Will Syria's Sectarian Divisions Spill Over into Turkey?

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Apr 16, 2012

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Should the conflict in Syria turn Sunni on Alawite, Turkish Alevis may find themselves actively opposing any intervention organized by their own government.

Observers of the growing humanitarian crisis in Syria are increasingly worried that the conflict will turn into sectarian struggle, and with good reason: the Assad regime has enjoyed overwhelming support among Syria's minority Alawite population, while the country's Sunni majority is leading the anti-Assad rebellion. But the conflict poses another risk. It may stir sectarian tensions in Turkey, which could, in turn, complicate any international intervention against Assad's regime.

The major sticking point is the Alevi group, a syncretic and highly secularized Muslim offshoot based in Turkey that has often defined itself as a minority persecuted by the country's Sunni majority. Should the conflict in Syria turn Sunni on Alawite, Turkish Alevis may find themselves empathizing with the minority Alawites in Syria and, by extension, with the Assad regime. More than that: they could actively oppose any intervention organized by their own government.

Some of this is rooted in contemporary Turkish politics. Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has moved away from its hardline Islamist roots and made inroads across most sectors of Turkish society, has, thus far, failed to win much support from the Alevis, who constitute 10 to 15 percent of Turkey's 75 million citizens. Unlike the AKP, the Alevis tend to align with the secularist views of Turkey's founder, Kemal Ataturk, favoring a strict separation of religion and politics. And sectarian conflict in the 1970s, including attacks by Sunnis on Alevi communities, has left behind a legacy of distrust between Alevis and Sunnis.

Relations have improved recently, but should Ankara intervene in Syria against the Assad regime, some in the Turkish Alevi community might be inclined to view this as a new "Sunni attack" against a fellow minority. That likelihood is further bolstered by many Turkish Alevis' belief that they actually are the same as the Alawites, though they are not ethnically or religiously related (the Alawites are Arabs and the Alevis are Turks). It is not uncommon to meet Alevis who, due to a lack of religious education, assume that Alawite is just another name for Alevi.

There are already signs of a divergence between the AKP's stance on Syria and the way Turkish Alevis view the conflict. In an interview with The Wall Street Journal on April 9, Selahattin Ozel, chairman of the federation of Alevi

associations in Turkey, said, "As Turkish Alevis, we do not support an anti-democratic, an anti-humanist regime [in Syria], but we cannot understand why the [Turkish] prime minister so suddenly became an enemy of the Syrian administration."

Most Turkish Alevis support the opposition Republican Peoples Party (CHP), which has taken issue with the AKP's policy of confronting the Assad regime. The CHP's current leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, happens to be Alevi, and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's criticism of Kilicdaroglu's Syria policy has been laced with sectarian innuendo. "Don't forget that a person's religion," Erdogan has said in this context, "is the religion of his friend."

Meanwhile, there is an additional reason for Ankara to worry about sectarian tensions spilling over: More than half a million Arab Alawites live in Turkey -- mostly in the Hatay province, which is centered around the ancient city of Antakya -- and southern Turkey is also home to around one million Sunni Arabs. If the conflict in Syria turns more sectarian, it could resonate across the border among Turkish Arabs of both Alawite and Sunni faiths.

Recently, I visited Antakya, where Turkey has built camps to accommodate refugees fleeing Assad's crackdown. There, I witnessed a pro-Assad demonstration attended by Turkish Arab Alawites, who chanted anti-AKP and pro-Assad slogans. Alawite merchants in town proudly sell and display Assad paraphernalia. At the same time, Antakya's Sunni Arab community is busy organizing assistance to the anti-Assad uprising, using smuggling routes to take supplies into Syria.

Given all this, it seems a real possibility that the prospect of domestic sectarian unrest could tie Turkey's hands in devising a policy toward Syria. That said, it's a problem Ankara could still avoid. The key would be for Turkey to alleviate any concerns that its approach to Syria is meant to serve narrow sectarian interests. For starters, the government should cease its own rhetoric that plays into sectarianism, and expressly reach out to the CHP and to the Turkish Alevis, informing them of the humanitarian nature of its Syria policy. Ankara should also consider reaching out to Syrian Alawites by making clear that prominent Alawite members of the Syrian regime who defect would be able to take refuge in Turkey.

There's another key step Turkey can take. Turkey has been debating implementing a humanitarian corridor that would allow the international community to bring relief to civilians in Syria. Ankara should make a strong case for opening the first such corridor from Turkey into Syria's Alawite heartland or the multi-ethnic city of Latakia. This would signal Turkey's intent to protect all Syrians. Such a corridor would be a bridge not only between Ankara and Alawites, but perhaps also between Turkish Sunnis and Alevis. And it may reduce internal opposition to intervention.

*Soner Cagaptay is director of the **Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/research-programs/turkish-research-program/)**.* ❖

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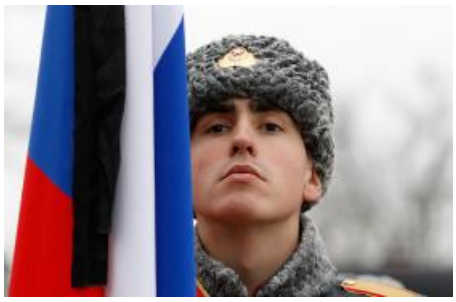

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