

OFFICIAL ISLAM AS A THREAT? THE PARADIGM SHIFT IN AUSTRIA'S SECURITY POLITICS

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- What is the history of Austria's security politics vis-à-vis Islam?
 - What are the factors explaining the new security politics?
 - What are the implications of the new security politics?
 - What can be done to counteract this new development?

INTRODUCTION

For a very long time Austria has been known as one of the most open and progressively accommodating countries in terms of Muslim life and practice. With the Islam Act of 1912, which goes back to the Habsburg monarchy, Austria was one of the very few countries to legally recognize Muslims as a religious community. On the other hand, in more recent times, Austria has become infamous for the anti-Muslim propaganda in party politics, spearheaded especially by the right-wing extreme Freedom Party that previously governed the country together with Sebastian Kurz's newly branded Conservatives (OVP). Especially the Kurz-OVP has become the champion of anti-Muslim legislation. During their governance, this acceptance of Islam was profoundly shaken and Muslims were targeted by new laws and initiatives such as the hijab ban in kindergarten and primary school or the attempt to close certain mosques. But what had always remained unchanged was that the security apparatus, especially the interior ministry's security agency, never followed the patterns of anti-Muslim rhetoric. Rather, it saw

the Islamic Religious Community as a partner against extremism and especially Jihadism. This seems to have profoundly changed with the new annual report of the security agency BVT; the yearly report is entitled *Verfassungsschutzbericht* (literally: Report on the Protection of the Constitution).

In the past, Islam as a religion had never been regarded as a threat. Rather the opposite, the *Staatspolizei* (State Police) had clearly regarded the Islamic Religious Community (IGGÖ, *Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich*), which is the legally recognized denomination of Muslims based on the Islam Act of 1912, as the main institution of Muslims. The *Staatspolizei* at that time saw what it referred to as "Islamic extremism" as an existing problem. But it did not regard the IGGÖ as such.

THE HISTORY OF AUSTRIA'S SECURITY POLITICS VIS-À-VIS ISLAM

Austria, a country with only 8.8 million inhabitants, is home to three security services. Two of them, the *Heeres-Nachrichtenamt* (Military Intelligence Service)

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and the *Abwehramt* (Counter Intelligence Service), are both part of the Ministry of Defense. While the *Heeres-Nachrichtenamt*, which is part of the military, is the only security service that operates as a foreign service, the *Abwehramt* is the domestic security service operating under the Ministry of Defense. The third security service is the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung* (BVT, Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counter Terrorism), which is part of the Ministry of Interior. It emerged from the former State Police and merged with a few other units to become the BVT in 2002 following the war on terror. The BVT annually publishes a report for the public that offers a picture of security risks on a domestic level.

The oldest annual report, which can be found online, dates back to 1997,¹ before 9/11 and also before Islam became a highly contested domestic issue. The report states that “the majority of Muslims are adherers of a moderate Islam and act according to the Austrian laws.”² The report also argues in favor of a differentiation between Islam as a religion, Islamic fundamentalism, and most importantly “Islamic extremism,” which for the BVT is a “radical form of Islamic fundamentalism.” Hence, in the BVT’s definition, while “Islamic fundamentalism” is a form of rigorous religious lifestyle, only “Islamic extremism” becomes a problem, since it is the Islamic extremist, who picks up arms.³ At the same time, the report refers to the IGGÖ as an institution in Austria based on the Islam Act of 1912. In another instance, it is only mentioned as a victim of a bomb threat.⁴ This position is maintained in the following reports. In the 1999 report, it even says that the reason why most Muslims are not extremists is because of the legal recognition of Islam and the IGGÖ.⁵

1. Republic of Austria – Ministry of Interior, Staatsschutzbericht 1997, Vienna, 1998, <https://www.bvt.bmi.gv.at/401/files/Verfassungsschutzbericht1997.pdf> (all links are accessed on 15 September 2019)

2. Ibid., p. 47.

3. Ibid., pp. 46-47.

4. Ibid., p. 25.

5. Republic of Austria – Ministry of Interior, Staatsschutzbericht 1999, Vienna, June 2000 <https://www.bvt.bmi.gv.at/401/files/Verfassungsschutzbericht1999.pdf>, p. 61.

This is basically copy-pasted in the following reports until 2001, where a shift can be seen whereby extensive space is given to the discussion of Al-Qaida. Besides this short interlude, the 2002 report reiterates the BVT’s assumption that the legal recognition of Islam and the religious education courses in public schools are a powerful tool for integration (*Integrationskraft*) and are thus more influential than the extremists in convincing potential followers. The report on 2003⁶ and 2004⁷ did not explicitly refer to the IGGÖ.

The 2005 report included the IGGÖ again, praising the existence of the organization. For the BVT, the institutionalization of Islam was defined as a guarantor of better security: “The security on both sides emerges from this (the legal recognition of Islam, FH). Muslims in Austria have a clear and confident foundation with the IGGÖ that is in dialogue with different social and state organizations. The Austrian state and its authorities, on the other hand, have the confident organs of the Islamic Religious Society (IGGÖ) as a contact organization that is able to represent and negotiate the interests of Muslims.”⁸ In the 2006 report, the institutionalization of Islam in Austria was mentioned as an example to be followed by other EU member states. For a few years, the IGGÖ was not mentioned. In 2012, the report mentioned that the IGGÖ distanced itself from protests against the release of the anti-Muslim video “Innocence of Muslims.”⁹ In the 2016 report, the IGGÖ is mentioned along with other official Muslim denominations in Europe,¹⁰ while it is again skipped in 2017.¹¹

6. Republic of Austria – Ministry of Interior, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2004, <https://www.bvt.bmi.gv.at/401/files/Verfassungsschutzbericht-2004Berichtszeitraum2003.pdf>

7. Republic of Austria – Ministry of Interior, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2005, <https://www.bvt.bmi.gv.at/401/files/Verfassungsschutzbericht-2005Berichtszeitraum2004.pdf>

8. Republic of Austria – Ministry of Interior, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2006, <https://www.bvt.bmi.gv.at/401/files/Verfassungsschutzbericht-2006Berichtszeitraum2005understesHalbjahr2006.pdf>

9. Republic of Austria – Ministry of Interior, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2013, <https://www.bvt.bmi.gv.at/401/files/Verfassungsschutzbericht-2013Berichtszeitraum2012.pdf>, p. 67.

10. Republic of Austria – Ministry of Interior, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2016, <https://www.bvt.gv.at/401/files/Verfassungsschutzbericht2016.pdf>, p. 39.

11. Republic of Austria – Ministry of Interior, Verfassungsschutzbericht 2017, <https://www.bvt.gv.at/401/files/Verfassungsschutzbericht2017.pdf>

To sum up, in the past, Austria's domestic security agency, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, did not see the IGGÖ as a security threat.

THE NEW SECURITY POLITICS VIS-À-VIS ISLAM

When in December 2017, a coalition between the conservative OVP and the right-wing extremist FPO under the leadership of Sebastian Kurz and Heinz-Christian Strache formed, Herbert Kickl, a longtime leader of the FPO became minister of interior. Kickl attempted to replace top officials of the BVT to rebrand the security service according to his wishes,¹² fearing that there was a dominance of people tied to the conservative OVP within the security service.¹³ Hence, the changes within the BVT should not be seen as a shift to the right based on the governance of the right-wing extremist FPO, but as a general move to the right within a state agency.

In the annual report published by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the security service closed the chapter of cooperation and adopted the agenda of the right-wing to criminalize Muslim actors. The IGGÖ suddenly became an Islamist danger, not a legitimate Muslim institution, and the services of the IGGÖ, which were supported by the state such as religious education in public school, the training of religion teachers, and chaplaincy in prisons and hospitals were now defined as being in the scope of Islamists. All of these services had been implemented with the help of the state, partly even with state funds. By defining certain of the IGGÖ's primary scopes as Islamist threats, a legally recognized religious institution turns from a partner to an enemy.

Very interestingly, the terminology adopted in this document is quite new and reflects the political

discourse to a greater extent than the work of the security service. While the Office for the Protection of the Constitution in the past used terms such as "Islamism" and "Jihadism" in its annual reports, now it adopted a term which is mainly known from the public discourse, namely "political Islam." This term has been central to the discourse of the OVP under the leadership of Sebastian Kurz, especially in the last few years.¹⁴ Various legislations, such as the ban of the hijab in kindergarten and primary school or the Symbol Act, have been implemented as a means to combat what was referred to as "political Islam."¹⁵ Even more interesting, other than in one headline, the notion of "political Islam" was not used in the 2018 report of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Also, it was not defined and hence generates a great amount of vagueness and diffusion rather than clarity. Political Islam, it seems, is less about a clear-cut definition of a phenomenon than about the attempt to include different strains of Islamic groups within one broad category to criminalize all of them.¹⁶ This becomes clear when reading about the three future challenges, which the report details. While the first two speak of Jihadist and thus violent expressions of so-called Islamic extremism, the third speaks of explicit non-violent Islamic movements. According to the report, while these movements denounce the democratic constitutional state, they cooperate with parties, associations, and NGOs to have social and political impact. This could lead to a "strategic infiltration with the aim of shaping and regulating the society according to social beliefs of the 'caliphate' and 'shari'a'."¹⁷ All of this sounds more like an exam-

12. Dominik Schreiber, Kid Möchel, Causa BVT: Neos zeigen Ex-Innenminister Herbert Kickl an, *Kurier*, 24 July 2019, <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/causa-bvt-neos-zeigen-ex-innenminister-herbert-kickl-an/400560092>

13. Elisabeth Postl, BVT: Kickl spricht von "ÖVP-Geheimdienst", *Die Presse*, 1 July 2019, https://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5652808/BVT_Kickl-spricht-von-OeVPGeheimdienst

14. Farid Hafez, *Islamophobia in Austria: National Report 2017*, in: Enes Bayraklı & Farid Hafez, *European Islamophobia Report 2017*, Istanbul, SETA, <http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Austria.pdf>

15. Farid Hafez, *Islamophobia in Austria: National Report 2018*, in: Enes Bayraklı & Farid Hafez, *European Islamophobia Report 2018*, Istanbul, SETA.

16. Farid Hafez, "Muslim Civil Society under Attack: The European Foundation for Democracy's Role in Defaming and Delegitimizing Muslim Civil Society." *Islamophobia and Radicalization*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019, pp. 117-137. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95237-6_7

17. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

ple of a blatant Islamophobic conspiracy pamphlet rather than a state agency's report. And it shows the wide-reaching changes that have occurred in the last 1.5 years within the security service.

The annual report goes even further. Throughout the Western world, corporations and states speak of diversity and inclusion as important values that strengthen social cohesion. More progressive institutions even speak of empowerment and positive discrimination. Not so with the Austrian Office for the Protection of the Constitution. According to the report, Islamists use education, social welfare services, and the organization of cultural life in order to create a "counter-society." The goal is to prevent "assimilation," which then becomes the very goal of the security service itself. While many Austrian Muslims would argue that integration often is nothing but a euphemism for assimilation, never has any state agency made this so explicit in an official document. Saying this, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution clearly goes beyond its own scope, discussing not only security threats in society, but also laying down a social agenda. While it alleges Islamists have an agenda of creating an alternative society, it appears this state agency itself follows a clear agenda of making Muslims invisible.

As in other areas of Muslim life in Austria, we can observe a shift in the Islam-related politics by recent Austrian governments across the political line, be it governments controlled by coalitions of social democrats (SPO) and conservatives (OVP) or coalition governments of conservatives and the extreme right-wing (FPO). As shown in other studies,¹⁸ the anti-Muslim attitudes deeply shape the decisions made by those in power in the way they regulate Islam and Muslims. This most recent example shows us how state agencies change their behavior against the backdrop of widespread anti-Muslim attitudes.

18. Farid Hafez and Reinhard Heinisch. "Breaking with Austrian Conso-
ciationalism: How the Rise of Rightwing Populism and Party Competition
Have Changed Austria's Islam Politics." *Politics and Religion*, 11.3 (2018):
649-678. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048318000172>

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW SECURITY POLITICS

So, what are the consequences of this new report? On behalf of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, it seems that an entirely new shift has been undertaken. This will have far-reaching implications, since never in the history of Austria has a legally recognized church or religious community been regarded as a security threat. It might have severe implications on the funds allocated to the IGGÖ in respect to religious education, the training of religion teachers, and the organization of chaplaincy in prisons and hospitals. Also, by criminalizing the IGGÖ, all religious institutions of the IGGÖ, which have been legally connected to each other since the Islam Act of 2015, are targeted. This might open the door to a game of divide-and-rule in order to create frictions within the IGGÖ and subsequently turn the IGGÖ into an insignificant minor institution.

Following the presentation of this new publication to the public, the OVP immediately announced a set of measures to forbid what they call "political Islam." Practically, this means the adoption of a new act specifically for outlawing 'political Islam', creating a monitoring center dedicated to 'political Islam' (something, which had already been announced during the coalition government of the OVP and the FPO), and to extend the ability of the ministry of culture to handle the IGGÖ. Parts of this are an outcome of the Islam Act of 2015. If the OVP were to win the next elections on September 29, 2019, these policies will most probably be implemented and thus Muslim civil society actors will be even further criminalized and pushed to the political margins.

In the broader picture, this might even be a precedent for implementing further authoritarian moves by the nation-state to marginalize political opposition. The IGGÖ might only be a test case for further implementing authoritarian policies to silence potential opposition and foster the policy of white supremacy that does not give any space to identities other than male whiteness.

MEASURES TO COUNTERACT THIS NEW DEVELOPMENT

The IGGÖ has already issued a statement of protest, where it criticized the fact that political participation of Muslims is problematized.¹⁹ But opposition by the targeted Muslim community alone is not sufficient. Religious institutions and the political opposition need to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the IGGÖ in order not to allow such a criminalization of the main institu-

19. Ümit Vural, Begriff Politischer Islam im österreichischen Verfassungsschutzbericht, 19 August 2019, *derislam.at* <http://www.derislam.at/iggo/?f=news&shownews=2162&kid=70>

tions of Muslims in Austria to become commonplace. As the OVP under Sebastian Kurz has shown, it does not care about religious minorities.²⁰ The new report only shows, how easily the words of politicians²¹ can become the politics of the state.

20. The Local, Austrians fume over proposed 'half-day holiday', The Local News, 23 February 2019, <https://www.thelocal.at/20190223/austrians-fume-over-proposed-half-day-holiday>

21. SOS Mitmensch, Antimuslimischer Rassismus in der österreichischen Politik – Bericht 2018, https://www2.sosmitmensch.at/dl/OMulJKJKN-mKJqx4KJK/Bericht2018_Antimuslimischer_Rassismus_in_der_Politik_SOS_Mitmensch.pdf



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