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Between *Mezhep* and Minority: Twelver Shiʿism in the Turkish Public Sphere

Stefan Williamson Fa

Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, Lund, Sweden
Email: stefan.williamson_fa@ctr.lu.se

Abstract

Despite the growth in scholarship on diverse religious communities in Turkey, little attention has been paid to Twelver Shiʿi Muslims. Since the founding of the Republic, the Turkish state's foundational secularist agenda has attempted to control and promote a single hegemonic form of Islam, and Shiʿa have faced continuous issues practicing their faith in public as a result. While the liberalization of the past three decades has allowed Shiʿism to enter the public sphere, the community has had to continue navigating limitations on their expression of religious difference. Based on fieldwork in Eastern Anatolia, this article deepens understandings of Islam in Turkey by showing how Shiʿa have negotiated their position vis-à-vis both secularist and Sunni-majority actors and policies across various religious and political currents. Rejecting categorization as either *mezhep* (sect) or minority, Shiʿa have demanded independence from state religious control while also asserting their allegiance to the Republic and nation as Turkish Muslims.

Keywords: Shiʿa; Religious Minorities; Islam; Sects; Turkey

In May 2020, the hashtag *#CaferilerYalnızDeğildir* (#Jaʿfaris are not alone) appeared on social media in response to the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, Diyanet for short) assigning a prayer leader to a mosque in the Pendik district on Istanbul's Asian side. While most mosques in Turkey are administered by the Diyanet, this one had been built and independently funded by the district's Twelver Shiʿi community, mostly known and self-identifying as Jaʿfaris (*Caferi*) in Turkey. The appointment of a civil servant imam infuriated Shiʿi Muslims across the country, who interpreted it as an attack on their right to worship freely and independently. This anger was vented in tweets carrying the hashtag aiming to raise awareness of the community's position. "The right to worship in accordance with one's belief is a constitutional right!" wrote one user. Another quickly responded: "Like all believers Jaʿfaris have the right to worship and live according to their beliefs. No to the Diyanet!" The outpouring of such posts was further elaborated by Shiʿi community leaders in several public statements. Kadir Akaras, chairman of the Ehl-i Beyt Scholars' Association (Ehlibeyt Alimleri Derneği), one of the largest Shiʿi organizations in the country, appeared on a private Shiʿi-run TV channel to explain the problem: "The Diyanet's appointment of imams to Jaʿfari mosques is like Fenerbahçe choosing the president of Galatasaray Football Club, or to give a political analogy, as if the CHP had appointed the leader of the AKP. This is the same."[1] For

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Akaras, the imam's appointment amounted to interference in the community's ability to pray independent of state political influence and according to their own school of Islamic jurisprudence (*fıkıh*). The Pendik appointment once again raised the question of the Shiʿa right to build and run their own mosques free of Diyanet interference, an ongoing issue since the founding of the Republic of Turkey a century ago.

After the founding of the republic, reforms were not merely concerned with curtailing Islam and constructing a secularized public sphere devoid of Islam, but also the implementation of a particular secular agenda, referred to as *laiklik*, which saw the state's control and monopolization of Islam.[2] The establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, which remains the largest single state bureaucracy in the country, gave the state exclusive authority over defining and legitimating all Islamic precepts and practices; all mosques came under state control.[3] The Diyanet has continuously presented itself as being "above sectarianism," claiming its services are not specific in nature and are provided for every Muslim citizen regardless of sectarian orientation.[4] However, through its publications, training of imams, and administration of mosques over decades, the institution has produced and promoted a hegemonic public form of Sunni Islam in line with the Hanafi school of jurisprudence; a form that does not fully incorporate the country's non-Hanafi Sunni Muslims and Alevi communities.

The issues surrounding the status of Shiʿi mosques are the result of the state's particular categorization of who constitutes a minority community within the Turkish nation, and the subsequent recognition of religious difference. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) formally recognized only Christians and Jews as minorities in Turkey, meaning that, in constitutional terms, no sectarian distinctions were made amongst Muslims. All Muslims, regardless of sect or *mezhep* (Arabic *madhhab*), including Alevis, were effectively categorized as within the fold of Turkey's dominant religious identity.[5] Alevis, who comprise the largest non-Sunni community in Turkey, have been especially vocal in their criticism of what they see as assimilationist state policies and, as a result, have received substantial media and academic attention.[6] In contrast, Shiʿi Muslims' relationship to the state, and the issues they face, have been neglected almost entirely. Like Alevis, the state has often refused to recognize Shiʿi jurisprudence, traditions, and practices as deserving of special legal status, support, or protection, instead expecting the community to conform to the Diyanet's Hanafi Sunni-centric forms of Islam. However, while some Alevi groups have argued that Alevism be treated as a religion separate from Islam, and thus for their recognition as a minority community, as an effective way to attain various rights and exemptions, Shiʿa are united

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Diyanet Konusunu Değerlendirdi," Kevser Kültür Merkezi, 27 April 2020, https://kevser.com.tr/ehla-der-baskani-kadir-akaras-diyanet-konusunu-degerlendirdi/1899/.

[2] Umut Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and the Nation State* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010); Ceren Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey: From the Birth of the Republic to the AKP* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); David Shankland, *Islam and Society in Turkey* (Tallahassee, FL: Eothen Press, 1999).

[3] Jeremy F. Walton, *Muslim Civil Society and the Politics of Religious Freedom in Turkey* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

[4] Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Transformation of the Turkish Diyanet Both at Home and Abroad: Three Stages," *European Journal of Turkish Studies. Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey* [Online], no. 27 (2018) http://journals.openedition.org/ejts/5944; İştar Gözaydın, "Religion, Politics, and the Politics of Religion in Turkey," in *Religion, Politics, and Turkey's EU Accession*, ed. Dietrich Jung and Catharina Raudvere (New York: Springer, 2008), 159–76.

[5] Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 2.

[6] Mehmet Bardakçı, "The Alevi Opening of the AKP Government in Turkey: Walking a Tightrope between Democracy and Identity," *Turkish Studies* 16, no. 3 (2015): 349–70; Murat Borovali and Cemil Boyraz, "The Alevi Workshops: An Opening without an Outcome?" *Turkish Studies* 16, no. 2 (2015): 145–60; 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; Ihsan Yilmaz and James Barry, "The AKP's de-Securitization and Re-Securitization of a Minority Community: The Alevi Opening and Closing," *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 2 (2020): 231–53.

in considering themselves firmly within the fold of Islam and therefore part of Turkey's Muslim religious majority, rejecting the title of minority (*azınlık*).[7] Furthermore, as Azeri-Turks, many Twelver Shiʿi Muslims simultaneously feel a strong attachment to Turkish national identity through a notion of shared Turkic ethnicity, different from other ethnic and linguistic minority communities.

This article examines how Twelver Shiʿi Muslims in Turkey have negotiated their position in the public sphere vis-à-vis both the republican *laiklik* and hegemonic forms of Sunni-Turkish politics and socio-cultural identity to show how their experience in the country is positioned between multiple social and political currents and forces. For much of the twentieth century, Shiʿi identity and religious expression, including the building of mosques, was restricted by Kemalist *laiklik* policy that sought to directly control religion and remove religious difference. While the political-economic liberalization of Turkey over the past three decades has allowed Shiʿi Muslims to enter the public sphere, the modes and means of expressing difference have been limited and shaped by the community's position as a non-Sunni Muslim group. As they seek to participate fully and benefit from the opening of the public sphere, expressions of Shiʿi difference have continued to be restricted by both the Turkish state's continued limitation on pluralism and the growing hegemony of forms of Sunni Islam supported by political figures and private entities.[8] The case of Shiʿi Muslims, a community previously ignored in studies of religion in Turkey, not only allows for comparison with previous studies of other religious and Muslim minorities in the country, it also presents a new perspective on Islam in Turkey; a perspective that challenges the common binary juxtaposition of Islamists and secularists by further highlighting the diversity of "pious Muslims" in the country beyond the Sunni mainstream.[9] Furthermore, in showing the community's complex relationship with the Turkish state and nationalism, the article moves away from the simplistic categorization of Shiʿism as either "a religion of protest" or "quietist."[10] Indeed, I argue that Shiʿa have rejected the state's assimilationist religious policies while simultaneously asserting their belonging to the nation as Turkish Muslims.

This article traces Shiʿi Islam's entrance to the public sphere through an ethnographic focus on the construction and administration of Shiʿi mosques in Turkey, a persistent area of dispute as discussed above. This account is primarily based on long-term fieldwork carried out in the city of Kars in Eastern Anatolia, with insights also drawn from research in Istanbul, Ankara, and Iğdır. Fieldwork involved participation in community rituals, meetings, and events and interviews with senior community figures, clerics, association leaders, regular mosque attendees, association members, and self-identifying Azeri-Turkish Shiʿi Muslims. The example of Kars is significant, as the few studies that do exist on Shiʿa in Turkey have focused on the community in Istanbul, which not only has a shorter

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[7] Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism*, 3.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism*; Seçil Dağtaş, "The Civilizaations Choir of Antakya: The Politics of Religious Tolerance and Minority Representation at the National Margins of Turkey," *Cultural Anthropology* 35, no. 1 (2020): 167–95; Marcy Brink-Danan, *Jewish Life in Twenty-First-Century Turkey: The Other Side of Tolerance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011); Şule Can, "The Syrian Civil War, Sectarianism and Political Change at the Turkish–Syrian Border," *Social Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2017): 174–89; Esra Özyürek, "Christian and Turkish: Secularist Fears of a Converted Nation," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29, no. 3, (2009): 398–412; Jeremy F. Walton, "Architectures of Interreligious Tolerance: The Infrastructural Politics of Place and Space in Croatia and Turkey," *New Diversities* 17, no. 2 (2016): 103–17; Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Travails of the Secular: Puzzle and Paradox in Turkey," *Economy and Society* 41, no. 4 (2012): 513–31; Berna Turam, *Secular State and Religious Society: Two Forces in Play in Turkey* (New York: Springer, 2011).

[10] Hamid Dabashi, *Shiʿism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Juan Cole and Nikki Keddie, eds., *Shiʿism and Social Protest* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); Denis McEoin, "Aspects of Militancy and Quietism in Imami Shiʿism," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 1 (1984): 18–27; Rainer Brunner, "Shiism in the Modern Context: From Religious Quietism to Political Activism," *Religion Compass* 3, no. 1 (2009): 136–53.

history—dating back to migration from the provinces in the 1970s—but also inadvertently reemphasizes "the unacknowledged and untested assumption that Istanbul… is the proper location for studies on contemporary Turkey."[11]

As literature on this community is scarce, I begin with a brief overview of the Shiʿi community in Turkey before providing an account of the building of a Shiʿi mosque in Kars in 1952, claimed as the first built in republican Turkey. This account, based on both oral history and archival research in Kars, provides an early example of the ways non-Sunni Muslim communities successfully managed to carve out a space by informally circumventing strict state religious policy. Following this, I go on to show how, like other religious communities, Shiʿa in Turkey have availed themselves of the liberalization of Turkish society and neoliberal openness toward civil society institutions since the 1990s to build new mosques, found associations and foundations, open media outlets, and perform public rituals.[12] However, this entrance to the public sphere has met with multiple state attempts to bring Shiʿa into the fold of the Diyanet, a move rejected by most Shiʿa as assimilative. The Shiʿi community has continuously asserted belonging to the nation while rejecting such assimilation. This complex balancing of difference and belonging is most clearly illustrated by the sounds amplified from Shiʿi mosques across the urban soundscape of Kars, which I draw attention to in the conclusion. Although the daily sounding of a distinct Shiʿi call to prayer, *ezan* in Turkish (Arabic *adhān*), marks these mosques out as different in the public sphere, sound is also adopted as a medium for reasserting national belonging through playback of the Turkish national anthem. By tracing changes from the founding of the first mosque to the ongoing issues surrounding the status of such mosques, as in the Pendik case, I demonstrate how the community's entrance to the public sphere has involved navigating wider political and social currents and constant negotiation with the state.

Twelver Shiʿism in Turkey

The majority of Turkey's population are Hanafi Sunni Muslims, with Alevi being the second largest religious group at approximately 15 percent of the total population.[13] Twelver Shiʿi Muslims represent only a small percentage of the country's total population and are mostly known and self-identity as *Caferi* or *Caferi-Şii*—a reference to the sixth Shiʿi Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq and the Jaʿfari school of Islamic jurisprudence. While there are no exact figures for the number of Shiʿa in the country, as sectarian difference is not officially noted, they are estimated to number between 500,000 and 1.5 million based on assumed demographics of areas known to have a Shiʿa presence.[14]

Despite the growth in scholarship on Turkey's diverse religious and ethnic groups, very little research has been undertaken on the Shiʿa. In both academic literature and amongst the public, there appears to be confusion about the community, as they are often mistakenly

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[11] Kimberly Hart, *And Then We Work for God: Rural Sunni Islam in Western Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 24. For the Shiʿa in Turkey, see Ayşen Baylak, "Visibility Through Ritual: The Shiite Community in Turkey" (MA Thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2011); Thierry Zarcone, "Shi'isms under Construction: The Shi'a Community of Turkey in the Contemporary Era," in *The Shi'a Worlds and Iran*, ed. Sabrina Mervin (London: Saqi, 2010), 139–66.

[12] Elise Massicard, *The Alevis in Turkey and Europe: Identity and Managing Territorial Diversity* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Walton, *Muslim Civil Society and the Politics of Religious Freedom in Turkey*.

[13] Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism*.

[14] Shiʿi leaders have tended to overestimate the size of the population, with Selahattin Özgündüz often saying they number up to 3 million. While the state does not collect census data on sects, one report commissioned by the Diyanet in 2014, "*Türkiye'de Dini Hayat Araştırması*" (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2014), estimated 1 percent of the population in Turkey, around 760,000, were followers of the "Jaʿfari *mezhep*." Scholars have estimated a population of between 500,000 to 1.5 million; Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, "İslam Kaynaklı Mezheplerin Ortadoğu'daki Coğrafi Dağılımı ve Tahmini Nüfusları," *E-Makalat Mezhep Araştırmaları Dergisi* 6, no. 2 (2013): 332; İlyas Üzüm, "İnanç Esasları Açısından Türkiye'de Ca'ferilik" (PhD diss., Marmara University, 1993); Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002).

equated with Alevis.[15] Within Turkey, academic interest has been limited to a few unpublished theses and a small number of publications primarily concentrated on documenting the central tenets of Twelver Shiʿism and surveying the community's general religious attitudes.[16]

Like many other religious communities, Shiʿa in Turkey are heterogenous in their beliefs, practices, and political orientations. The vast majority of Twelver Shiʿa, however, self-identify as Azeri-Turks (*Azeriler* or *Azeri Türkleri* in Turkish): Turkic-speakers whose language is mutually intelligible with modern Turkish and have historical and cultural links to Azeri-Turks, or Azerbaijanis, living in the Caucasus and Iran. Generally speaking, the Azeri population in Turkey is considered well-integrated on the basis of a "shared" Turkic identity—broadly understood as speaking Turkish and being Muslim—a feature often mobilized by nationalist political forces in society.

Until the second half of the twentieth century, Turkey's Azeri Shiʿi communities lived mostly in the Eastern Anatolian provinces of Kars and Iğdır—which today border Armenia, the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan, and Iran—and the district of Taşlıçay in the neighboring province of Ağrı. In these provinces, also home to Sunni Kurds and other Turkic-speaking groups with origins in the Caucasus, the terms Azeri and Jaʿfari are generally synonymous. Ethnolinguistic and denominational identity are interconnected; to be Azeri is to be Shiʿa.

Since the 1950s, parallel to the processes of industrialization and urbanization, there has been a steady flow of migration from rural to urban centers, including Ankara, Istanbul, Bursa, Izmir, and Manisa. In Istanbul, Azeri Shiʿi migrants from Eastern Anatolia first settled in *gecekondu*-style living conditions in the Halkalı district, a suburb on the European side of the Marmara Sea. By the 1970s, chain migration meant the community had grown large enough to establish a mosque and religious movement called Zeynebiye (named after Imam Husayn's sister Zaynab). This neighborhood, which is now also called Zeynebiye,

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[15] One such example of this mistaken categorization in scholarship is evident in Martin Van Bruinessen's inclusion of Jaʿfaris in his broad definition of Alevis. He states: "In the eastern province of Kars, there are communities speaking Azerbaijani Turkish and whose Alevism closely resembles the orthodox Twelver Shiʿism of modern Iran." Martin Van Bruinessen, "Kurds, Turks and the Alevi Revival in Turkey," *Middle East Report*, no. 200 (1996): 7.

[16] The first doctoral research on the Shiʿa in Turkey was written by İlyas Üzüm (1993). The thesis, which was supported by the Diyanet's İslam Araştırmaları Merkezi, is a general survey of the community, provides a descriptive account of its beliefs and practices, and is largely based on quantitative data collection methods. Other Turkish language publications provide similar descriptive surveys of beliefs, attitudes, and practices of Jaʿfari communities in different locations in Turkey. Hatice Bakırlı, "Kars Caferilerinde Dini Hayat" (MA Thesis, Necmettin Erbakan University, 2019); Abdülkadir Yeler, "Türk Toplumunda Caferiler:(İstanbul Halkalı Örneği)" (MA Thesis, Marmara University, 2006); Ayşen Baylak Güngör, "Türkiye'de Caferi Topluluğun Konumu ve Değişim Dinamikleri Üzerine Değerlendirmeler," *Insan ve Toplum* 7, no. 1 (2017): 69; Hüseyin Doğan, "Kars Caferîlerinde Dinî İnanç ve Sosyal Pratikler," *E-Makalat Mezhep Araştırmaları Dergisi* 10, no. 1 (2017): 113–47; Ercan Dağdeviren, "Ankara Ili Keçiören Ilçesinde Yaşayan Caferilerde Dini Hayat ve Ilçenin Günümüz Dini Durumu" (MA Thesis, Fırat University, 1998); Ali Albayrak, "Caferilerde Dini ve Sosyal Hayat (Ankara Keçiören Örneği)" (PhD diss., Ankara University, 2006); Şaban Banaz, "Türkiye'de Ca'feriler," *Gaziosmanpaşa Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 6, no. 1 (2018): 29–62; Emine Öztürk, *Dini ve Kültürel Ritüelleriyle Ca'ferîlik* (Istanbul: Rağbey Yayınları, 2014); Filiz Demirci, "Caferilerin Dini Örf ve Adetleri Iğdır Örneği" (MA Thesis, Erciyes University, 2006); Yavuz Yıldız, "Gebze Caferi Toplumunun Sosyo-Kültürel Yapısı (Inanç ve Değerler Bağlamında Alan Araştırması)" (MA Thesis, Marmara University, 2009); Çetin Doğru, "Mezhepsel Çoğulculuk Bağlamında Caferilerin Din Eğitimi ve Öğretimi Ile Ilgili Beklenti ve Önerileri Üzerine Bir Araştırma (Iğdır Örneği)" (MA Thesis, Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen University, 2016); Yeliz Turmuş, "Caferilikte Mersiye ve Sinezen" (MA Thesis, Istanbul Technical University, 2018); Erkan Beder, *Huseyn Vay Iğdır İlinde Muharrem Ayı Törenleri* (Ankara: Kün Yayıncılık, 2011); Figen Balamir, "Karakoyunlu'da Sosyal ve Dini Hayat" (PhD diss., Selçuk University, 2008). Ayşen Baylak's MA thesis (2007) on the community's visibility through public Ashura ritual commemorations in the Zeynebiye community in Istanbul is noteworthy, as it provides important insight on questions of representation within the context of the development of specific Shiʿi religious organizations in Istanbul. One of the only works to have been published outside of Turkey, and in English, is Thierry Zarcone's chapter focused exclusively on the social-political organization of the Zeynebiye movement in Istanbul: Thierry Zarcone, "Shi'isms under Construction: The Shiʿa Community of Turkey in the Contemporary Era," in *The Shiʿa Worlds and Iran*, ed. Sabrina Mervin (London: Saqi, 2010), 139–66.

quickly became the main center of Shiʿi activity in the country. Shiʿi mosques and associa-
tions (*dernek*), which cater to the religious needs of these rural to urban migrants, are now
found in other towns and cities across Turkey.

In addition to Azeris, who consider themselves "born into" the Twelver Shiʿi tradition, there
also exist smaller groups of "converts" from Sunni backgrounds and Alevis who have turned
towards Twelver Shiʿism. These Alevi groups, often pejoratively called "*Şiileşen Aleviler*" or
Shiʿified Alevis, are small in number and organized around a few foundations based in urban
centers like Istanbul and Çorum.[17] There are also Shiʿi migrants from other countries living
in urban centers—most notably Twelver Shiʿi Iranians, who have had a presence in Istanbul
since Ottoman times—and two historic mosques still in use today: Valide Han Mosque in
Fatih and Seyyid Ahmet Deresi Mosque in Üsküdar, both popularly known as *İranlılar Mescidi*.[18]

Unlike Sunni prayer leaders and clerics, who are trained in state institutions, Shiʿi clerics
are mostly educated at *ḥawzah*, the main seminaries of Shiʿi learning, in Iran or Iraq due to
the lack of Jaʿfari education in Turkey. As the title Imam is mostly reserved for the twelve
male figures from the Prophet's family believed to be his divinely-ordained successors,
Shiʿa in Turkey use the titles *ahund*, *şeyh*, *molla*, or *hoca* for their community and prayer
leaders. There is no *mujtahid* in Turkey and the practice of following a *marjiʿ*, a source of emulation
(*marjaʿ al-taqlīd*), is not as prominent as in other Shiʿi contexts. Clerics and active members
of associations and foundations tend to follow either ʿAli Sistani or ʿAli Khamenei, but sermons
in mosques rarely refer to them and their images are not displayed publicly.[19]

According to Shiʿi associations in the country, there are over 300 Shiʿi mosques in Turkey
today.[20] Mosques are of particular importance for Shiʿa in Turkey, as they are not only spaces
for prayer but also centers for community activities and commemorative rituals, most nota-
bly mourning *meclis* gatherings ([Fig. 1](#)) held during the Islamic month of Muharram to mark
the martyrdom of the third Shiʿi Imam and grandson of the Prophet, Husayn ibn ʿAli.[21] The
majority of Shiʿa mosques in Turkey are independently funded by their community. Since
the founding of the Republic and constant state attempts to bring all mosques—both
Sunni and Shiʿi—under its control, this has given rise to ongoing issues. While no laws spe-
cifically target Shiʿi mosques in the country, legal restrictions on mosques' independence
from Diyanet authority have sometimes been invoked in disputes over their status.
Building and running these mosques has instead involved the informal negotiation of vari-
ous actors, leading to inconsistencies in their status and acceptance in different times and
parts of the country. This has been true since the opening of the first Shiʿi mosque in repub-
lican Turkey in Kars in the early 1950s.

1952: Building the First Shiʿi Mosque in Kars

The city of Kars, at the geographical intersection of Anatolia and the Caucasus, has a long
and complex history under different empires, rulers, and people. Today, the city is composed

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[17] Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey*; Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism*; Tahire Erman and Emrah Göker, "Alevi
Politics in Contemporary Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 4 (2000): 105.

[18] Thierry Zarcone and Fariba Zarinebaf-Shahr, *Les Iraniens d'Istanbul* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters Pub & Booksellers,
1993), 42.

[19] Some associations (*dernek*) and foundations (*vakf*) are clearly aligned with either Khamenei or Sistani, with
Sistani having a representative and office in Istanbul. During my fieldwork, one *dernek* in Kars, for instance, used
Sistani's catechism (*ilmihal*) as the basis of their daily religious lessons. Selahattin Özgündüz and the Zeynebiye
movement, however, do not openly support a specific *marjaʿ*, which has led to disputes between them and other
groups, particularly in relation to rulings on the end of Ramadan.

[20] Ayşen Baylak Güngör, "Türkiye'de Caferi Topluluğun Konumu ve Değişim Dinamikleri Üzerine
Değerlendirmeler," *İnsan ve Toplum* 7, no. 1 (2017): 76.

[21] Unlike other parts of the Middle East and South Asia, where Shiʿi Muslims use distinct buildings (*ḥosayniya*,
imambara, or *ashurkhana*) for commemorative rituals, in Turkey mosques host both congregational prayer and
such ritual gatherings.

Figure 1. Mourning gathering (*matem meclisi*) during Muharram at Hazret Ali Mosque in Kars. Photo by author, October 2015.

of an ethno-linguistically diverse, yet almost entirely Muslim population of just under 80,000, mainly comprised of three self-differentiating Turkic-speaking groups: *Yerli*, literally "local" but, in the context of Kars, meaning "unmarked" Sunni Anatolian Turks; *Azeri*, Shiʿi Turks who are mostly the descendants of immigrants who arrived in the city from present day Armenia between 1918 and 1925; and *Terekeme*, who also trace their origins to the Caucasus but are predominantly Sunni.[22] Since the 1980s, there is also a growing number

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[22] Peter Alford Andrews and Rüdiger Benninghaus, *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 1989), 74.

of Sunni Kurdish-speakers in the city center. Azeris are said to make up around a third of the total population of Kars Center today.[23] When the city was taken by Turkish forces in 1920, only two mosques were in use, both of which are now used by Sunni congregations as many of the earlier Ottoman Islamic monuments were damaged or destroyed under Russian occupation between 1877 and 1917.[24] Russian censuses show that the late nineteenth-century Muslim population of Kars province consisted of both Sunni and Shiʿa, though there is little description of what Shiʿi life in the province was like at the time.[25]

During the one-party era (1923–50), expressions of Shiʿi religious difference—similar to those of Alevis—were effectively driven out of the public sphere under a "republican cloak of invisibility."[26] While the national public sphere was thriving under the supervision of the state and secularist elite circles in the early decades of the Republic, Islamic formations maintained a rather low profile, surviving through personal networks and communal gatherings that avoided public visibility and, thereby, the state's domineering gaze. With no mosques serving the community, Shiʿi Muslims in Kars wishing to attend communal prayer had to join congregations in state-approved mosques, where prayers were performed according to the Hanafi tradition. In addition to the difficulties organizing communal prayer at this time, public commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom during the Islamic month of Muharram was initially forbidden along with all other public displays of Shiʿi religiosity.

Hasan, an octogenarian I first met at one of the Shiʿi mosques in Kars, recounted the restrictions imposed on Muharram mourning rituals in this period.

> For decades, Muharram mourning (*Muharremlik*) here in Kars was closely monitored, restricted, and interrupted by the *jandarma* or police. Most of them were not from here, they couldn't understand our culture (*kültürümüzü anlayamadılar*). They said these activities went against the promotion of national unity and the secular ideals of the state… but we knew this was not true, nothing can stop the cause of Imam Husayn! We continued to hold our mourning gatherings (*matem meclisleri*) in secret (*gizli bir şekilde*) using different tactics to remain unnoticed. We would meet in houses on the outskirts of town or in our villages. The curtains would be drawn and windows blocked to stop the sound of weeping and recitation of laments (*mersiye*) being heard outside.[27]

Hasan and other elders I spoke to in Kars and Iğdır recalled instances when these *meclis* were interrupted by officials tasked with inspecting and searching houses, as they knew such rituals were taking place. In addition to the "underground" locations of these *meclis*, other tactics were used to pre-empt such crackdowns, including lookouts standing guard outside to warn of any officials nearby. Dissimulation was necessary if a *meclis* was uncovered, as Hasan continued:

> If they came to the houses, we would do everything to hide the fact we were mourning. We would pretend it was a celebration, an engagement, a circumcision. We even had a *saz* (a long-necked lute) at hand so that the *jandarma* believed it was a party.[28]

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[23] Üzüm, *İnanç Esasları Açısından Türkiye'de Ca'ferilik*; Doğan, *Kars Caferîlerinde Dinî İnanç ve Sosyal Pratikler*.

[24] Neşe Gurallar, "Russian Modernization in East Anatolia: The Case of Kars," *Muqarnas Online* 37, no. 1 (2020): 247–64.

[25] According to Ortaylı (p. 350), the 1897 census showed that Muslims outnumbered non-Muslims in the province of Kars by 123,418 to 100,898. The census further divided Muslims by sect, with Sunni Muslims making up the majority at 105,318 and Shiʿa only numbering 15,004. İlber Ortaylı, "Çarlık Rusyasi Yönetiminde Kars," *Edebiyat Fakültesi Tarih Enstitüsü Dergisi* 9 (1978): 343–62.

[26] Besim Can Zirh, "Becoming Visible Through Migration: Understanding the Relationships Between the Alevi Revival, Migration and Funerary Practices Through Europe and Turkey" (PhD diss., University of London, 2012), 140–41.

[27] Author Interview, Kars, 10 November 2015.

[28] Ibid.

The end of the single-party period and the rise of the Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti, here-after DP) in the first multi-party elections in 1950 brought changes to religious policy. Despite the DP's roots in Atatürk's Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), there was a clear move away from the militantly secular stance of early Kemalism. After the relaxation of some authoritarian political controls on religion, such as the scrap-ping of policies like the enforcement of the Turkish-language *ezan* (call to prayer; Arabic *adhan*), large numbers began to call more openly for a return to traditional religious prac-tice. During the 1950s, some political leaders found it expedient to join religious leaders advocating greater state respect for religion and the restoration of religious education in public schools. In Kars in this period, the DP's entrance mobilized different ethnic and reli-gious groups in the city. According to one critical government report from the time, political parties sought to gain from the divisions between Azeris and Yerlis, Sunni and Shiʿa.[29]

It was in this context that a series of events led to the construction of the first Shiʿi mos-que in Kars in 1952, which is also said to be the first Shiʿi mosque built in republican Turkey. The mosque's founder, Ahunt Malik Mehmet Işıklı (1889–1979), was born to a family of farm-ers in a village near Yerevan in present-day Armenia. He moved with his father and older brother across the border to a village in the Arpaçay region of Kars, before being sent to Iranian Azerbaijan for religious education. At the age of thirty-two, Ahunt Malik returned to Turkey and soon settled in the center of Kars. Malik began providing religious services for the Shiʿi community and received mixed reactions from non-Shiʿi clerics, who were some-what suspicious of his views, some going so far as to make complaints to the authorities. Despite being taken for questioning by the police on numerous occasions, Malik seemingly continued his work with little fear of repercussions. Having gathered a loyal following amongst Azeris locally, he attended communal prayers led by a Sunni cleric at the Yusuf Paşa Mosque over a twenty-five-year period, purportedly to promote unity between the city's sects.

1950, when Ahunt Malik traveled to Ankara to seek Diyanet permission to build a Shiʿi mosque, was a turning point for the Shiʿa of Kars. With the support of three Azeri members of parliament from Kars—two lawyers, Latif Aküzüm (1912–75) and Abbas Ali Çetin (1914–75), and a merchant, Veyis Koçulu (1891–1984)—Malik met with Ahmet Hamdi Akseki (1886–1951), the head of the Diyanet at the time. Latif Aküzüm recalled the unusual event:

> Upon entering the office, the president of the Diyanet hardly paid us attention, only sitting up ever so slightly from his chair to lightly shake our hands and invite us to take a seat. Ahunt Malik sat directly in front of the president. After speaking a while Ahunt Malik pointed out a grammatical mistake in the Arabic calligraphy written on the wall above where the president was sitting. The president did not accept that there could be a mistake at first and as Ahunt attempted to correct the mistake they began to argue. Ahunt finally demonstrated his point to which the president replied "perhaps," thereby accepting that Ahunt had, in fact, been right.

> As we left, the president who had not even stood up to greet us when we entered the room, accompanied us all the way to the entrance of the building! No matter how much we told him not to trouble himself he insisted on accompanying us saying: "I look up to knowledge and its possessors." He eventually said farewell, providing us later with the permission needed to build our mosque.[30]

Other, perhaps more hagiographical, versions of the same event were commonly recounted to me during my fieldwork in Kars. In another version, the president and other important

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[29] Cengiz Atlı, "1950 Yılı Kars Milletvekilliği ve Belediye Seçimleri," *Atatürk Yolu Dergisi* 13, no. 51 (2013): 529.

[30] Latif Aküzüm's account of Ahunt Malik's meeting with the head of the Diyanet was published in a small pam-phlet containing the biographies of Shiʿi clerics from Kars called "Kars Ehl-i Beyt Alimleri" published by Kars Ehl-i Beyt Association in 2013.

clerics from the Diyanet tested Ahunt Malik's knowledge of Islam. With only a pocket-sized Qur'an in his hands, Malik's knowledge of both Sunni and Shiʿi hadith and jurisprudence proved so immense that, deeply impressed, those gathered immediately signed a letter granting permission to build the mosque. Regardless of what occurred during the meeting, it was a combination of political forces, including a changing climate towards religion, and Ahunt Malik's individual personality that secured the necessary permission to build the first Shiʿi mosque in the Turkish Republic. Ahunt Malik returned to Kars and began working on the mosque in the Yeni Mahalle neighborhood, which was home to most of the city's Azeri population. The community covered the cost of materials, volunteered in construction, and the mosque opened in 1952 without funding from the Turkish state or support from actors outside the country.

In founding the first Shiʿi mosque and congregation, Ahunt Malik managed to bring Shiʿa Islam into the public sphere in Kars, despite the limited space for religious expression outside the narrow state definition of Islamic practice. This was done in part by expressing the community's allegiance to the Republic. It was said that, during congregational prayers, Ahunt Malik always offered prayers for Atatürk and the Republic of Turkey, something still common in Shiʿi mosques in Turkey today. Ahunt Malik also repeatedly sought to downplay sectarian difference in Kars. This is most clearly seen in his only book *Doğru Yol* (True Path), published in 1973, the first to outline the central tenants of Islam for a Turkish Shiʿi audience.[31] In this book, Malik emphasizes the unity of Islam through asserting that only one *mezhep* existed at the time of the Prophet and in early Islam, concluding with the declaration: "so let's all come together and abandon these sectarian quarrels" (*mezhep münakaşalarını bırakalım*).[32]

Although Ahunt Malik's position may seem contradictory within the binary representations of secularism versus Islamism and rigid sectarian boundaries dominant today, it is unlikely that statements like this, and his loyalty to the Republic and Atatürk, were solely attempts to appease the authorities. For Muslims in Kars, living on the Turkey-Soviet border, Atatürk was seen as having liberated them from non-Muslim occupation, with the Republic ensuring the protection of their faith, unlike the Muslims in the Caucasus now under atheist Soviet rule. Similarly, his assertion of the unity of Islam resonates with the wider moment of Islamic ecumenism at the time, which predates more recent forms of sectarianization in the Middle East.[33]

While Ahunt Malik played a crucial role in organizing the Shiʿa in Kars, the Diyanet's permission was, of course, also acquired through dialogue with state authorities and the mediation of other political actors, such as Azeri members of parliament from Kars in Ankara. Looking at religion-state relations in Turkey, David Shankland has noted that the state has been much more open to conflicting opinions and influence from diverse groups than is commonly realized.[34] In the resulting situation, the state's power has been diffused between people of different sympathies, creating rival zones of patronage and making it appear to pursue contradictory policies at times. The example of Ahunt Malik and the Yeni Mahalle mosque illustrates that, in Turkey, laws and restrictions on Shiʿi Islam and religion, more generally, have rarely been clear-cut and, for this reason perhaps, constantly contested, modified, and navigated by different groups. With Diyanet permission and the active support of local political figures, the founding of the mosque set a precedent: Shiʿism would be tolerated locally despite not being officially recognized or directly supported by the state.

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[31] Malik Mehmet Işıklı, *Doğru Yol* (Ankara: Güneş Matbaacılık, 1973).

[32] Ibid., 35.

[33] On Islamic ecumenicism, see Rainer Brünner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: The Azhar and Shiism BetweenRrapprochement and Restraint*, vol. 91 (Leiden: Brill, 2004). On sectarianization, see Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds., *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017).

[34] Shankland, *Islam and Society in Turkey*, 3.

Entering the Public Sphere

Wider social and political changes in Turkey from the mid-1980s brought about a gradual liberalization of the public sphere, which led to the increasing visibility of autonomous Islamic practices. The growing number of men and women assuming Islamic identities and gaining salient public visibility related to the emergence of political Islam.[35] By the 1990s, Turkey's social political landscape had changed radically and the dramatic ascendance of Islam as a "public religion"—one no longer determined solely by state design—was hugely impacting both Sunni groups and a wide range of communities, including Alevis, sufi orders, and other Islamic movements including Shiʿa.[36]

As with the Alevis, migration to urban centers and the liberalization of state policies towards religion led to the founding of associations, media, and more conspicuous places of worship.[37] In the 1980s, after the founding of the Zeynebiye mosque in 1978, Istanbul became the main center of Shiʿi activity. Emboldened by Turkey's changing social and political atmosphere, and the success of the revolution in Iran, Selahattin Özgündüz and Hamit Turan, two clerics from Iğdır province who studied together in Iraq, organized and led a social and religious movement with Azeri migrants in Istanbul's Halkalı district.[38] After the relaxing of laws on the publication of religious material in the early 1990s, various Shiʿi media outlets and publishing houses were created that reached Shiʿa across the country.

The development of Shiʿi activities in the metropolis had multiple effects on communities in Eastern Anatolia. Until the end of the 1980s, Muharram mourning rituals in most parts of the country were still carried out within the confines of private houses and the few Shiʿi mosques. Migration had stimulated new debate and discussion around how to commemorate Muharram, and Zeynebiye became the first place to hold public processions and gatherings in republican Turkey. After news and images of these events reached the provinces, there was increased demand to follow the lead and take commemorations outside the mosque in Kars. In 1994, community leaders in Kars received permission from the mayor, who was also an Azeri Shiʿa, to organize a public procession.

Following the February 28, 1997, military intervention and in response to the emboldening of Muslim identities, groups, and political Islam, a decree was issued on July 31, 1998, requiring all mosques built without permission by associations, foundations, and individuals be transferred to the Diyanet within three months.[39] The law was not directed at Shiʿi mosques in particular, but the entrance of Shiʿi religious expression to the public domain and increasing media coverage of ʿAshuraʾ rituals in the mainstream press meant the status of Shiʿi mosques was an issue under debate. One such report published in the *Hurriyet* (Freedom) newspaper on March 3, 1998, under the headline "300 Mosques Under Iran's Command," included an interview with Abdülkadir Sezgin, the Diyanet's chief inspector, who claimed that Shiʿi mosques in Turkey were under Iran's influence due to the fact that Iran paid some imams' salaries; an accusation often levelled at Jaʿfaris but fiercely rejected by the community.[40] Sezgin asserted the need to bring these mosques under

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[35] Nilüfer Göle, "Secularism and Islamism in Turkey: The Making of Elites and Counter-Elites," *The Middle East Journal* 51, no. 1 (1997): 46–58; Nilüfer Göle, "Islamic Visibilities and Public Sphere," in *Islam in Public: Turkey, Iran and Europe*, eds. Nilüfer Göle & Ludwig Ammann (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2006), 3–44; Nilufer Göle, "Islam in Public: New Visibilities and New Imaginaries," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 173–90; Menderes Çınar and Burhanettin Duran, "The Specific Evolution of Contemporary Political Islam in Turkey and Its 'Difference'," *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party* (London, UK: Routledge, 2008), 17–41.

[36] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[37] Massicard, *The Alevis in Turkey and Europe*; Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism*.

[38] For more on the Zeynebiye movement, see Zarcone, *Shi'isms under Construction*.

[39] Article 35: Opening and Management of Mosques (Amendment 31/7/1998 – 4379/1).

[40] "300 cami, İran emrinde," *Hurriyet*, 3 March 1998, https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/300-cami-iran-emrinde-39008429.

Diyanet control, proposing the possible solution of Ja'fari jurisprudence being taught at the Faculty of Theology in Ankara University, potentially attracting Shi'i students also from Iraq, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Despite the rhetoric, such an initiative never materialized and mosques managed to preserve their independence, as talks between Shi'i leaders and state officials during this period led to an informal understanding of "good will" that prevented most state interference.[41]

AKP and the "Ja'fari Opening" and Closing

With the rise of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) in the early 2000s, relations between the Diyanet and Shi'i community came to the fore once again during the government's period of "democratic opening" (*demokratik açılım*) following its second victory in the 2007 general elections, purportedly aiming to address the demands and problems of the country's various ethnic and religious communities. While much was said about the "Alevi opening" launched by the AKP in 2007 being a step toward Alevis' official recognition, some commentators also spoke of a possible "Ja'fari opening" (*Caferi açılımı*).[42] Indeed, the head of the Diyanet at the time, Ali Bardakoğlu, expressed an interest in bringing Shi'a into the fold in 2005, saying: "We must win the Ja'faris" (*Caferileri kazanmalıyım*).[43] Bardakoğlu acknowledged the prayer leaders of Shi'i mosques as "honorary imams" (*fahri imam*), inviting them to receive training and join the Diyanet to receive state salaries.

However, many Shi'i leaders rejected the idea of Diyanet-trained Shi'a as an assimilationist move, with Selahattin Özgündüz, the leader of the Zeynebiye movement, replying directly to Bardakoğlu's call: "We are not the loss of this country" (*Biz bu ülkenin kayıpları değiliz*).[44] At the 2009 'Ashura' ceremony in Zeynebiye, attended by opposition political figures including the then CHP leader, Deniz Baykal, Özgündüz reiterated his suspicion of government intentions, stating that this so-called opening had thus far not been sincere, as it had occurred without community consultation or attention to the rights they demanded.[45]

In the following years, the Diyanet and AKP politicians made several symbolic moves towards the Shi'a. Perhaps the most significant was then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's attendance at the 2010 'Ashura' ceremony in Zeynebiye, where he gave a speech echoing the tone of the democratic opening, emphasizing national "unity and solidarity."[46] At this same event, Özgündüz took the opportunity to spell out some of the Shi'i community's key demands: mosques' independence from the Diyanet, inclusion of the Ja'fari perspective in public school religious textbooks, and official representation in parliament.

At this time, Diyanet rhetoric had shifted to acknowledging Shi'a by reframing them as followers of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq's jurisprudence and making gestures of catering to these differences as jurisprudential rather than sectarian. In 2010, the Diyanet announced the intended publication of a series of books covering Shafi'i and Ja'fari jurisprudence, which

[41] Sönmez Kutlu, "The Presidency of Religious Affairs' Relationship with Religious Groups (Sects/Sufi Orders) in Turkey," *The Muslim World* 98, no. 2–3 (2008): 249–63.

[42] Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey*; Ceren Lord, "Rethinking the Justice and Development Party's 'Alevi Openings," *Turkish Studies* 18, no. 2 (2017): 278–96; Bardakçi, "The Alevi Opening of the AKP Government in Turkey"; Soner and Toktaş, "Alevis and Alevism in the Changing Context of Turkish Politics"; Elise Massicard, "Alevi Critique of the AK Party, Criticizing 'Islamism' or the Turkish State," in *The Turkish AK Party and Its Leader: Criticism, Opposition and Dissent* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 75–102.

[43] Ali Bardakoğlu, "Caferileri Kazanmalıyız," *Caferiyol* Magazine, May 2006, 14–15.

[44] "Özgündüz'den Diyanete Cevap," *Zeynebiye.com*, 19 December 2008, http://zeynebiye.com/d/70773/ozgunduz-den-diyanete-cevap (accessed 9 September 2023); "KANAL D - Caferi Açılımı," http://www.zeynebiye.tv/v/812/kanal-d-caferi-acilimi- (accessed 10 May 2023).

[45] "Halkalı' da Yapılan Aşura 2009 Programından Başlıklar," *Zeynebiye.com*, 7 January 2009, http://zeynebiye.com/d/70833/halkali-da-yapilan-asura-2009-programindan-basliklar.

[46] "Başbakan Erdoğan, Halkalı'daki Aşura Meydanı'ndaki Konuşması," 16 December 2010, https://youtu.be/6Z_yKplPTBU.

were to be sent to (Hanafi) Sunni imams and muftis where these communities lived.[47] School religious textbooks were also updated to ambiguously include *Caferilik* (Jaʿfarism) as a fifth *mezhep* (school of jurisprudence) alongside the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence; a move that both angered many Sunni groups and also failed to satisfy Shiʿi demands for representation of their beliefs and practices.[48] For many Shiʿa, the Diyanet's ambiguous positioning of Shiʿism as a *mezhep* alongside the four main Sunni legal schools was an assimilationist move aimed at reducing their beliefs and practices to jurisprudential differences subsumed within a dominant Sunni framework.

Like the "Alevi opening," this period of symbolic gestures towards the community ended soon after 2011, as Turkey became increasingly involved in the sectarianized conflict in Syria.[49] Perhaps most alarmingly for Shiʿa at this time, was the growing sense of Diyanet efforts to monitor and control their mosques and community. One incident appeared to justify these fears in 2013, when a leaked report prepared by the provincial mufti of Iğdır, Cüneyt Kulaz, the Diyanet's official representative in the province, and signed by the governor and general of security, angered Shiʿa throughout Turkey. The two-page report addressed to the General Directorate of Security, gave figures on the number of Shiʿi mosques in the province (80 of the total 226), and stated that Shiʿa in the area were unwilling to enter Diyanet-controlled mosques. The report stated that "Shiʿi ideology" was developing amongst the youth and should be closely monitored by the state. The report, which also noted the differences in the community's practices, including the timing of their *ezan* and religious festivals, ended with the mufti's recommendation that Shiʿi mosques be brought directly under Diyanet control. Shiʿa across the country were infuriated and held press conferences and demonstrations, feeling as though they had been depicted as "terrorists and traitors." The Diyanet, perhaps surprised by the outrage, suggested it was all a misunderstanding. To calm tensions, the then president of the Diyanet, Mehmet Görmez, declared: "Everything that offends and upsets our Shiʿi citizens also upsets and offends us." However, this statement only further stoked the anger, as it was seen to imply, once again, that Shiʿa were indeed outside the "us" of the nation.

In 2014, the following year, the earlier "Jaʿfari opening" and sincerity of Erdoğan's 2010 speech at the ʿAshuraʾ ceremony was called into question when the prime minister made disparaging remarks about Shiʿa in a televised interview. While criticizing the Gülen movement's "infiltration of the Turkish state," he suggested that Gülenists had surpassed the Shiʿa in three features: "lying, slander and *taqiya* (dissimulation)." These comments enraged Shiʿa, who demanded an apology, but such never came.[50] A few months later, two separate Shiʿi mosques in Istanbul were set on fire in arson attacks that closely followed each other.[51] Although the Diyanet and local authorities strongly condemned the attacks, opposition MPs and community leaders drew attention to their timing, after Erdoğan's comments against Shiʿa, claiming that such rhetoric was increasing sectarian tensions.[52]

These attacks and the "closing" of dialogue around the Jaʿfari community's status, following Erdoğan's support for Sunni groups in Syria and the change in rhetoric towards the country's

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[47] A single volume Jaʿfari catechism was published in 2012; see Mehmet Keskin, *Caferi İlmihali* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2012). A two-volume set on Shafiʿi jurisprudence was published in 2018; see Mehmet Keskin, *Şafii Fıkhı* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2018).

[48] The controversial Sunni imam Ahmet Mahmut Ünlü (better known as Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca), who regularly preaches against Shiʿism, gave various sermons denouncing the Diyanet's inclusion of *Caferilik* in school textbooks. See for example, "Câferilik hak mezheb değildir - Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca," February 16, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvkF9wgsX5s.

[49] Lord, "Rethinking the Justice and Development Party's 'Alevi Openings'."

[50] "Başbakan'ın Caferi vatandaşlarımıza özür borcu var," *Hurriyet*, 18 March 2014, https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/basbakanin-caferi-vatandaslarimiza-ozur-borcu-var-26029731.

[51] Veli Gürbüz, Hasan Postacı, and Gökhan Türkoğlu, *Caferi Cemaatin Yoğun Olarak Kullandiği Camilere Yapilan Saldirilar Hakkinda İnceleme ve Gözlem Raporu* (Istanbul: Mazlumder, 2014).

[52] "Yine Esenyurt, yine Caferi Camii'ne saldırı," *Agos*, 8 July 2014, https://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/7523/yine-esenyurt-yine-caferi-camii-ne-saldiri.

minority communities, echoed the wider growth of sectarianization across the Middle East in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Changes in the AKP's attitude towards Shiʿa during this period reflected the increased securitization of minorities deemed a potential fifth column.[53] Subsequently, the community has viewed attempts to bring Jaʿfari mosques under state control with increased suspicion, questioning the state's sincerity and motives.

Expressions of Difference and Allegiance to the Nation

In the context of this increased "sectarianized securitization," Diyanet authorities in 2013 once again reasserted the claim that, in accordance with the laws and regulations of the Turkish Republic, all mosques should come under government control and all prayer leader be employed by the state. This proposition has only been accepted by a small handful of the country's Shiʿi mosques, most of which are affiliated with the Turkey Jaʿfari Foundation (Türkiye Caferileri Vakfı, TÜRCAV), an association claiming to be the first and only official Jaʿfari foundation in Turkey with the Ministry of Interior's official support.[54] The Shiʿi imams I interviewed from the few mosques affiliated with this group claimed they are allowed to preach freely and follow the requirements of Shiʿi jurisprudence in full. However, they have received much opposition from within the country's wider Shiʿi community, often labelled as "sell outs" willing to compromise their religious freedom for a state salary. Despite attempts to prove their allegiance to Shiʿi jurisprudence when joining the Diyanet—even seeking approval from ayatollahs in Iran and Iraq for their status within Turkey—the majority of Shiʿa continue to regard the Diyanet's position as assimilationist, insisting that, within the Shiʿi tradition, a prayer leader cannot be a government employee as this compromises their independence. As one Istanbul prayer leader put it to me:

> I don't mean to criticize the Diyanet; they provide an important service to those whose jurisprudence they serve. Whether that institution continues is up to our Sunni brothers to decide. We respect the institution the same way we respect all state institutions. But under this condition: it should not interfere in our worship and our mosques. This is our constitutional right, our individual and social freedom. It is one of the essentials of our belief. According to our jurisprudence, a civil servant who receives a salary from the state cannot be an imam! It doesn't matter if that state is the Turkish Republic, the Islamic Republic of Iran, or Saudi Arabia, it makes no difference. Sunni may see this differently, but it is not possible in our jurisprudence. Let me give you an example: on February 28 [1997] the Diyanet said that according to the Qur'an there is no headscarf in Islam. If I had been a Diyanet imam then I would have had to say this too. When you are a civil servant you must follow state policies and when the government changes these policies also change. This is not accepted in our jurisprudence and that is why we cannot pray behind a civil servant.[55]

In 2016, in an interview with the current leader of the mosque founded by Ahunt Malik in Kars, Sayyid Ahmet reasserted the importance of Shiʿi prayer leaders' independence to me:

> Our mosques are independent and will continue that way. They tell us that if we join the Diyanet we will receive a share of the budget. They say they will accept us, but we must be like them. We built our mosques ourselves without any support from the state. The Diyanet should treat all religions equally, it is not right to serve only one *mezhep*. They should fix this issue; we are secular and mosques should not be connected to the state. We put our labor to build our own mosques. We selected are own prayer leaders. We are

[53] Ceren Lord, "Sectarianized Securitization in Turkey in the Wake of the 2011 Arab Uprisings," *The Middle East Journal* 73, no. 1 (2019): 51–72.

[54] "Türkiye Caferileri Vakfı Tarihçesi," Türkiye Caferileri Vakfı, https://turcav.org/kurumsal/turkiye-caferileri-vakfi-tarihcesi (accessed 9 September 2023).

[55] Author Interview, Istanbul, 20 July 2015.

part of this country's mosaic and have never had ambitions of separatism. We live here as brothers and will continue living this way. We see these attempts with suspicion.[56]

These comments exemplify the stance of most Shiʿa community leaders, who assert the need for Shiʿi mosques to remain independent from the state while simultaneously emphasizing the community's allegiance to the Turkish Republic. The state's interest in incorporating these mosques into the Diyanet often raises suspicion, as such suggests that the state views Shiʿa as a problem or outside the fold of the nation. Diyanet attempts to control Shiʿi mosques or classify *Caferilik* as a *mezhep* are seen as attempts at assimilation through the direct or indirect erasure of differences in beliefs and practices that Shiʿa consider sine qua non to their faith. Similar concerns over state assimilation are shared by non-Hanafi Muslims in Turkey, alongside Alevis, most recently due to the government's 2022 announcement of the creation of the Presidency of Alevi-Bektashi Culture and Cemevis within the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Kurdish Shafiʿi's, who have also faced similar attempts to bring their religious leaders and places of worship under Diyanet control, also share these concerns.[57]

Alongside demands for religious independence and despite decades of uncertainty regarding their status as a religious community, the majority of Shiʿa, like Sayyid Ahmet, continue to assert their loyalty and sense of belonging to the Turkish Republic. The Turkish flag is omnipresent at Shiʿi mosques across the country (Fig. 2). Muharram processions held annually act as important public events in which Twelver Shiʿi Muslims can express elements of their religious identity and difference, particularly their loyalty and devotion to Imam Husayn and the *Ehl-i Beyt* (the Family of the Prophet), while also reaffirming their commitment to Turkish nationalism and a shared Muslim identity. This is done by incorporating symbols such as the national flag and anthem at events. While these displays can be seen to demonstrate the "paradox of pluralism" highlighted by Kabir Tambar in relation to Alevis in Turkey, in which apparent displays of difference are limited by and reassert Turkish nationalism, displays of Shiʿi difference have arguably been equally framed by dominant forms of Sunni Islamism in the public sphere.[58] An example of this is shying away from using the title "Shiʿa" in favor of the title "Jaʿfari" in public, as well as the centering of devotion to the Family of the Prophet as something shared by all Muslims—Sunni, Shiʿa, sufis, and Alevis. Mosques are mostly named after members of the *Ehl-i Beyt,* who are known and revered by Sunni Muslims as well. In Kars, for example, the second largest mosque is named the Hazreti Ali Mosque, using the common honorific for respected Muslims, *hazret*, rather than Imam, which more clearly marks it as a Shiʿi place of worship. Public speeches by Shiʿi clerics and displays during Muharram utilize discourses and slogans that emphasize a shared mourning, such as "*Ey müslümanlar! Bu matem hepimimizin*" (Oh Muslims! This mourning is all of ours) (Fig. 3). The public expression of a distinct Shiʿi identity is articulated in ways seeking to reemphasize the community's belonging within both a Turkish nation and wider Muslim community, beyond sectarian boundaries.

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[56] Author Interview, Kars, 12 May 2016.

[57] As with Jaʿfaris, the Diyanet has made several attempts to include Shafiʿi *meles*, community religious leaders trained in local Kurdish-speaking *medrese*, in its institutional framework since the initial period of "democratic opening." While these efforts have received mixed responses, they have mostly been seen negatively, in line with the Turkish State's policies of assimilation and securitization of Kurds. Most recently, this was done to fill the gap left after the arrest and dismissal of Diyanet imams suspected of Gülenist links following the July 15, 2016, coup d'état attempt. See Nil Mutluer, "Diyanet's Role in Building the 'Yeni (New) Milli' in the AKP Era," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 27 [Online] (2018); Omer Tekdemir, *Constituting the Political Economy of the Kurds: Social Embeddedness, Hegemony, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Emir Kaya, *Secularism and State Religion in Modern Turkey: Law, Policymaking and the Diyanet* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017); Gülay Türkmen, *Under the Banner of Islam: Turks, Kurds, and the Limits of Religious Unity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[58] Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism*.

Figure 2. The outside of Hazret Ali Mosque during Muharram. The only mosque in Kars with a large Turkish flag hanging between its minarets. The sign on the front side of the mosque reads "Kars mourns for Imam Husayn." Photo by author, October 2015.

"We Are Not a Minority. We Are the Original Owners of This Country"

Today, there are three mosques in Kars that function independent of the Diyanet. From the outside, there is little that distinguishes them architecturally from the neo-Ottoman style of contemporary mosques in Turkey.[59] However, the sound of the distinct call to prayer (*ezan*), three times a day, marks them out in the religious landscape, announcing the Shiʿi community's presence in

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[59] Bülent Batuman, "Architectural Mimicry and the Politics of Mosque Building: Negotiating Islam and Nation in Turkey," *The Journal of Architecture* 21, no. 3 (2016): 321–47.

Figure 3. "Oh Muslims! This mourning is all of ours…" A banner displayed on the streets of Kars during Muharram. Photo by author, October 2015.

the city. Indeed, when mentioning my research on Shiʿi Islam to both Shiʿi and Sunni friends and interlocutors in Kars, the *ezan* was often the first topic of conversation. Visitors and migrants from other parts of the country are often struck by its presence in the city's soundscape.

Although the core of the Shiʿi *ezan* does not differ from that of the Sunni, it is common to recite an additional line, sometimes referred to as the "third testimony" (*üçüncü şehadet*), referencing Imam ʿAli.[60] Many listeners in Kars will not necessarily pick up on the inclusion

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[60] Liyakat Takim, "From Bid-A to Sunna: The Wilaya of Ali in the Shi-i-adhan," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120, no. 2 (2000): 166.

of this extra line, but will notice the distinct characteristics and quality of the voice on the recording relayed through the loudspeakers of minarets, as well as the difference in timing. The Diyanet's training of *muezzin* and the replay of recordings have led to the standardization of the *ezan* in the Turkish public soundscape. The *ezan* from Diyanet mosques across the country is based on an Ottoman melodic style often described as being a Turkish "national" sound.[61] The recording played by the Shi'i mosques, in contrast, is based on a distinct modal form from the Persian *dastgāh* (*Bayāt-e Tork*) and was recorded by Rahim Moezzenzadeh, a famous Azeri-Turkish *muezzin* from Ardabil, Iran, in 1955. It is the combination of these melodic features, the timing of the *ezan*, and the inclusion of the third *şehadet* that mark these mosques in the urban soundscape. For Shi'a locally, the *ezan* is described with pride, a sign of their independence and loyalty to the Family of the Prophet as well as a symbol of their public presence in Turkey.

Although the sound of the *ezan* reverberating from these minarets has been covered by national media in the past, a different sound caught the attention of people across the country in April 2020.[62] In honor of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi), Sayyid Ahmet decided to broadcast the national anthem from the minarets of the Yeni Mahalle mosque. As videos of the event circulated online, viewers from across the country expressed both support and criticism for this act of patriotism.[63]

Sayyid Ahmet decided to play the national anthem after hearing that the Diyanet had refused a request by well-known writer and journalist Can Ataklı to sound the national anthem from the mosques to honor this occasion, as public celebrations had been canceled due to the Covid pandemic. Free from the constraints of Diyanet control, Sayyid Ahmet made his own decision and, by sounding the national anthem in contradiction to the Diyanet's ruling, claimed to be upholding the essence of the Republic. "Our republic, our homeland, our flag and anthem are our red line," he declared in a newspaper interview. "Today, if there are mosques and we can worship comfortably, we owe it to the Great Leader Atatürk, his principles and reforms, and our red flag."[64]

Listening to the sounds emanating from Ahunt Malik's mosque today—i.e., the Shi'i *ezan* and national anthem—highlights the precarious position of Shi'a Muslims in republican Turkey. On the one hand, the community has continuously struggled and negotiated changing social and political climates to assert their distinct identity and right to practice Islam independent of state control. On the other hand, they have also had to demonstrate their genuineness, loyalty, and support for the Republic in ways that reflect and sometimes, as in the case of the amplification of the anthem, go beyond the expected expressions of Turkish nationalism.

The community's attitude towards its minority status was most firmly communicated to me in an interview with a prominent Shi'i lawyer in Kars in the days following the sounding of the national anthem: "We are not a minority; we are the original owners of this country (*biz azınlık değiliz, bu ülkenin asli sahipleriyiz*). There is no section [of this country] more closely connected to this homeland, nation, and state!"[65] By rejecting categorization as a minority, Twelver Shi'i Muslims reinforce the notion that to be a minority in Turkey—whether

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[61] Eve McPherson, *Political History and Embodied Identity Discourse in the Turkish Call to Prayer* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Library, 2011).

[62] On the *ezan*, see "İftarda iki kez ezan okunuyor," *Anadolu Ajansı*, 5 July 2014, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/iftarda-iki-kez-ezan-okunuyor/145237. For the national anthem, see "85 bin cami sustu Işıklı Camii'den İstiklâl Marşı okundu," *Sözcü*, 24 April 2020, https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/85-bin-cami-sustu-isikli-camiiden-istiklal-marsi-okundu-5772769/.

[63] "Cami Minarelerinden İstiklal Marşı Okundu," 24 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4Ddu705hOA.

[64] "23 Nisan'da İstiklâl Marşı okunan tek caminin imamı o geceyi anlattı," *Oda TV*, 28 April 2020, https://www.odatv4.com/guncel/23-nisanda-istikll-marsi-okunan-tek-caminin-imami-o-geceyi-anlatti-28042041-182990.

[65] Author Interview, online, 28 April 2020.

religious, ethnic, or other—is to be outside the Turkish nation and open to suspicion. This places limitations on the expression of religious difference, as Shi'ism's entry to the public sphere is accompanied by the need to reassert the community's Turkish and Islamic character. The case of Shi'i Muslims presents an instance in which the simple binary metanarrative of Islamists versus secularists in Turkey collapses, highlighting the diversity of Muslim experiences in the country and the way actors and communities navigate multiple political, religious, and social currents.[66] While the decline of early republican policy has seen the increased presence of Islam in the Turkish public sphere and politics, this has not meant that all Muslim groups have benefitted equally. To fully understand Islam in Turkey, it is thus essential to attend to the diversity of Muslim groups, experiences, and relations with both the state and dominant forms of Islam.

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[66] Kandiyoti, "The Travails of the Secular"; Berna Turam, *Secular State and Religious Society: Two Forces in Play in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillon, 2011).