

From Enclaves to Spaces of Encounter: Post-Gezi Urban Politics of Islamic Minorities in Turkey

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The global protests of the 2010s brought to the foreground the politics of encounter. In Turkey, this moment materialized in the Gezi Park protests of 2013, and this article scrutinizes its aftermath with respect to the changing trajectories of urban politics. Specifically, the growing authoritarianism of the government has been troublesome for heterodox Islamic minorities, who have been increasingly forced to abide by Sunni practices. The largest of such groups is the Alevis, who have historically suffered marginalization due to the state's strict endorsement of Sunni Islam. In this article I discuss the political encounters among different Alevisms in the city of Adana in southern Turkey, where shrines, which traditionally functioned as enclaves, have now become spaces of association.

The city has long been studied as a site of encounter: a place where people from different walks of life come together. In Doreen Massey's famous conceptualization, it is its very "throwntogetherness" that characterizes the city as a place open to unforeseen contacts, which at times trigger unpredictable consequences.¹ This is what makes the city a dynamic environment, enabling individual emancipation as well as social change.

While it is a general characteristic of the city to inspire encounter, the political potential of such encounters has recently become an object of scholarly scrutiny. In particular, the global protests of the 2010s not only created the opportunity for encounters in public space between activists with different agendas, but also the chance for contact and mutual influence between protestors from different countries at a global scale. Typically, in the global North these protests have challenged austerity measures, while in the global South they have targeted corrupt authoritarian regimes. Yet they have also had an impact on each other. In this regard, the emergence of the Occupy moment, as a reflection of the global simultaneity and interaction of these diverse protests, represents the rise of a

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politics of encounter, which has left particular imprints in its aftermath on certain geographies.

In Turkey, this global tide materialized in the Gezi Park protests that took place in Istanbul in the summer of 2013. The protests began with a small environmentalist demonstration against the destruction of Gezi Park in the city center but rapidly turned into a nationwide uprising as a reaction to the level of police brutality exercised on the protestors. And while Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government grew increasingly authoritarian in the following decade, the repertoire of collective action produced during the Gezi protests, as well as the experience of encounter among different subject positions, has now come to prevail in grassroots politics.

This article scrutinizes the post-Gezi moment with respect to the changing trajectories of urban politics in Turkey. The growing authoritarianism of the AKP has today been coupled with the increasing role played by Sunni Islam in the definition of Turkish nationalism and the national identity. The oppressive attitude of the government has fallen heavily on heterodox Islamic minorities, who have been increasingly forced to abide by Sunni practices. The largest of such groups is the Alevi, a religious minority of 10–15 million people who have historically suffered marginalization due to the state's endorsement of Sunni Islam. The gradual urbanization of Alevism due to the trend of rural-to-urban migration that has characterized Turkey since the 1950s has also turned the urban environment into a site of encounter for various strands of Alevi. Such encounters have now sparked new political possibilities in the post-Gezi moment.

In this article I will discuss the predicaments created by these encounters through the case of Adana in southern Turkey. Being a major industrial city and the center of an agricultural hinterland, Adana has recently received migrant (Turkish and Kurdish) Alevi from Eastern Anatolia. It has also long been home to nomadic Alevi tribes of the Taurus Mountains (called Tahtacı) and local Arab Alawites (Nusayri). As the Gezi protests coincided with the escalation of the civil war in Syria, the period after 2013 became doubly troublesome for these Alevi groups. Within the context of this political tension, however, they have begun interacting among themselves, with the venues built by their NGOs facilitating these interactions. Thus, while their shrines traditionally functioned as enclaves, they have now become spaces of association among different Alevisms.

After discussing Islamist attempts to control the production of Alevi spaces, I will analyze this new phenomenon through a discussion of a number of recently built buildings and my interpretation of the architectural dialogue between them. My analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in 2019–2022, which included site visits to the buildings under discussion as well as interviews with their architects and with representatives of Alevi and Nusayri NGOs.² I will begin with a brief discussion of the concept of encounter, linking it to the politics of encounter during and after the Gezi protests.

After that, I will provide a historical background on Alevism in Turkey and the urban context of Adana. I will then move on to my analysis on the spaces of different Alevi groups and their interaction in the last decade. Through this analysis I hope to contribute to discussions on urban encounter, showing how the meeting of different strands of Alevisms in Adana has led to associations not only in terms of political allegiance but even in a narrowing of faith-based gaps leading toward the creation of a shared Alevi identity.

POLITICS OF ENCOUNTER

The city has always provided an environment of interaction where strangers may encounter one another, and public space has been seen as the prime site of such encounters.³ Indeed, Henri Lefebvre defined the urban as a particular “form of simultaneity” and a “field of encounters.”⁴ Diversity and intercultural exchange as a result of encounter have thus been described as characteristic features of urban society.⁵ Encounter has also been seen as enabling a cosmopolitan mindset that affirms heterogeneity and offers the possibility of triggering social interaction and cultural change.⁶ In this respect, it is possible to argue that the urban is not only the site of encounters, but is produced by them.⁷

Claiming that it is a “conceptually charged construct,” Helen F. Wilson traced the use of “encounter” in the field of geography.⁸ She pointed out that the initial emergence of the concept in spatial terms came through postcolonial studies.⁹ In that context, critical scholarship scrutinized the encounter of different epistemologies as well as those that emerged through colonial encounters.¹⁰ Informed in part by postcolonial writings, the period following the World Trade Center attacks saw the further deployment of the concept to describe the integration of migrants. Themes such as conflict, prejudice, discrimination, and community cohesion also began to be scrutinized through spaces of interaction and “contact zones” in cities.¹¹ The global tide of protests that shook both the global North and South in the 2010s politically charged the concept even further. Encounters among activists, even those not sharing the same physical space (through the resonance of the name Tahrir across the globe, for instance) may now define new modes of assembly and the production of multitudes.¹²

This has very much been the case in Turkey, where a small environmentalist protest to prevent the destruction of Gezi Park in Istanbul's city center in the last days of May 2013 turned into a nationwide antigovernment revolt. When the initial group of protestors inside Gezi Park were brutally dispersed by police on the morning of May 30, the protests spread to other cities, and within two days the main squares of major cities were occupied. During the weeks that followed, millions took to the streets protesting the government on various grounds. They had diverse agendas: some were protesting the Islamization of education and the conservative

pressure on daily lives; others were challenging the increasing pressure on women's rights; some were pursuing labor struggles; and others were disputing specific urban renewal projects in their respective towns.¹³ Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of the protestors and the culture of assembly they created, despite their differences, left a permanent mark on Turkish politics.¹⁴ In this respect, the protests not only illustrated the politics of encounter but paved the way for future encounters after they faded away.¹⁵

Coming back to the literature on the politics of encounter, it is possible to define two poles within this growing body of work. At one end, scholars have focused on the progressive potential latent in the coming together of differences and their governance.¹⁶ In the wake of the so-called "refugee crisis," this line of inquiry has recently concentrated on urban encounters of and with refugees.¹⁷ On the other end of the spectrum, encounter is a key term for a line of radical urban political theory underlining the unforeseen outcomes of chance encounters.¹⁸ In this framework, the city has been described by Lefebvre as the "place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable."¹⁹ It is worth noting that this line of inquiry has also been taken up in studies focusing on the urban political experience of refugees.²⁰

Defining these two lineages as, on the one hand, scrutinizing "the negotiation of difference" and, on the other, "consider[ing] the excessive qualities of urban life," Wilson and Jonathan Darling argued that it is crucial to address urban encounters in terms of their transformative effects and the relational interconnections in the city.²¹ In tune with this approach, this article aims to show, first, the role of architectural space in encounters among different strands of Alevism, and second, the transformative predicaments of encounter — which I will define as association. As I will discuss in my conclusion, association here implies more than acceptance, understanding and collaboration. The recent experience of Alevi in Adana has thus led to a closing of faith-based gaps between their identities and the acknowledgment of a shared Alevi identity.

ALEVISM: A BRIEF HISTORY

Alevism is the second largest faith after Sunni Islam in Turkey. It combines elements from Shi'ism and Sufism as well as local rituals and traditions from Eastern Anatolia.²² The main Alevi ritual is called *cem*, and Alevi shrines are called *cemevis* (houses of *cem*). Historically, from the sixteenth century onwards, Alevi suffered from the centralization of the Ottoman Empire. And their later suppression took the form of systematic Islamization and Turkification in the nineteenth century.²³ This trend continued in the Republican period, after 1923, although the new government also provided some relief from persecution. Thus, the relationship

between the Alevi and the modern Turkish nation-state has been ambiguous: they were freed from Sunni oppression, but they continued to suffer from official discrimination and public "invisibility." Moreover, there have been recent massacres of Alevi — in Maraş (1978), Çorum (1980), and Sivas (1993)).

The state's relation to Alevism has also been far from unequivocal.²⁴ On the one hand, as early as the 1910s it was claimed that Alevism had links with central Asian shamanism, which was used to argue that Alevi were of Turkish origin.²⁵ Accordingly, they were incorporated into the nation-building as representatives of a "Turkish Islam," in contrast to mainstream Sunnism which was coded as "Arabic." Nevertheless, Sunni Islam would also become a major component of Turkish national identity, and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA), which was established in 1923 to control religious activities in the country, would not accept Alevism as a separate belief system. Even today the DRA still persists in asserting that Alevism is a branch of Islam, and thus continues to deny official status to the *cemevi*. Moreover, due to the oppression that Alevi faced for centuries, the *cemevi* did not develop as a specific architectural typology; in villages, rather, the houses of clerics — called *dede* — were typically used for *cem* gatherings.

As a result of this continuing exclusion, Alevism maintained its rural character up until the second half of the twentieth century. Yet after the 1950s, like other parts of the developing world, Turkish metropolises experienced massive rural-to-urban migration. As a result, major cities were quickly surrounded with squatter settlements built illegally on public land. And these squatter neighborhoods soon came to be seen as a threat to the urban order, especially with the rise of social movements across the country.²⁶ It was in this context that, in the 1970s, Alevi neighborhoods in squatter areas became bases for left-wing politics, ranging from the left-of-center Republican People's Party to clandestine socialist organizations.²⁷

The 1980s witnessed a further shift in urbanization policies in Turkey, as building amnesties allowed the replacement of single-story squatter homes with four- to five-story apartment buildings.²⁸ This process eventually transformed former squatters into an urban petty bourgeoisie who demanded recognition, and the majority of this new class provided a base for the emergence of Islamism in the 1990s.²⁹ In a similar way, however, Alevi began to raise demands for recognition of their rituals and practices, insisting on their difference from Sunni Islam.³⁰ This process, in which new Alevi organizations were founded and new debates on Alevi identity flourished, has since been labeled the "Alevi renaissance."³¹

In the 1990s the architecture of the *cemevi* also became a topic of investigation for the first time, in parallel with attempts to promote modern designs for a communal building that might address contemporary needs.³² This effort gained further urgency due to the increasing prominence of identity politics (not unlike the contemporaneous expansion of intel-

lectual debates among Islamists). However, it was also a result of the urbanization of Alevism, which for centuries had maintained a rural character. And it was within this context that the *cemevi* came to represent Alevi identity beyond faith, encompassing educational and cultural activities that could be attended by even nonpracticing Alevi.³³

THE URBAN CONTEXT OF ADANA

I shall now move on to the context of my inquiry, the city of Adana. Adana was an important settlement in the historical region of Cilicia, and the city is today the center of the fertile Çukurova plain, with a population approaching two million. In the late nineteenth century, however, the expansion of large farms and the emergence of cotton-based industry triggered social conflict in the region, resulting in the massacre of local Armenians in 1909. With the subsequent decline in the number of Armenians in the area, the local population came to be largely comprised, especially after 1915, of Turks and Arabs.

In Adana, the local Arab population is typically identified as Nusayri-Alawite. The belief system of the Nusayri is closer to Shi'ism and shares very little with either Sunni Islam or the heterodoxy of Alevism.³⁴ A community also marginalized throughout history, the Nusayri were regarded as heretics by Sunni Muslims and as “pagans” by Western travelers of the nineteenth century.³⁵ The Nusayri number approximately 5 million people, who live mainly in Syria (where they comprise the social base for the ruling Baath party) and in Lebanon and Turkey. In Turkey, approximately 300,000 Nusayris are settled in the southern provinces of Adana, Mersin and Hatay. In Adana, much of this community lives on the southern fringes of the city, where their major religious spaces consist of single-roomed, mud-brick shrines (*ziyarets*), built and named to mark the burial places of important religious figures.

In Adana, post-World War II rural-to-urban migration from poor Eastern Anatolian villages involved large numbers of Turkish and Kurdish Alevi. Massacres of Alevi in smaller Anatolian towns also resulted in middle-class Alevi migration into Adana. Finally, the escalation of armed conflict between Kurdish insurgents and the Turkish military in the 1990s triggered a new wave of (this time, forced) migration, in which Adana was one of the major destinations.

As a result, the 1990s was a time of significant urban transformation in the city, leading to new interactions between these minority groups. The arrival of impoverished Kurdish immigrants, among other things, triggered ethnic tensions between Kurdish and Arab minorities, as the former arrived in the southern districts where the latter were historically settled. Meanwhile, middle-class Nusayri began to move to the modern districts of the city in the north.³⁶ It was in this context that Alevi identity, which had historically been concealed in the public sphere, served as a mediator for the Kurdish Alevi in the face of anti-Kurdish hostility.

As I have mentioned earlier, in the 1990s, all ethnic and religious groups were affected by the emergence of identity politics and demanded some level of recognition. In Adana the most striking aspect of this came in terms of a growing prominence given to the architecture of shrines, which until then had been official status — whether they were the *cemevis* of the Alevi or the *ziyarets* of the Nusayri. In the following section, I will discuss the architectures of these shrines and their transformation in the 1990s.

FROM RELIGIOUS SHRINES TO CULTURAL ENCLAVES

Denied official religious status, *cemevis* have officially been built as cultural centers since the 1990s. The design of the *cemevi* thus embodies a prevailing tension. On the one hand, it is supposed to represent Alevi identity in the absence of a historical typology. On the other, in addition to providing a sacred setting for *cem* gatherings, it is required to provide space for other Alevi rituals (such as soup kitchens and funeral facilities), while also providing a communal gathering space that will attract nonpracticing Alevi. The official denial of religious status to the *cemevi* has thus turned these buildings into venues with ambiguous — and at times ambitious — architectural programs. Today *cemevis* may include libraries, study rooms, exhibition spaces, and conference halls as well as butcheries added to kitchens and morgues integrated with funerary spaces. The lack of historical precedent has also opened room for experimentation with architectural idioms, a quality that is today effectively being pursued through a growing number of architectural competitions.

However, this was not the case as recently as the 1990s. Indeed, one of the earliest attempts to build a *cemevi* in Adana only began with the purchase in the mid-1990s of a lot on the city's periphery by the Hacı Bektaş Veli Anadolu Kültür Vakfı. A project for that site was subsequently designed toward the end of the decade by an architect based in Ankara. And the ambitious program for this 6,000-sq.m. building included a *cem* hall on the top floor, a conference hall, a multipurpose hall equipped for wedding ceremonies, a dining hall and kitchen, a library, classrooms, rooms for dance training (including traditional *semah* as well as ballet), exhibition spaces, and a morgue. The back yard also featured a canopied area for funerals.

While the extent of the program resulted in delays in construction (which meant the building was only finished in 2014), there was, however, a stark contrast between the ambitious architectural program and the building's overall image (FIG. 1). Thus, from the outside, the building resembles a secular public building — a school, perhaps — with its cubic mass largely hiding the skylight of the *cem* hall. The design thus illustrates great ambitions regarding the building's functions; but it also symptomatically refrains from displaying its identity, even if it does contain liturgic references such as the



FIGURE 1. *Yüzüncü Yıl Cemevi* in Adana. Photo by author.

numbers 3 and 12, which are “visible yet hidden.” Yet significant changes also took place in the two decades between its conception and its opening, which have led to changes in its use — to which I will return below.

At the same time that experiments were beginning to formalize the architecture of the *cemevi*, the 1990s also witnessed the emergence of Nusayri NGOs and the transformation of their shrines.³⁷ The oldest of these were mud-brick huts with single interior spaces, sometimes including a grave. The most important of these were frequently visited by pilgrims from the region.³⁸ Although larger *ziyarets* were also used for gathering purposes, this lack of formal religious architecture resulted from the fact that the religious rituals of the Nusayri were generally organized in the courtyards of private houses. These rituals typically involved cooking and distribution to the community of a special dish (*hrisi*) made with sacrificial meat. Another important ritual centered on condolences, and this would typically take place at the home of the deceased.

In the 1990s, however, additions began to be made to *ziyarets* that sometimes resulted in annexes that overshadowed the shrines. These additions also embodied architectural programs incorporating practices of communal worship that had previously taken place in the private spaces of the home. Similar to the transformation of *cemevis* into urban communal spaces, the Nusayri shrines thus also expanded in function to include spaces for prayer (which is performed in seated position, unlike during a *cem*, when worshippers are required to touch the ground), rooms for condolence, dining halls, and kitchens with butcheries (FIG. 2).

These new buildings, however, had little ambition in terms of architectural significance and did not contain cul-

tural facilities such as libraries, conference rooms, etc., as did the new *cemevis*. One reason was that Nusayri neighborhoods had always been exclusive, and such facilities typically already existed within them. Another was that the shrines remained destinations within a regionwide pilgrimage network and so did not require a recognizable architectural image.



FIGURE 2. The transformation of Sheikh Ahmed Garib Ziyaret in Adana from late 1990s to 2019.

ISLAMIST GOVERNMENT AND ALEVISM: ARCHITECTURE OF ASSIMILATION

The Republican history of Turkey was long marked by a radical secularism that sought to strictly control public representations of Islam. It was only in 2002, after a severe economic crisis, that the Islamist AKP came to power. The early years of AKP rule were marked by a fierce struggle against the existing secularist establishment led by the military. In its quest for power, the AKP allied itself with different political actors, from liberals to nationalists, depending on the needs of the moment. It was in this spirit that the AKP was initially attentive to Alevi demands, and that a series of workshops were organized toward an “Alevi opening” in 2009–2010.³⁹ The workshops, however, did not achieve much of significance, and they were dropped from the party’s agenda after the elections in 2011, which brought a clear victory by the Islamist government over the former secularist establishment.

In 2013 the government announced a new project that it argued would build a bridge between the Sunni and Alevi faiths. The project was sponsored by the Gülen movement, which maintained an international sphere of influence and was the largest Turkish Islamist group at the time. In exchange for supporting the AKP, Gülenists had been named to many important positions in the Turkish state bureaucracy.⁴⁰ However, the cooperation between the two parties subsequently turned deadly, leading to a failed military coup in 2016 in which Gülenist officers played an important role. Nevertheless, in 2013, the government still fully supported the Gülenist proposal as a formula for bypassing the demands of Alevis for official recognition of the *cemevi*.

Specifically, the Gülenist proposal involved a new architectural typology that would bring the mosque and *cemevi* together within a single complex.⁴¹ Such a unified space would serve the association of faiths and allow the *cemevi* to derive official religious status through association with the mosque. The project was announced with enthusiastic coverage in progovernment media, which emphasized how the project was being pursued in collaboration with the Cem Foundation (an Alevi organization sympathetic to right-wing governments since the 1990s). The construction of the first mosque-*cemevi* complex was subsequently begun in Tuzlucaçayır, a low-income Alevi quarter in Ankara, in September 2013 (immediately after the suppression of the Gezi protests). The project was soon met with opposition in the neighborhood, however, which had a known identity as a leftist enclave.⁴² Indeed, the choice of the neighborhood was seen by many as a provocation, and it triggered violent clashes between protestors and the police.⁴³ As a result, the project quickly became a topic nationwide. And although some Alevi organizations supported the endeavor, most perceived it as an attempt at forced assimilation.⁴⁴

In terms of design, the new mosque-*cemevi* complex brought together the functions of mosque, *cemevi*, and *aşevi* (soup kitchen) around a courtyard (FIG. 3). From the Alevi point of view, the architectural arrangement created significant inequities, however. While the design accorded the two faiths their separate spaces of worship, the *aşevi* (which is traditionally a trademark component of Alevi culture) was treated as a combining element, disconnected from the *cemevi*. Moreover, the two spaces of worship — the mosque prayer hall and the *cemevi* — were not treated equally: specifi-



FIGURE 3. The mosque-*cemevi* complex in Tuzlucaçayır, which is currently abandoned. Photo by author.

cally, the architectural form of the dome was allocated only to the mosque, and it was made taller than the polygonal, hipped roof of the *cemevi*. Moreover, while the *cemevi* could be accessed only through the common courtyard, the mosque was given a direct entrance from the street, allowing Sunni worshippers to avoid using the courtyard.

Interestingly, the courtyard is a characteristic feature of many traditional Turkish mosques. And when it exists, it usually contains the main gate to the prayer hall. That is, there is always visual access from the courtyard to the interior prayer hall through both a gate and windows. Yet, in the design for the combined mosque-*cemevi* complex in Tuzluca, although the interior space of the mosque opened to the courtyard through a secondary door, it was largely cut off from this unifying exterior space by the wall of the minaret staircase. This condition existed because the minaret was attached, unconventionally, to the main mass of the mosque, where it towered over the courtyard. The architecture of the complex thus subordinated the *cemevi* to the symbolism of Sunni Islam, while using the organization of access to assign autonomy to the mosque alone.

With the fallout between the AKP and the Gülen movement, however, the project abruptly became obsolete. Construction was halted, and the building was sealed. As of 2023, it still stood derelict, with no prospect of reuse. However, the violent episodes that surrounded efforts to build such mosque-*cemevi* complexes across Turkey led, in a quite opposite sense, to a convergence among various Alevi groups and organizations.

After the failed 2016 coup, the AKP also dropped its so-called “opening” policies toward the Alevis, adopting instead an increasingly hostile sectarian stance toward them.⁴⁵ This was particularly the case in the wake of the Gezi protests, which progovernment media did not hesitate to depict as an “Alevi upheaval.”⁴⁶ The Syrian civil war and the Turkish government’s zealous embrace of Syrian insurgents further escalated sectarian tensions in the region, especially in Hatay and Adana where the Nusayri population live. And terrorist attacks in Reyhanlı, in Hatay province, only 8 km. from the Syrian border, subsequently killed 53 Turkish citizens in May 2013. Prime Minister Erdoğan’s public statement emphasizing that the dead were all Sunni (implying that it had either been the Syrian regime or the Alevis, as its accomplices, who were responsible) further exacerbated the situation.⁴⁷ Since then, the ongoing conflict in Syria (and Turkey’s involvement in it) and the significant number of Syrian refugees who have settled in the region have further increased sectarian tensions.⁴⁸

FROM ENCLAVES TO SPACES OF ENCOUNTER

The rapid politicization of Alevism in the wake of the Gezi protests as well as the concurrent attempt at introducing mosque-*cemevi* complexes has now intensified debate on *cemevi* architecture. In addition to the growing number of unassuming *cemevîs* built mostly by municipalities, this has resulted in the staging of a number of national architectural competitions. Two of these were organized by the district municipalities of Beylikdüzü and Maltepe in Istanbul (both in 2015), and another was held by Karabağlar Municipality in İzmir (in 2017). Although only the Beylikdüzü competition has resulted in a completed building (finished in 2020), these competitions have drawn significant participation and triggered public debate on *cemevi* architecture.

In tune with this, the group interview I conducted with representatives of various Alevi organizations in 2019 revealed that the architecture of the *cemevi* was being hotly debated within the Alevi community (Interview 1). Specifically, many community members were now demanding that *cemevîs* openly represent their identity and purpose, particularly in terms of their entrance gates. A dome was also frequently cited as an important feature to include, along with colonnades. And it was frequently stated that figures of animals such as lions and deer, which are important symbols in Alevi belief, should be included.⁴⁹

The interview exposed further points of consensus and dispute regarding the architectural program of the *cemevi*. For example, it was mostly agreed that a *cemevi* should take the form of a complex that could accommodate communal feasts and funerary performances, and that the *cem* hall should be located on an upper floor, separate from these functions. At the same time, however, such an expansion of building program meant that *cemevîs* would be transformed from simple religious shrines into urban community centers, to the dismay of older generations. Nevertheless, it is precisely this ambiguous character that has enabled new *cemevîs* to become spaces of encounter.

A recently built *cemevi* illustrating this point is located in a mixed neighborhood containing both Nusayri landowners and (mostly Kurdish) Alevi migrants. It was designed and built by the district municipality in 2018 (FIG. 4). The three-floor building, comprising 1,280 sq.m. of floor area, has a dining hall on the first floor, classrooms on the second floor, and a *cem* hall on the top floor. Although the *cem* hall’s conical skylight is not visible from the street, its location is signaled by means of the overall facade organization. The building also represents the outcome of a negotiation between the Alevi and the Nusayri, since it was the Nusayri mayor who convinced Nusayri landowners to support its construction. He was also successful in raising funds among middle-class (mostly Turkish) Alevis to build the *cemevi* in this predominantly Kurdish neighborhood. The members of the community have since reported on their growing in-

FIGURE 4. Şakirpaşa Cemevi in Adana. Photo by author.



tegration with their Nusayri neighbors through the example of intergroup marriages, of which they had previously disapproved (Interview 3).

As I discussed above, the first *cemevi* that was constructed in Adana, the Yüzüncüyıl Cemevi, was only finished in 2014. That is, although it was conceived and designed in the 1990s, it actually only came into use in the post-Gezi era. Since its opening, this *cemevi* has become a venue that is also used by non-Alevi. Indeed, the large courtyard in front of it has been used for mass gatherings of 15 to 20 thousand people, such as during Ashura, when it has been used for both the cooking and distribution of the *ashure* meal. Its courtyard also has a raised platform that has been used as a concert stage.

The officials in charge of the *cemevi* take pride in the building's use by various groups ranging from Tahtacı Alevi, who spend winters in the city and summers in their mountain villages, to Sunni Muslims, who attend the events there with curiosity (Interview 2).⁵⁰ And the officials emphasize that the *cemevi* is used by various ethnic and religious groups not only for cultural activities, such as popular chess tournaments, but even for funerals. Yet they do not allow the use of Arabic language at these events — which they perceive as an instrument of Sunni oppression — unless the dead person was of Arabic origin. The same goes for Kurdish. It is preferred that the language of a funeral service be the dead person's mother tongue. Turkish, Kurdish and Arabic are thus given equal standing.

The last decade in Adana has also seen the construction of a Nusayri *ziyaret*, the first ever designed by a professional architect. Built at the site of the Nebi Nuh (Noah) shrine in

2018, this *ziyaret* provides a stark contrast with earlier examples and displays a clear attempt to prioritize its architectural image (FIG. 5). The idea to build an “architecturally significant” *ziyaret* was on the agenda of the members of the community as early as 2008–10 (Interview 4). The architect was an experienced professional coming from a Nusayri family, although she hadn't previously designed religious buildings. She conceived the task as designing an “archetype” for *ziyaret* architecture, which for her should be “non-Islamic yet taking references from Islam” (Interview 5).

The various functions in the building are expressed through a differentiation of volumes. While the butchery, the kitchen, and the condolence hall are all situated on the ground floor, the main prayer hall, on the upper floor, is expanded outwards and tilted in relation to both of the building's principal axes. The bold choice to emphasize the prayer hall in the *ziyaret* is further pursued with references to mosque architecture. These include both a minaret-like chimney and a prayer hall that is sky-lit with a sliced dome. In this way the religious symbolism of these forms may be deconstructed so as to appropriate yet detach it from its Sunni connotations. Moreover, the architect chose to present her project in a professional journal as a *cemevi*, a term never before used for Nusayri shrines.⁵¹ This represented a clear attempt to use recent public recognition of the *cemevi* to further legitimize the structure.

I argue that these architectural “citations” should be understood as elements of a post-Gezi dialogue among Alevisms. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, in the aftermath of the Gezi protests the government took an increasingly oppressive stance against any form of dissent,



FIGURE 5. *Nebi Nuh Ziyaret in Adana: designed project and the interior of the main hall*

which later assumed the form of state of emergency in the wake of the unsuccessful coup in 2016. While the details of this political situation are beyond the scope of discussion here, what is important to acknowledge is how it has encouraged a flourishing dialogue among minority groups in the wake of the Gezi protests. This was, on the one hand, a direct outcome of the protests, in which diverse actors with different issues of discontent shared public spaces, claiming their right to the city. Yet it may also be interpreted as a defensive action in the face of increasingly oppressive measures by the government and its vision of the Islamic nation. This now extends to dismissing the concerns of those unwilling to comply, and labeling those who raise them as traitors.

It is within this context that the growing visibility of Alevi and Nusayri shrines has led to two very different outcomes, neither of which would have been conceivable a decade ago. One involves a new trend in the architecture of assimilation, as illustrated by the construction of new *cemevi* by the ultranationalist MHP (which was associated with Alevi massacres in the 1970s). The first such *cemevi* was built in Tarsus — a historical town outside the provincial borders of Adana — in 2014. Significantly, the architecture of this *cemevi* echoed the so-called Ottoman-Seljuk style invented and promoted by the AKP. This eclectic style juxtaposes elements from historical Ottoman and Seljuk architectures to represent a new national identity based on the fusion of Turkishness and (Sunni) Islam.⁵² In the design of this *cemevi*, characteristic features of Ottoman revivalist architecture such as wide eaves and pointed arches were thus used together with exaggerated portals reminiscent of Seljuk examples.

Such a design strategy represents an attempt to co-opt the new popularity of the *cemevi* to a nationalist program through a process of architectural assimilation. And toward this end, the MHP-affiliated mayor of the Adana Metropolitan Municipality used the blueprints for the first project to build

two more *cemevis* in the districts of Ceyhan and Yüreğir. The former was opened in 2018, and the latter was halfway through construction as of 2023 (FIG. 6). Significantly, however, since the MHP lost control of municipal administration, representatives of the Alevi community have demanded a change in the exterior image of these *cemevis*, because they see the use of the Ottoman-Seljuk style as a hostile imposition (Interview 6).

The second outcome of the current political context has been the architectural materialization of a growing alliance among Alevi groups in Adana. As a concrete example of the flourishing dialogue among minority groups who feel threatened by the AKP government, an Alevi Platform was established in the city in 2014. This movement has now brought together seventeen organizations, including major Alevi associations and Nusayri NGOs. The platform has so far been successful raising a unified voice on political issues. It has also managed to improve the organization of religious rituals. Thus, for the past few years, the Ashura celebration has been organized collaboratively by the platform, instead of by individual organizations (Interview 7). And as a reflection of the growing power of this alliance, the platform appealed to the municipality for a single building complex that could be used collectively, both as a public cultural venue and a site for religious rituals.

The main functions common to all the examples I have discussed so far were also present in this proposal. And the building — which was designed in 2018 and completed in 2022 — has been named “Selman-ı Pak Cultural Center” after Salman al-Farsi, a prominent religious figure revered by both the Alevi and the Nusayri. The structure is designed around a courtyard, an element its architect has claimed responds to both climatic and social needs (FIG. 7). Its basement houses the kitchen and the funerary-preparation spaces, including a morgue. While the morgue is not yet functional, the kitchen

FIGURE 6. The cemevi project for Yüreğir and the current condition of the building. Photo by author.



FIGURE 7. Selman-ı Pak Cultural Center in Adana. Photo by author.

is the largest operated by the municipality, with the capacity to produce 5,000 meals a day (Interview 8). Its ground floor contains a dining hall, a condolence room, and workshops. Its first floor contains spaces for each of the organizations and a conference hall. The *cem* hall rises as a solid box covered with timber motifs, which the designer intended as references to the octagonal Seljuk star. Finally, the front facade of the courtyard is composed of a portico imitating the entrance of the Hacı Bektaş Veli tomb, a major Alevi pilgrimage site.

The architect, who is of Nusayri origin, has described discussions he had with the representatives of the various organizations involved (Interview 9). Among other concerns, he said, these brought out tension between the older generation's desire to identify the building primarily as a *cemevi*, a religious building, and those who wished it to be seen as a more general space for public gathering. He emphasized that the architectural elements that were part of the final design were compromises resulting from negotiations between various parties, including different Alevi and Nusayri groups, the design team, and the municipality.

What is clearly characteristic of this building and the others I have discussed here is that they are ambiguous as institutions. Officially, they are cultural centers, which makes it possible to negotiate their architectural programs as well as their images. Yet this ambiguity also opens room to negotiate their public perception, allowing them to swing between being seen as religious shrines and inclusive community centers. Through these spaces, the interaction among Alevi and Nusayri groups has assumed a form of association perhaps best expressed in the gradual unification of the architectural programs of the *cemevi* and the *ziyaret*.

Interestingly, now that these groups have begun to collaborate in the realm of architecture, their rituals have also begun to affect each other. Thus, the traditional Ashura of the Alevi is increasingly attended by the Nusayri, and its emblematic *ashure* dish has occasionally been adopted by the latter, who may now prefer to label themselves "Arab Alevis." In return, the main Nusayri event, Ghadir Hum (celebrated as Eid al-Ghadir by Shi'ites across the Middle East, but not by Alevis in Turkey) is being recognized by the Alevis, who attend the Nusayri celebrations. In fact, the opening of the Selman-ı Pak Cultural Center was timed to coincide with a celebration of Ghadir Hum, and the center now houses workshops aimed at mutualizing the Alevi and Nusayri rituals (Interview 6).

THE UNIFYING EFFECT OF CULTURAL PRESSURE

The interaction among Alevi and Nusayri groups in Adana arose initially in response to the current urban political condition in Turkey. All these groups believe they are "undesirables" under the Islamist AKP, and as a result increasingly feel the need to collaborate. The sense of insecurity among these minority groups escalated further with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. This triggered anxiety both among the Alevi and, especially, the Nusayri, who have been associated with the Syrian regime by Turkish Islamists. News reports on the use of refugee camps by Jihadist militants have been particularly terrifying for them.

Despite the authoritarian measures implemented in the wake of the unsuccessful 2016 coup, the contemporary Turkish metropolis is also marked by the increased potential for political dissent latent in public space. And it is under these conditions that the specific historical circumstances of Adana as a city that shelters various minority groups has created conditions for an unexpected alliance cutting across ethnicities. As a result, the basic dynamic today is that the more the government defines Turkish nationalism with reference to Sunni Islam, the more these minority groups turn to Alevism as a unifying identity. In other words, while the government enforces Islam as a reference to what constitutes the "national," the growing association among various strands of heterodox Islamic groups in Adana is creating a revisionist understanding of what Alevism entails. And a main expression of this convergence has been the displacing of centuries-old architectural traditions. It is in this context that the ambiguous status of shrines — whether they be the *cemevis* of the Alevis or the *ziyarets* of the Nusayris — has thus turned them into spaces of encounter among hitherto withdrawn minorities of heterodox Islamic beliefs.

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Interview 3. User of Şakirpaşa Cemevi (Oct. 26, 2019)
Interview 4. Sponsor of Nebi Nuh Ziyaret (Sept. 30, 2020)
Interview 5. Architect Güniz Baykam (Jan. 10, 2020)
Interview 6. President of Yüreğir Cemevi (Oct. 3, 2022)
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