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Surveilling and Criminalizing Austrian Muslims: The Case of 'Political Islam'

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ABSTRACT *In this commentary, I deal with how the governing conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) managed successfully to fundamentally reshape the state's politics towards Muslim communities by introducing the terminology of 'political Islam' in the public discourse. I show how this affected the political discourse, how the governing ÖVP has been using institutions to produce knowledge in order to criminalize Muslimness, and how this also affected the work of the domestic intelligence agency and subsequently police operations. I argue that by introducing the notion of 'political Islam' came a criminalization of vocal and/or organized Muslims as well as anti-racist actors.*

Keywords: Islamophobia, Austria, Surveillance, Criminalization, Knowledge Production, Political Islam

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Introduction

On November 2, 2020, an ISIS-sympathizer killed four people on the street in Vienna, Austria. Nine days later, the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz presented a package of new laws, saying it was serving two goals: “consistent action against terrorists and dangerous persons, and secondly, decisive action against the ideology of political Islam, which forms the basis for terror.”¹ Hence, Kurz linked what he calls ‘political Islam’ to violence and militancy, framing ‘political Islam’ as the basis of militant action. As critical scholars like Edward Said argued a long time ago, “The problem is that use of the word ‘terrorism’ was a political weapon designed to protect the strong.”² Postcolonial theorists have emphasized the centrality of race and imperial power in forming normative understandings and meanings of terrorisms.³ The broadening of the notion of ‘terrorism’ has been one consequence in the attempted struggle to fight what has been named ‘Islamist terrorism,’ ‘Jihadism’ or the like, following the destruction of the Manhattan twin towers in 2001.⁴ As I have shown in other publications, part of the attempt by some think tanks has been the endeavor to expand the notion of “countering violent extremism” to “countering non-violent extremism,”⁵ which ultimately focused not on violence and militancy, but thought. Not actions, but indeed the minds of people are targeted.

While Austria has a long history of incorporating Islam into the polit-

ical system based on the Islam Act of 1912, which allowed Muslims to be recognized as a religious denomination alongside other churches and religious communities, this understanding has changed fundamentally within the last seven years. When the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ, *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*) started focusing on Islam as a threat in 2005, other political parties started co-opting this discourse, first and foremost the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP, *Österreichische Volkspartei*). But while the FPÖ rallied against the religion of Islam as a threat, the ÖVP under Sebastian Kurz presented a much more differentiated discourse in the public sphere, arguing that it wants to protect Muslims was not against Islam, but only against ‘political Islam.’ By introducing the notion of ‘political Islam’ into the public discourse, the ÖVP managed to distance itself from the blatant anti-Muslim discourse coming from the FPÖ, while at the same time criminalizing basically every sign of Muslim-ness. As in many other countries in Europe, in the course of the war on terror, ‘Islam’ –as an indefinite object, an imagined concept, and not an ontological reality– has been turned into a security threat. As Jocelyne Cesari argues, this “involves actors who propose that Islam is an existential threat to European political and secular norms and thereby justifies extraordinary measures against it.”⁶ By using the notion of ‘political Islam,’ the ÖVP managed successfully to fundamentally reshape the state’s politics towards Muslim communities, which has led to the crimi-

nalization of Muslims. Those affected and potentially affected are all vocal and/or organized Muslims, including community organizations, mosques, educational institutions, individuals, associations, or charities.

Introducing 'Political Islam' into Austrian Discourse

While the FPÖ began to make the otherized Muslim the object of its bogeyman from 2005 onwards, slowly but surely other parties followed.⁷ It was the ÖVP that explicitly used the term 'political Islam' for the first time. It addresses this issue in two subchapters of its election program from 2017, called "Showing Zero Tolerance towards Political Islam" and in "Preventing Parallel Societies:"

Political Islam is a combination of religious fundamentalism and political extremism and as such is a breeding ground for violence and terrorism. It aims to undermine our values and ways of life. Political Islam has no place in our society – we must fight radicalization, violence, and terrorism with all means.⁸

The danger of 'political Islam,' according to the election program, is threefold: 'political Islam' is a "breeding ground for violence and terrorism (...) a totalitarian system with the ambition to produce parallel legal systems," and promoted from abroad to "undermine our values and way of life."⁹ This trend goes hand in hand with a discourse that has pursued a project of creating an "Austrian/Eu-

If Muslims are framed as 'carriers of poison,' every measure can be taken to protect oneself from this 'poison.' This allows political leaders to justify political measures to be taken against this allegedly dangerous group of people

ropean-style Islam,"¹⁰ especially by Sebastian Kurz since his position as State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of the Interior from 2011 onward. The 'Islam of Austrian character' constitutes the other side of the coin of a negatively framed 'political Islam.'

Knowledge Production

Several institutions from academia¹¹ to policy-driven state-near institutions have been central in shaping the discourse on Islam. One of them is the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF, *Österreichischer Integrationsfonds*), which is a fund of the Republic of Austria that "used its platform to promote anti-Muslim views through speakers and reports. The ÖIF supports the anti-Muslim policies of the Austrian People's Party's"¹² which is dominated by the conservatives. Part of the agenda is also to target 'political Islam.' The ÖIF organized several panels on "The Influence of Political

These attempts were made based on the proclamation of fighting ‘political Islam,’ while they are in fact against Muslims in general and especially against organized Muslim civil society

Islam,”¹³ or similar panel discussions, where panelists argued that Islamophobia was a means for ‘political Islam’ to prevent reforms of Islam by liberal Muslims, saying: “Political Islam strives to take over the Muslim community in Europe. In the process, ideas for reform or justified criticism are immediately dismissed wholesale as ‘Islamophobic.’”¹⁴ Moreover, the Integration Advisory Board of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BMEIA, *Bundesministerium für europäische und internationale Angelegenheiten*) met under the leadership of ÖIF director Franz Wolf, where Lorenzo Vidino, a major propagandist of the threat of ‘political Islam’¹⁵ presented a talk on ‘Political Islam in Austria.’¹⁶

With this knowledge production, several politicians of the ÖVP repeatedly framed ‘political Islam’ as the greatest threat to Austrian society. The ÖVP’s General Secretary argued, “The poison of political Islam must not endanger our society [...] Violent clashes, territorial conflicts, and parallel justice are on the agenda

according to the executive officials and judges.”¹⁷ By using terminologies like ‘poison,’ those who are framed as proponents of ‘political Islam’ are dehumanized, which justifies any extraordinary means against them. If Muslims are framed as ‘carriers of poison,’ every measure can be taken to protect oneself from this ‘poison.’ This allows political leaders to justify political measures to be taken against this allegedly dangerous group of people.

One can see the discursive impact of this knowledge production. The ban of the *hijab* in elementary school was widely supported in the media by many so-called ‘integration experts’ and academics, as the Austrian section of the European Islamophobia Report reveals.¹⁸ It was legitimized as a means to fight ‘political Islam.’ For Chancellor Kurz, fighting ‘political Islam’ means monitoring Islamist associations, Islamist ideology on social media, and segregation in the realm of education.¹⁹ While intelligence services have no institutional contact with churches and other religious communities –except for the Jewish Community in order to protect them– Muslims are the only religious group, where the intelligence service regularly meets with community leaders. Based on these securitized structures, the further institutionalization of surveillance was not far away. On the second day in power during the ÖVP-Greens coalition that started in January 2020, Integration Minister Susanne Raab (ÖVP) stated that it was a high priority for her to establish the Documentation



Austrian Interior Minister Karl Nehammer (L) and Austrian Integration Minister Susanne Raab address a press conference to announce the closure of 'radical' mosques, following the deadly *jihadi* shooting, in Vienna on November 2, 2020.

JOE KLAMAR / AFP via Getty Images

Center for Political Islam within her first 100 days.²⁰

Political 'Answers' to 'Political Islam'

In the government's coalition program of the ÖVP and FPÖ in 2017, 'political Islam' for the first time becomes a focal point of security policies. The coalition program requires that essential sources of faith such as the Koran be submitted in an authorized translation. This clearly shows how much politicians are interested in managing an otherized religion that is seen as a potential threat. Beyond that, the program reiterates a "ban on foreign financing" and a "criminal law against political Islam." The government attempted to close mosques and the Arab Islamic Community of the Islamic Religious Authority (IGGÖ, *Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich*) and ban

the *hijab*. These attempts were made based on the proclamation of fighting 'political Islam,' while they are in fact against Muslims in general and especially against organized Muslim civil society.

Numerous legislations were implemented to battle 'political Islam,' especially following the inception of the new coalition of ÖVP and FPÖ. FPÖ Party whip Johann Gudenus announced a new act in mid-2019, that forbids the promotion of so-called 'political Islam,'²¹ but this did not happen under their legislation period, since the coalition broke in mid-2019. This was reiterated following the murder of four people in Vienna by a former ISIS sympathizer. The Greens pushed against this move and watered the bill down to ban "religiously motivated extremism," while Integration Minister Raab still declared during the presentation of the law that this is directed against 'political Islam.'²² Un-

It might become an institution of criminalizing Muslimness when regular reports are produced that insinuate Muslims and their institutions are waging a war by integrating themselves into the system

til now, there has been no definition of ‘political Islam’ offered by the government, while at the same time, one could deduce from the implemented policies, what the government means when they accuse Muslims of following ‘political Islam’: effectively wearing the *hijab* or running mosques.

During the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition, the leadership of the government announced in a press conference that eight mosques would be closed to fight ‘political Islam.’²³ The Chancellor framed the government’s initiative as a means to protect common Muslims from ‘political Islam.’²⁴ Sanctioniously, Blümel (ÖVP) argued that it was “no contradiction to be a believing Muslim and a proud Austrian.”²⁵ Following a complaint by the mosques, the Viennese Court of Administration ruled half a year later that this initiative was against the law.²⁶

While the Austrian’s domestic intelligence service, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution

(BVT, *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung*) had in the past used the terminology Islamism and *Jihadism* in its annual report dating back as far as 1997, the notion of ‘political Islam’ was only used in the 2019 title. Moreover, the content of the report deviated from the other previous as well as following reports. For the first time, the legally recognized Islamic Religious Community (IGGÖ) was presented not as an ally against extremism, but as an organization from which risks emanate. The report presents three types of problematic manifestations: 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 a 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*.”²⁷ Here, political participation is framed as potential infiltration. According to the report published in 2019, 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 intelligence 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 BVT 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. This major shift in the bureaucracy suggests that the discourse started by the ÖVP has found its way into the bureaucracy.

This tendency found its peak in the proclamation to create a monitoring center that tracks religious extremism, conducts research, documents, and archives it,²⁸ a move which was only achieved when the Greens joined a coalition with the ÖVP as the junior partner in 2020. Stating that the battle against 'political Islam' was a 'top priority,' the Greens and ÖVP agreed to introduce a Documentation Center to target religious extremism (which was originally presented and finally implemented as the Documentation Center for Political Islam).²⁹ This Center was established on July 15, 2020, and presented by the Minister of Interior, Susanne Raab, alongside two scholars, Mouhanad Khorchide and Lorenzo Vidino.³⁰ The Documentation Center has been presented as "part of the national strategy of extremism prevention and deradicalization."³¹ The center has a yearly budget of €500,000. According to Minister Raab, the Documentation Center allows "for the first time in Austria, (...) to independently and scientifically deal with the dangerous ideology of political Islam and offer insights into the previously hidden networks."³² The board includes some of the most

well-known anti-Muslim authors like Susanne Schröter,³³ Lorenzo Vidino,³⁴ and Heiko Heinisch.³⁵ During the presentation, the minister argued: "Because political Islam is poison for our social coexistence and must be fought with all means. With the establishment of the Documentation Center for Political Islam, Austria thus becomes a pioneer in Europe."³⁶ Raab wants to have an annual report on extremism as well as the:

Creation of an overview map of problematic networks and associations in Austria that can be attributed to political Islam. The aim is to make visible structures, actors, and goals of the representatives of this dangerous ideology. Financial, organizational and ideological connections (abroad) are also to be investigated and disclosed.³⁷

In addition, the Documentation Center ought to present a "detailed analysis of the individual networks operating in secret."³⁸ During the presentation, Khorchide argued that 'political Islam' is "wrapped with a cloak of democracy." He further suggested that the proponents of political Islam would engage in *taqiyya* –dissimulation or denial of religious belief in the face of persecution– by masking their 'inwardly' values. According to this logic, whatever Muslims do, they cannot be trusted. While Susanne Raab reaffirmed that this monitoring center was not directed against Islam as a religion, Muslim activists argued that this might become an "institution of surveillance."³⁹ And one could add here that it might become an insti-

Europe's populist leaders discriminate against Muslims

Islamophobia in Europe, which has been on the rise in recent years, is now deepening further with the populist discourses and policies of politicians like 42-year-old French President Emmanuel Macron and 33-year-old Austrian Prime Minister Sebastian Kurz, both of whose political experience has come under question



EMMANUEL MACRON

French President

AGE 42

- A draft law on "**Islamic separatism**," which will be submitted to cabinet on Dec. 9, aims to place tighter controls on mosque financing and as well as on Muslim associations
- After the murder of French teacher Samuel Patty on Oct. 16, the Macron administration took **harsher steps against Muslims** and Muslim groups in the country
- Muslim associations and civil society groups were subject to extralegal practices, such as closures
- Macron decided to **target Muslims** due to fears of losing votes in upcoming presidential elections slated for 2022
- **Islamophobia** in the country has become violent, as was exhibited in an incident where police treated four Muslim children -- three of them Turkish -- as terrorists, detaining the 12-year-old schoolchildren for 11 hours and opening an investigation on them over suspicions of "terrorist" propaganda
- Under the Macron administration's pressure, **French Muslims are being deprived** of their freedom of expression



SEBASTIAN KURZ

Austrian Prime Minister

AGE 33

- Changing the more-than-century-old Islam Law, Kurz **restricted the rights of Muslims**
- He **banned the use of veils** in public places and headscarves in primary schools
- Kurz plans to raise the age ban on wearing headscarves in schools from 10 to 14
- He has used the label "political Islam" to **pressure Muslims**
- He has used anti-Islam and anti-Turkey discourse over the last two elections
- **30 Muslim activists** and academics have been **detained** in the name of "**fighting terrorism**"
- He plans to name "political Islam" as a criminal offense

Anti-Islam activity in Europe, which has been on the rise in recent years, is now deepening further with the populist discourses and policies of young politicians like French President Emmanuel Macron and Austrian Prime Minister Sebastian Kurz.

ZEYNEP ÖZTÜRK / AA

tution of criminalizing Muslimness when regular reports are produced that insinuate Muslims and their institutions are waging a war by integrating themselves into the system.

Following a raid against 30 people that included myself,⁴⁰ Interior Minister Karl Nehammer argued on November 9, 2020, that this was aimed at "cutting off the roots of political Is-

lam.”⁴¹ When the defendants, accused of organizing and financing terrorism, were interrogated following the raids, they were asked questions that had little to do with violence and militancy, but a lot to do with an Orientalist perspective on Islam, being Muslim and political views: How many non-Muslim friends do you have? Do you visit a mosque and if yes, which mosque? What do you think about the *caliphate*? What do you think about peace with Israel? Should kids raised in Austria be educated to become martyrs? Do you want to introduce *Sharia*? Do you know the Protocols of the Elders of Zion? What do you understand by the term ‘Islamophobia’? In your opinion, is this term justified? If so, please explain why and what do you understand by this term? Are Muslims suppressed in Austria? Is Islamist global terrorism possibly the reason for fears emanating from Islam or is it the oppression, especially of women or people of other faiths, by the norms of the *Sharia*? May your son marry a Christian, unbeliever, or a Jew? Do you designate your son’s spouse? What does the term *Kuffare* (sic) mean for you? Are Christians for you *Kuffar*? Is one allowed to kill in the name of God? Do you and your wife and your kids observe the prayer times?⁴²

One could write a whole book about the questions above. Clearly, they reveal the Orientalized perspective of the authorities. But first and foremost, they show how much imagined personal religious practices and perspectives have become a target of the state. ‘Political Islam’ it seems, has become a

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Conclusion

This commentary reveals the extent of the criminalization of Islam and Muslims at the end of a road that started with the introduction of the notion of ‘political Islam’ by a political party. The questions from the intelligence service above reveal the extent to which not violent but simply religious, as well as political, thought and religious practice is targeted. The Documentation Center for Political Islam that was inaugurated in July 2020 along with the proclamation to make ‘political Islam’ a criminal offense are the latest institutional steps that surveil and criminalize organized and vocal Muslims. It raises many questions when these institutions are built to monitor associations, ideol-

ogy on social media as well as education programs of a religious minority, raids are conducted with the help of the intelligence service and people are intimidated by terrorism legislation. These measures should be read as a danger to freedom of expression and freedom of religion, both high values in democratic societies that have come under fire. ■

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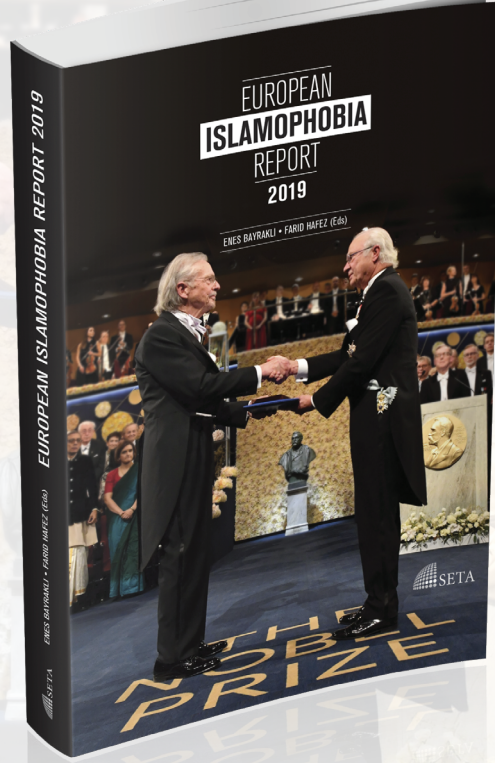
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