unrepented.

Finally, the coordinates of Alevi difference and the threat of violence take shape in relation to other differences, ambivalently located as both internal and external to the Turkish state. The focus group excerpt with which we opened this section begins with the recognition of the palpable anxiety of the Armenian neighbors (“They’re more of a minority than us. We have anxiety but they have it more”), whose own difference and traumatic history have been cast as unassimilable within Turkish national ideology. For our focus group

<sup>42</sup> Tambar, *Pluralism*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> These incidents in July 2016 were reported in the media. See, for example, “Darbeyi Protesto Eden Gruplar Alevi Mahallelerinde Gerginliğe Neden Oldu,” *Haberler*, 15 July 2016, [www.haberler.com/darbeyi-protesto-eden-gruplar-alevi-8617207-haberi](http://www.haberler.com/darbeyi-protesto-eden-gruplar-alevi-8617207-haberi).

participants, it is as though the “otherness” of the Armenians lies on the other side of a menacing threshold, one that threatens to shift and open under one’s feet. The excerpt ends with the appearance of yet another “other”: when asked about the movement of Syrians into majority Alevi provinces, the shared response is, “We don’t like it.” For some, the new (predominantly Sunni) Syrian presence in these areas signals the possibility of another threatening iteration of Alevi difference: the Sunnification of formerly majority Alevi areas and a (re)mapping within the coordinates of the violent “sectarianism” to the south.<sup>44</sup> Difference is cast and recast. For Alevis, this negotiation carries an incipient threat: not distant or abstract but woven into the everyday fabric of the uneasy dwelling together of neighbors, with all that is left unsaid.

### Unbearable Differences: “We Never Talked about [It]”

Neighboring is an ambivalent relation in which questions of ethics—that is, of how to respond to another who is both familiar to and different from oneself—arise and are answered in sometimes surprising ways. While the previous section focused on the uneasiness of Alevi neighbors at a moment of intense polarization, here we turn to a story of everyday neighbor relations to show how the entanglement of neighbors’ lives, even when characterized by trust and care, can harbor this uneasiness and devolve into something more painful, even unbearable. Focusing on a single extended story told in a focus group, we show how, in a context redolent with the violence of the past and the power dynamics of “sectarian” discourse, neighbor relations have the potential to become saturated with power relations—to become unbearable.

The story that we analyze here took place in a focus group with young Alevi women in Istanbul in September 2016. The participants in this focus group, as in others, took a range of positions vis-à-vis religious practice and “mixing with” Sunni Muslims; some engaged in Sunni religious spaces and practices, going to mosques and fasting during Ramadan, and several had Sunni relatives. Still, many shared stories of how their Sunni neighbors were surprised and even taken aback when they revealed their Alevi identification. When the conversation started to move in a different direction (as women started to give examples of how Sunni rituals and practices dominate public life), Ayla intervened to say that she did not have the chance to share her story yet. A thirty-four-year-old accountant who lived in Gülbağ (a lower-income part of Şişli in central Istanbul), Ayla had been among the quieter participants of the group. She proceeded to tell her story, uninterrupted, as the group hushed to listen:

I have a neighbor from Konya. This happened very recently. She works at Mado [a restaurant chain]. She had to go to Konya for a while. She had a ten-year-old daughter. She left her with us for a week. We’ve been very good neighbors for four to five years. We never talked about Alevism-Sunnism before. She left us her daughter for a week. The daughter stayed with me. She also has a [older] daughter close to my age. When my son...was little, I used to visit her. Her daughter would take my keys and smoke in our house even when my husband was alone in the house. We were that close...She was so good, she worshipped me, loved me a lot, and I was too naive. Then one day, another neighbor’s (from Bolu) daughter ran away with her sister-in-law’s husband. We were gossiping; I was with them. We were at my neighbor’s house—the neighbor from Erzurum. “Have you heard, [the neighbor’s] daughter ran away with her sister-in-law’s husband?” “Oh that...” etc.; they were cursing.

<sup>44</sup> Because the Turkish government has been more likely to admit Sunnis and Arabs than ethnic or religious minorities such as Alawites or Kurds, critics have suggested that Turkey’s so-called open door refugee policy is promoting the Sunnification of Alevi areas. See Burcu Toğral Koca, “Deconstructing Turkey’s ‘Open Door’ Policy towards Refugees from Syria,” *Migration Letters* 12, no. 3 (2015): 209–25.

My neighbor from Konya said, “She must be a *Kızılbaş* [crimson-head, often used as a pejorative label for Alevis].” I asked her, “Who are those?” She answered: “Alevis. They have no honor.” I said, “Really? You left your daughter with me for ten days. My husband is thirty years old. Your daughter takes my keys and goes to my house when I’m at your house. She smokes in my house when my husband is at home. Have you ever seen me do anything disgraceful? I’m Alevi.” She was shocked. She said, “I guess I don’t know what an Alevi is.” [I said,] “That’s no excuse. You say ‘*Kızılbaş*’ without even thinking about it twice. We have been neighbors for six years. There’s a lot I can say to you, I don’t like confronting people. But you, you just labeled the girl a ‘*Kızılbaş*’ because she ran away with another man. That’s what our mothers used to say. My mother is eighty years old, you are fifty, haven’t you learned anything?” Of course, after that our relationship was never the same. I wasn’t warm to her anymore and she moved away after a while.

Ayla’s story first lays out the contours of her close relationship with her neighbor, only to reveal its sudden rupture. This relationship includes known differences (they are from different parts of Turkey and of different ages) and those that are unknown or kept a secret (Ayla’s Alevi identity and the neighbor’s anti-Alevi prejudice). They build a relationship defined by care and protection of their children, including young daughters, who are traditionally considered the most vulnerable within families. They share food, enter each other’s homes comfortably, and even provide a space of refuge when needed. Ayla’s narration of her relationship with her neighbor has all the signs of the neighbor as the other “who is not necessarily kin but who can be.”<sup>45</sup> Her neighbor’s use of the derogatory term *Kızılbaş*—an old Ottoman term for a population that the rulers of the empire considered heretical and disloyal—reveals an unbearable difference that leads to the end of this relationship. Ayla hears her neighbor using *Kızılbaş* generically, without any consideration of the harm it does to those at its target and the long history of violence within which it is imbricated. In her neighbor’s usage (as in its common usage by some Sunnis in Turkey today) this term simply indicates dishonor and moral failing—as though there is an equivalence between perfidy and the Alevi tradition. This encounter casts Ayla’s relation with her neighbor anew; an irreversible difference emerges and positions both subjects against a new set of coordinates in a sociopolitical field of disappointment and betrayal. The efforts of Ayla’s neighbor to mend the relationship are of no use. Finally, the neighbor moves away.

Yet the moment of the slur is not the first sign of distrust between neighbors, for Ayla and her family were hiding their Aleviness all along. Not revealing Alevi identification has been a strategy of survival for many Alevis in Turkey and continues even after the “Alevi revival” that brought out debates about Alevi identity, history, and culture into the public sphere.<sup>46</sup> In our research, we also heard of many stories of parents telling their children not to tell anyone that they are Alevi and even to keep their ancestral town a secret, fearing that it might provide a clue to Alevi identity. While keeping her own identity closely guarded, Ayla befriended her neighbor, knowing fully that she was Sunni and from the socially and religiously conservative Sunni-dominated city of Konya. Alevi-Sunni difference seemed irrelevant for years, despite their relationship spanning many Ramadans and Muharrams. There seemed nothing perceptibly different about Ayla and her family that would have placed them as Alevi in the eyes of her neighbor. And Ayla’s shock at her neighbor’s slur shows that she did not suspect her neighbor to harbor bigotry toward Alevis.

<sup>45</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics and Politics,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1989), 289–97, as quoted in Painter, “Politics of the Neighbor,” 529.

<sup>46</sup> The strategy of hiding Aleviness is mentioned in many articles about Alevi identity. See, for example, Kerem Karaosmanoğlu, “Beyond Essentialism: Negotiating Alevi Identity in Urban Turkey,” *Identities* 20, no. 5 (2013): 580–97; and Hande Sözer, *Managing Invisibility: Dissimulation and Identity Maintenance among Alevi Bulgarian Turks* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).



Ayla defends her family's honor and morality against the neighbor's blanket accusations of Alevis being dishonorable in a gendered and sexualized context. She emphasizes how she took care of her neighbor's daughters; the younger one stayed with her family for a full week and the older one simply took her keys to go smoke in her house even when her husband was alone at home. Here, she hints at the possibility of a sexual encounter between the neighbor's daughter and her husband. She suggests the potential of such an encounter by underscoring the age of both; the daughter is close to her own age and her husband is young. She leaves unsaid that in many circumstances, this situation alone would lead to questions about the chastity of the neighbor's daughter and be considered dishonorable. Also unsaid is why the neighbor's daughter cannot smoke at her own house. Young women's smoking is perceived as transgressive and immoral in some conservative social circles and presumably the neighbor's daughter was avoiding her father's scrutiny by smoking in Ayla's home.<sup>47</sup> Ayla brings up these examples of the neighbor's daughters as proof of her husband's and her family's honorable conduct. Her story also reveals that her neighbor trusted Ayla with her children. Yet, all that time, she chose to keep her Alevi identification a secret—until the moment she could no longer.

The unbearable moment of the slur arises, and Ayla expresses her shock and exasperation: "That's what our mothers used to say. My mother is eighty years old, you are fifty, haven't you learned anything?" Ayla's neighbor has betrayed a prejudicial attitude that Ayla associated with an older generation, one that lacked awareness of Alevi culture and identity. For Ayla, the use of this slur by a woman of her own generation, and by someone with whom she has shared the intimacies of neighboring, is a shocking betrayal. While Ayla is not threatened by her neighbor in a literal sense, this slur in the mouth of her neighbor should be understood as marking what Patricia Hill Collins calls "a saturated site of intersecting power relations"—a site, in other words, where violence and political domination are rooted in the everyday.<sup>48</sup> This is what is unbearable.

Ayla's story demonstrates how the daily entanglements of neighbors both fuel and trouble the marking out of what is shared and what is separate, what is familiar, what is tolerable, and what is unbearable. Ayla's story may end in the collapse of neighboring, but it also points toward the receptivity of neighbors to one another and how they come to support and trust one another, even when keeping secrets. In the context of the lived experience of Alevi precarity in Turkey, Ayla's story of entanglement and dissolution resonates ambivalently, for certainly not all neighbor relations (even those that cross known differences) become unbearable. Yet as the following section shows, the questions that Ayla grapples with concerning the politics of knowing, hiding, and living with difference have significance well beyond the story of these two neighbors.

### **Dangerous Knowledge: "Yes, Now We Know It...It's Not So Nice, Actually"**

This riven and dangerous field within which Alevi difference seeks its bearings was apparent not only to our Alevi research participants. Discussions among Sunni participants indicated that they too fear the consequences of Alevi difference becoming "known." Their uneasiness reflected the continued salience (despite all the ways that identity politics have come to Turkey in the past thirty years) of the nationalist discourse and its basic premise: any departure from a Sunni-Turkish norm is a potential threat to the integrity of the state, so those who deviate from this norm have the responsibility not to tell anyone—for the sake of the nation and, implicitly, their own safety. The following excerpt from a focus

<sup>47</sup> Ayça Alemdaroğlu, "Escaping Femininity, Claiming Respectability: Culture, Class and Young Women in Turkey," *Women Studies International Forum* 53 (2015): 53–62, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.09.006>. See p. 58 for a discussion of how smoking of a young woman is seen "as immoral as prostitution" by her family.

<sup>48</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "On Violence, Intersectionality and Transversal Politics," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 9 (2017): 1460–73.

group with young middle-/upper-middle-class Sunni men in Istanbul in 2014 illustrates this discomfort.

- Kemal: Now people say, “That’s a Syrian, don’t shop from his store.” Another one says, “He’s from the Black Sea, he’s a fellow townsman [*hemşehri*],” [or] “Don’t buy anything from the Easterner.”...There was no such thing in the past. We had one little grocery in our neighborhood run by Uncle Hüseyin. We didn’t even know where he was from. It’s not like that now. There is favoritism based on regions and people discriminate more. This has reached an extreme level. We can say all we want that we’re all brothers and that we don’t discriminate but actually we do discriminate. There is discrimination in Turkey...I mean, I don’t know if there is an Alevi among us today [referring to the men in the focus group], but seven or eight years ago, it was impossible to tell whether or not someone was Alevi, or maybe we didn’t talk about this out in the open. But now people openly declare, “Look, he is Alevi. That one is not.”
- Çağatay: ...But now we know it, right?
- Kemal: Yes, now we know it...It’s not so nice, actually. We should not be differentiating like this. I did not used to know whether or not someone next to me was Alevi. When someone told me that they were Alevi, I didn’t know what Alevi meant. It’s in the last eight years [during the “Alevi opening”] that we have learned all about this unfortunately.
- Yılmaz: And I mean how many of us here have asked someone, “Are you Alevi or Sunni, what is your sect?” Have you asked anyone? How does one learn such things? We learn from someone around us who says, “That person is Alevi.” So there are some people who provoke others. I am thirty-one years old and I have never in my life asked anyone about their sect and I never will.
- Turgut: People still talk about it even if you don’t ask. They whisper to each other, “That person is Alevi.”

In the above dialogue, men claim that previously they would have been unaware of which sect a particular person belonged to or which town they came from (an indicator of possible ethnic and religious identity), but that now (in the wake of a growing presence of Alevi voices in the public sphere and the aftermath of the AKP’s brief “Alevi opening” launched in 2007) such knowledge has become unavoidable. For Kemal, who is originally from Malatya and works as a financial advisor, this knowledge appears to taint neighborhood relations. For the past twenty-four years, he has lived in an Istanbul neighborhood with Armenian, Circassian, and Alevi neighbors. Knowing that the neighborhood grocer is an Alevi, Kemal implies, complicates this relationship, one that had formerly couched affectionately as kinship (“uncle”), for himself and others in the neighborhood. The ensuing conversation reinforces the sense that one is better off not knowing, and in fact that asking or discussing sect should be rightly taboo. From this perspective, neighborhood knowledge of Alevi identity takes on the cast of malicious gossip, while public expressions of Alevi identity appear as a provocation.

If historically “the price for Alevis’ integration into Turkish nationhood was nonrecognition of their religious and sociocultural difference,” visibility seems to come with a cost to Alevis’ personal security.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, our Alevi participants frequently asserted that, on the one hand, “things are better” now that they have greater freedom to express their difference than in the past—and yet at the same time cast doubt upon whether this newfound freedom was entirely benign. In the words of a young Alevi woman in a focus group in Istanbul in 2016, “Now we can freely say we are Alevis but it feels like we are living in a more suppressed environment, whereas back then [when nobody knew who was Kurdish or Alevi] we were

<sup>49</sup> Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 279.

more comfortable.” This ambivalence not only inflects the daily lives of families and individuals—unsure whether or not they or their children should claim their Alevi identities as they navigate diverse schools, neighborhoods, and places of employment in cities such as Istanbul—but also plays out in public debates. While some Alevi leaders and intellectuals have called for more recognition from the state (in the form of funding from the Directorate of Religious Affairs, inclusion within the mandatory religious studies curriculum in state schools, and the recognition of Alevism as an officially designated religion), others fear that such measures would ultimately provide further leverage for (further) state surveillance, discrimination, and even violence.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to expressing their unease with “knowing” Alevi difference, the men in the focus group above also indicated their discomfort with the influx of Syrians into the region where Alevi populations are concentrated—and specifically into the districts where massacres took place in the past. Their fear of the spread of violence and “sectarian” logic from the south resonates with what is known about the risks of war and upheaval for vulnerable populations. When Kemal worries that the neighborhood grocer once known as Uncle Hüseyin is now known as an Alevi, what troubles him is the possibility of what is known to accompany the eruption of neighbor-upon-neighbor violence: the soft lines becoming hard ones, the familiar neighbor becoming categorized and subsumed “as part of a much larger enemy collectivity.”<sup>51</sup> And when Yılmaz says, “I have never in my life asked anyone about their sect and I never will,” he is speaking as one who wants to protect Turkish society from the potential for sectarian violence. Yet the implied demand—that Alevis remain silent and hidden in exchange for their safety—is a reiteration of the Republican logic that has engendered and left unrepented the violence against Alevis, Kurds, and Armenians in the past century. And as Ayla’s story also illustrates, relations between neighbors are saturated with constructions of difference and power even, or perhaps especially, when efforts are made to keep them from surfacing.

### Conclusion: “Is There Something You Want to Add?”

The central aim of this article has been to engage with the difficulties that inhere in the position of Alevis as neighbors—both figuratively and literally—in Turkey today. It is not a great distance from the figure of the neighbor as one who is both familiar and threatening to the words from Maraş quoted by one of our participants: “I saw my closest neighbor attacking me.” What we find from our study is that, for Alevis in Turkey today, neighboring takes place in an atmosphere of fear and precarity: an atmosphere within which the possibility of violence (such as on the night of the coup) and the unbearable (such as when a close neighbor reveals her prejudice) are ever present, even in situations of long-standing familiarity. Further, we find that dominant logics of difference in Turkey continue to inscribe Alevis within a discourse of sectarianism in which they themselves are made responsible for their precarity, made bearers of a “dangerous difference” that it is somehow their responsibility to suppress.

In the wake of all that has happened, silence and invisibility is simply not a viable option for the future of Alevis in Turkey. Building on Alevi claims for rights and recognition, what is necessary is the collective constitution of an everyday politics of difference that allows for it to be known that Uncle Hüseyin attends a *cemevi* without turning him into a potential target of neighborhood violence, that allows Alevi difference to be woven into the fabric of neighboring relations rather than appearing as a rupture (as for Ayla and her Sunni neighbor), and that allows Alevis and others to feel safe in their homes—whether in mixed or

<sup>50</sup> Talha Köse, “Ideological or Religious? Contending Visions on the Future of Alevi Identity,” *Identities* 19, no. 5 (2012): 576–96; Omer Tekdemir, “Constructing a Social Space for Alevi Political Identity: Religion, Antagonism and Collective Passion,” *National Identities* 20, no. 1 (2018): 31–51.

<sup>51</sup> Bergholz, *Violence*, 112.

homogeneous neighborhoods—even in times of polarization and uncertainty. While such a politics of difference has not been realized in Turkey today, it is our hope that, by demonstrating how “sectarianism”—as a reductive and dangerous scripting of difference—arises within the ambivalent intimacies of neighbor relations, our analysis might contribute to thinking through alternative ethical and political modes for living with difference.

Finally, the question of how one ethically engages the fear and precarity of others is one that inflects this research to the core. The uneasy atmosphere that our research subjects reflected on in the focus groups was also the context within which the focus groups took place. Our participants understood the researchers themselves not to be Alevi-identified (though also from appearance and other cues, not likely to be pious Sunnis). Despite our assurances of confidentiality, our research participants could not but find themselves weighing the risk involved in speaking freely to people whom they did not know. While we did not ask our participants to comment on how they viewed the research team, it is likely that—even aside from the question of our religious identities or apparent secularism—our internationalism (including researchers based in both Turkey and the United States), university and research center affiliations, and even our official paperwork (informed consent) created a certain distance between us and our participants. Such considerations were made explicit in the closing of a focus group with young women conducted in Istanbul in September 2016:

- Moderator: Okay, thank you very much. If there is something I forgot to ask, something you wanted to say but didn't get a chance, something you want to add...
- Ilknur: I think this was the first time we were able to express ourselves so freely.
- Deniz: I hope they don't arrest us later on.
- Moderator: They won't, not because of this study.
- Ilknur: When I was coming here, I told my friends I was going to a meeting about Alevis. They were worried, saying, “I hope they don't arrest you, I hope they are not looking into you, I hope they are not gathering Alevis.”

As researchers, we feel shame that the invitation to participate in our research stoked the ever-present embers of unease. At the same time, we are both grateful for and humbled by the willingness of all those who chose to participate in our study and the “speaking freely” to which Ilknur refers. Under these conditions, this article has attempted to do justice to what was shared with us, to underline what is at stake, and—without pretending to provide answers—to call for a consideration of neighbor relations as key to understanding the making (and perhaps unmaking) of sectarian difference and the precarity of all those who are marked as “other” in Turkey and elsewhere today.

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