

The French Initiative to Change the Qur'an

FARID HAFEZ

- How can we contextualize the initiative for changing the Qur'an?
 - What are the philosophical bases of this initiative?
- Is there a genealogical connection to the Islamophobic network?
 - What is the main function of this initiative?

INTRODUCTION

On April 21, a manifesto was published in the French daily *Le Parisien*. It was signed by some 300 prominent people, intellectuals and politicians including former President Nicolas Sarkozy and former Prime Minister Manuel Valls. The manifesto “contre le nouvel antisémitisme (lit. against the new anti-Semitism)” basically stresses an older topic that is regularly popping up around the Global North, especially in France: According to this concept of “new anti-Semitism”, anti-Semitism is currently not a threat perpetrated by the political far-right, but rather by Muslims living in the West.

This claim is everything but new. It is used by actors of various political spectrums. On one hand, new antisemitism refers to the claim that there is new form of hostility towards Jews and Israel which basically equates anti-Zionism with antisemitism.¹ Even the far-right, especially political parties such as the Front National (FN), the Austrian Freedom Party

(FPÖ), the Sweden Democrats (SD) or the Vlaams Belang (VB) use this to position themselves to argue that they are not anymore the drivers of antisemitism, but rather Muslims pose the real threat to Jews as well as to all of Europe² and some right-wing politicians argue that today, they are the ‘new Jews’, the victims so to say.³ According to the signatories of the French manifesto, its government and media should not refuse to recognize this “Muslim anti-Semitism.”

Part of the argumentation is the claim that the Qur'an incites violence. The signatories argue: “that the verses of the Qur'an calling for the killing and punishment of Jews, Christians and unbelievers be obsoleted by theological authorities, as were the incoherencies of the Bible and the Catholic anti-Semitism abolished by the Vatican. II, so that no believer can rely on a sacred text to commit a crime.

1 Klug, Brian. “The collective Jew: Israel and the new antisemitism.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 37.2 (2003): 117-138.

2 Bunzl, Matti. “Between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Some thoughts on the new Europe.” *American Ethnologist* 32.4 (2005): 499-508; Hafez, Farid. “Shifting borders: Islamophobia as common ground for building pan-European right-wing unity.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 48.5 (2014): 479-499.

3 Stoenner, Karin. “‘We are the new Jews!’ and ‘The Jewish Lobby’—antisemitism and the construction of a national identity by the Austrian Freedom Party.” *Nations and Nationalism* 22.3 (2016): 484-504.

Farid HAFEZ

PhD (political science, University of Vienna) is a senior research scholar and lecturer at the University of Salzburg, Department of Political Science and Sociology. He is also Senior Researcher at Georgetown University's ‘The Bridge Initiative’ and currently Associate Professor at Istanbul Zaim University in Istanbul and CIGA. In 2017, he was Fulbright visiting professor at University of California, Berkeley and in 2014, he was visiting scholar at Columbia University, New York. Email: farid.hafez@sbg.ac.at

We expect the Islam of France to lead the way”.⁴

Nostrae Aetate, the declaration which renewed the Catholic church’s relation to the Jews by declaring that “true, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today”⁵ was well received on behalf of Jews.⁶ And it was indeed important, since Christian antisemitism built the basis for racial antisemitism and without the long-standing tradition of Christian argumentations against the Jewish people, modern antisemitism, which led to the Nazi regimes annihilation, cannot be easily conceived of. Hence, there was a great need for the pope to stop these general accusations and make every living Jew guilty for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Here we face already the first problem of the argumentation of the signatories. They assume that antisemitism within the Muslim community has the same history as on the history of white Europe, which was built on the expulsion of not only Jews but also Muslim from the Spanish peninsula, while also ignoring the historical facts that Jews were largely living in a safe space in medieval Muslim lands.⁷ Hence, antisemitism becomes framed as a ‘Muslim’ issue, rather than a political issue that might be more linked to the question of Palestine, colonization, and the unsolved problems in what has become known as the ‘Middle

4 The French original says: „En conséquence, nous demandons que les versets du Coran appelant au meurtre et au châtement des juifs, des chrétiens et des incroyants soient frappés d’obsolescence par les autorités théologiques, comme le furent les incohérences de la Bible et l’antisémitisme catholique aboli par Vatican II, afin qu’aucun croyant ne puisse s’appuyer sur un texte sacré pour commettre un crime. Nous attendons de l’islam de France qu’il ouvre la voie.” See: <http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/manifeste-contre-le-nouvel-antisemitisme-21-04-2018-7676787.php>

5 Declaration on the relation of the church to non-Christian religions Nostrae Aetate, proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

6 THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL’S DECLARATION ON THE JEWS, A Background Report The American Jewish Committee Institute of Human Relations, 1965, http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/6A5.PDF

7 Lewis, Bernard. *The Jews of Islam*. Routledge, 2013; Elmessiri, Abdelwahab M. "Mawsu’at al-mafahim wa-al-mustalahat al-Sihyuniyah: ru’yah naqdiyah [Encyclopedia of Zionist Concepts and Terms: A Critical View]." Cairo: Markaz al-Dirasat al-Siyasiyah wa-al-Istirajiyah bi-al-Ahram (1975).

East’. Shifting attention from these issues, the focus is solely on religion as the driving factor.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM BY CHANGING THE QUR’AN?

So where is the claim to end antisemitism within the Muslim community by changing the Qur’an coming from? To be precise: The signatories are not very specific in what they argue: They “ask that the verses of the Qur’an calling for the killing and punishment of Jews, Christians and unbelievers be obsoleted by theological authorities”. It is an open question, how exactly they want the Qur’an to be changed. But more important than that is that the very fact that these charges are as old as racism is. Among the early otherized out-groups were the Jews and Muslims, who both were seen as descendants of an Arab religion, who in modern science later would become Semites.⁸ One of the oldest attempts in classical anti-Jewish polemics was the denigration of Judaism by quoting from classical rabbinic works. “By selectively citing various passages from the Talmud and Midrash, polemicists have sought to demonstrate that Judaism espouses hatred for non-Jews (and specifically for Christians), and promotes obscenity, sexual perversion, and other immoral behavior”,⁹ writes the Anti-Defamation League. It seems that the many Jews, who just signed this manifesto in France, have forgotten their own history of the persecution of Jews in Europe that was based on these and many other charges by the anti-Semites,¹⁰ which is hard to believe, since one of the signers is a leading scholar on anti-Semitism. If this history is so clear, then why have they nevertheless chosen to follow this path? It might be that many of the signatories are quite illiterate when it comes to handling religious texts. One of the signatories, Samy Ghazlan, argued that in Islam, “believers are instructed to respect the Quran—there’s no room

8 Ivan Kalmar, *Is Islamophobia the New Antisemitism?*, Istanbul: SETA, 2017, 13.

9 Anti-Defamation League, *The Talmud in Anti-Semitic Polemics*, Feb 2003, <http://www.come-and-hear.com/supplement/adl-talmud.pdf>

10 For a comprehensive history see four volumes of: Poliakov, Léon. *The History of Anti-Semitism*, University of Pennsylvania Press.

for commentary".¹¹ Mr. Ghozlan should know better. First, because it is historically false and second, because especially groups that draw on the Qur'an to legitimize violence, have to interpret not only the world they are living in, but also the Qur'an itself, to argue for the usage of violence.¹² And we know, that people can draw on literally every text, from the Bible to the Communist manifesto to legitimize an act of violence.

But more important than this discussion is the question, what really is at stake here. Indeed, the following sentence of the manifesto, which follows the argumentation on changing the Qur'an is quite revealing: The aim, it seems is that "no believer can rely on a sacred text to commit a crime. We expect the Islam of France to lead the way".¹³ It seems that the demand of the signatories is just fitting in a larger framework of an Islam Politics that can be observed throughout Europe, which is a to take ownership over their Muslim population by creating a French Islam, German Islam, Italian Islam, etc.¹⁴ The language is identical to Emmanuel Macron's recent proclamation to reform Islam in France.¹⁵ There might be a reason to believe that this initiative should also serve the French state's interest. But the issue is more complicated.

When in 2014, the Austrian government was marching towards its final steps in the restructuring of Islam by proclaiming the new Islam Act, which seriously damaged the relation between Austria and its Muslims,¹⁶ one of the claims of then minister of inte-

gration and today's chancellor Sebastian Kurz was to have only one single translation of the Qur'an. At that time, Mr. Kurz argued that this would help Muslims themselves to clarify their religion and secure the right interpretation of the Qur'an.¹⁷ Obviously, no terrorist will have a look at the Qur'an of state-ordained translation of their divine scripture before committing an act of violence. The coalition program of the new government in December 2017 also requires that essential sources of faith such as the Qur'an be submitted in an authorized translation.¹⁸ And indeed, Kurz was neither the first, nor is he the only one, who proposed this idea. But it has a long story.

THE ISLAMOPHOBIA NETWORK

The Counterjihad movement is a movement that dedicates itself to countering an alleged 'Islamization of the West'.¹⁹ It is a loose movement that is comprised of different international advocacy groups²⁰ that regularly meet at OSCE meetings, grassroots activist organizations²¹ and other individuals. Neoconservatives (f.i. Christine Brim) as well the Christian Right (f.i. Patrick Sookhdeo), the far-right (f.i. Filip Dewinter) and revisionist Zionists (f.i. Arieh Eldad) participated in the annual counterjihad conferences, which started back in 2007 in Brussels. They present themselves as defender of civil liberties, rights of women, homosexuals, religious freedom, and against religious violence²²

11 Karina Piser, Muslims Recoil at a French Proposal to Change the Quran, *The Atlantic*, May 3 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/france-delete-verses-quran/559550/>

12 Brown, Jonathan AC, and Misquoting Muhammad. The challenges and choices of interpreting the Prophet's legacy. London: Oneworld Publications, 2014.

13 <http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/manifeste-contre-le-nouvel-antisemitisme-21-04-2018-7676787.php>

14 Jonathan Laurence, *The Emancipation Of Europe's Muslims. The State's Role in Minority Integration*, Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012, pp.12-13.

15 Farid Hafez, Macron en route to new policy on Islam?, Opinion Anadolu Agency, 1 March 2018, <https://aa.com.tr/en/analysis-news/opinion-macron-en-route-to-new-policy-on-islam/1077045>

16 Farid Hafez, 'Muslim Protest against Austria's Islam law. An Analysis of Austrian Muslim's Protest against the 2015 Islam Law', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 2017, Vol. 37, Iss. 3, 2017, 267-283; Rijad Dautovic and Farid Hafez, 'Institutionalising Islam in Contemporary Austria: A Comparative Analysis of the Austrian Islam Act of 2015 and Austrian Religion Acts with Special Emphasis on the Israelite Act of 2012', *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* (forthcoming).

17 Kurz für "Einheits-Qur'an" und gegen "verhetzende Versionen", NEWS, 20 September 2014, <https://www.news.at/a/kurz-einheits-Qur'an-gegen-extremismus>

18 Farid Hafez, En route to a restrictive policy on Islam?, Qantara, 21 December 2017, <https://en.qantara.de/content/austrias-new-programme-for-government-en-route-to-a-restrictive-policy-on-islam>

19 T. Archer, "Breivik's Mindset: The Counterjihad and the New Transatlantic Anti-Muslim Right", in: *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*, eds. M. Taylor, P. M. Currie, and Donald Holbrook, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2013, 169-185.

20 Hope not Hate, International counter-jihad organisations, <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/research/islamophobia-hub/profiles/what-is-counter-jihadism/>

21 Hope not Hate, Anti-Muslim street protest movements, <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/research/islamophobia-hub/profiles/anti-muslim-street-protest-movements/>

22 Counterjihad Collective, A Brief History of the Transatlantic Counterjihad, Gates of Vienna Blog, Part VII, December 01, 2011, <http://gatesofvienna.blogspot.com.tr/2011/12/brief-history-of-transatlantic.html#more>

to fight against a perceived Islamization of the West. For them, the emergence of right-wing populist parties that challenge immigration and David Cameron's, Angela Merkel's, and Nicolas Sarkozy's statements that "multiculturalism has failed" is a confirmation of their long struggle.²³ They see an official repression of the counterjihad movement in the accusation of racism and Islamophobia and the adoption of these terminologies by international institutions such as the EU and the UN.²⁴ One of the French signatories, Philippe Val, is listed as a victim of the "repression of the counterjihad movement"²⁵ alongside other people like EDL-leader Tommy Robinson, Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders, and a central figure of the organized Islamophobia network, Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff.

The Qur'an is a central topic for the counterjihad movement. A leading figure of the organized Islamophobia network, Robert Spencer,²⁶ is regularly blogging on the Qur'an. Right-wing leader Geert Wilders even called for the ban of the Qur'an itself, equating it with Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.²⁷ Current Vice-Chancellor and leader of the right-wing FPÖ Heinz-Christian Strache posted an alleged quotation from Voltaire on Facebook, saying: "The Koran teaches fear, hate, despite towards others, killing as a legitimate means to spread and preserve the Satanic teaching. He badmouths women, separates people into classes and again and again calls for blood."²⁸ Vlaams Blok Belgian leader Filip de Winter called the Koran "a license to kill non-believers".²⁹ EDL-activist Tommy Robin-

son published a book in 2017 titled "Mohammed's Koran: Why Muslims kill for Islam".³⁰

But the partial abrogation of the Qur'an belongs to the more sophisticated arguments of the counterjihad movement. The Viennese Association of Academics (Wiener Akademikerbund) is a central actor in the counterjihad movement. It rallies together with Pegida Austria.³¹ Back in 2008, this association published 15 demands towards Muslims in Austria.³² The first was to argue that a certified translation of the Koran is needed, in order to really know what Muslims believe. The third demand argued that Muslims, who enter public service, have to "distance themselves from verses of the Qur'an, which forbid the subordination under directives of 'infidel' officials and judgements of 'infidel' judges in written form".³³ The fourth demand argued for the same in regards to religious education: Teachers for religious education have to "distance themselves from those verses that propagate the disadvantage of women, corporal punishment, and violence against believers of other faiths".³⁴ The fifth demand argues that sermons and religious education as well as Qur'an schools have to be in German language.

These demands clearly reveal the direction and the ultimate aim of these: Based on the assumption that Islam itself is a cruel religion, which is based on the teachings found in the Qur'an, Muslims have to distance themselves from their fundamental source. But it is not only about a debate on the scripture. At the end, these demands should allow the state bureaucracy to regulate the Muslim subject by defining what Islam should look like, allowing the state to interfere in the interpretation of the Qur'an and thus of Islam and to

23 Ibid.

24 Counterjihad Collective, A Brief History of the Transatlantic Counterjihad, Part V, Gates of Vienna Blog, November 29, 2011, http://gatesofvienna.blogspot.com.tr/2011/11/brief-history-of-transatlantic_29.html

25 Ibid.

26 CAIR, U.S. Islamophobia Network, Islamophobic Individuals, 5 October 2017, <http://www.islamophobia.org/islamophobic-individuals/robert-spencer/78-robert-spencer.html>

27 Bruno Waterfield, Ban Koran like Mein Kampf, says Dutch MP, The Telegraph, 09 Aug 2007, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/1559877/Ban-Koran-like-Mein-Kampf-says-Dutch-MP.html>

28 "SOS Mitmensch," Nachfragefragt: Was hat es mit Straches Anti-Koran-Zitat auf sich?, 21 December, 2015, accessed on 28 January, 2016, <http://www.sosmitmensch.at/site/home/article/1141.html>

29 Van der Valk, Ineke. "Islamophobia in the Netherlands. National Report 2015", in: Bayrakli, Enes & Farid Hafez, European Islamophobia Report 2015, Istanbul: SETA, 2016 (375-399), 385.

30 Kallis, Aristotle. "Islamophobia in the United Kingdom. National Report 2017. National Report 2015", in: Bayrakli, Enes & Farid Hafez, European Islamophobia Report 2017, Istanbul: SETA, 2018 (671-706), 701

31 Rechtsextreme und religiöse FundamentalistInnen demonstrieren in Wien, Neues von ganz rechts - Juni 2016, <http://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/juni-2016/rechtsextreme-und-religioese-fundamentalistinnen-demonstrieren-in-wien>

32 Europe News, Wiener Akademikerbund stellt 15 Forderungen an österreichische Muslime, 22.11.2008, <http://europenews.dk/de/node/16427> (24.3.2015).

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

regulate Muslims' lives by defining the rules of entry into 'civil life'. Since the claim of the French manifesto is not clear at all, it also raises the question of how far this regulation shall go. One thing is clear: It possibly allows for a large intervention. And it would leave Muslims to either embrace this demand and thus implicitly confirm the allegation that Islam was anti-Semitic or leave behind as the bad Muslim that only approves the dominant society.

Two of the signatories are themselves supporting Islamophobic ideology: "The allegations that an Islamist network of agents had infiltrated the French Republic were [...] supported by interviews of two [...] prominent anti-Muslim activists. The first one with former Socialist Prime Minister Manuel Valls whose flirtatious relationship with far-right ideas is no longer a secret, and the second with Pascal Bruckner who had just released a new essay titled "Islamophobia. The Imaginary Racism".³⁵ Bruckner writes in a publication supporting Islamophobic conspiracy theories: "[F]ormer Communists, Trotskyists, Maoists compete in their allegiance to bigotry provided it is carried by the followers of the Quran. They hate France not because it oppresses Muslims, but because it frees them. From then on, the enemy in their eyes becomes secularism and especially the dissidents of Islam."³⁶

WHAT REMAINS?

While not all signatories may share these conspiracies and even not think this manifesto through to the end, what remains is the following:

³⁵ Louati, Yasser. "Islamophobia in France. National Report 2017", in: Bayrakli, Enes & Farid Hafez, European Islamophobia Report 2018, Istanbul: SETA, 2018 (215-246), 233.

³⁶ Pascal Bruckner, "Bruckner : «Ils haïssent la France, non parce qu'elle opprime les musulmans, mais parce qu'elle les libère», Le Figarovox (6 October 2017) retrieved 8 March 2018 from <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/religion/2017/10/06/31004-20171006ARTFIG00073-bruckner-ils-haïssent-la-france-non-parce-qu-elle-opprimeles-musulmans-mais-parce-qu-elle-les-libere.php>

- The religion of Islam, represented by its most fundamental source, the Qur'an, is again presented as violent and evil.
- This manifesto normalizes the interference into the religion of Muslims and supports the politics of many European countries such as first and foremost France to create a national version of Islam. Quite contrary to the secular nature of France that would call for the separation of religion and society, these French intellectuals very much interfere into religious issues.
- This discourse allows for the white European dominant society to whitewash its own destructive history of antisemitism, which lead to the systematic industrial annihilation of 6 million Jews to reverse the victim-offender-relation. The strategy is to position Muslims as the new anti-Semites. This will not only strengthen the white dominant society, but also the far-right, especially the Front National.

We should remind the words of the historian and former director of the Berlin-based Center for Anti-Semitism Studies, Wolfgang Benz: "What the Talmud hetz (baiting, FH) was in the past, today is the Koran hetz. A minority is stigmatized as threatening, because the religion supposedly commands them to do so."³⁷

³⁷ Peter Mayr and Marie-Theres Egyed, Interview with Wolfgang Benz: "Was früher Talmud-Hetze war, ist jetzt Koran-Hetze", Der Standard, 2 October 2014, <https://derstandard.at/2000006304947/Was-frueher-Talmud-Hetze-war-ist-jetzt-Koran-Hetze>



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SETA | Ankara

Nenehatun Cd. No: 66 GOP Çankaya
06700 Ankara TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 312 551 21 00 | Faks: +90 312 551 21 90

SETA | İstanbul

Defterdar Mh. Savaklar Cd. Ayvansaray Kavşağı
No: 41-43 Eyüpsultan İstanbul TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 212 315 11 00 | Faks: +90 212 315 11 11

SETA | Washington D.C.

1025 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite
1106 Washington D.C. 20036 USA
Tel: 202-223-9885 | Faks: 202-223-6099

SETA | Cairo

21 Fahmi Street Bab al Luq Abdeen
Flat No: 19 Cairo EGYPT
Tel: 00202 279 56866 | 00202 279 56985