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## **Austria's planned full-face veil ban provokes debate on crucifixes in schools**

***The Austrian government's planned ban on full-face veils has naturally encountered resistance. But it's not the only religious symbol that is coming under scrutiny, as the display of crucifixes in kindergartens and schools also faces fresh debate. [EURACTIV Germany reports.](#)***

By Herbert Vytiska, translated by Sam Morgan

Euractive (.03.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2IVzyvF> - Representatives of the Muslim community have announced that there will be a demonstration in Vienna tomorrow (4 February). The protest will be against the planned ban on full-face veils and headscarf ban for employees in public services.

The tourism industry is also critical of the plans, as they are concerned of the effect it will have on wealthy visitors from Muslim countries.

The issue of crucifixes being displayed in schools and nurseries has also come under fire. Critics argue that if one religious symbol is going to be banned in public, then the same must apply to all religions, not just Islam.

But Austria's Constitutional Court has already taken a clear position on the issue, insisting that "the cross, without doubt, has become a symbol of the West's intellectual history". Moreover, it is also included in an international treaty between the Republic of Austria and the Holy See.

Austria's integration ministry is undeterred by the significant criticism that has been levelled at the proposal and has already taken the next steps. Last August, it presented its draft integration law, which then entered its assessment phase.

The new legislation stipulates that German values should be developed and that symbols of counterculture, like the full-face veil or the distributing of the Koran by Salafis, should be banned. It also insists that respecting the host culture and values system is a prerequisite for integration.

Anyone receiving protection and asylum will therefore have to sign an integration contract and the declaration contained within it, under which they commit to abiding by the legal and social values of the country.

Beneficiaries will also be expected to attend German lessons and courses that teach about values. In the draft law, penalties of between €500 and €2,500 are included in the case of non-compliance.

## **Muslim full face veil to be banned in public places in Austria**

***Austria is planning to ban Islamic full-face veils in courts, schools and other public places.***

By Samuel Osborne

World-Wide Religious News (31.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2kpUV6B> - The prohibition will apply to the niqab and burqa, the full-face or face-and-body coverings worn by some Muslim women.

It comes as part of a package of reforms drawn up by the country's governing coalition to counter the rise of the far-right Freedom Party, which has topped opinion polls for months.

"We believe in an open society that is also based on open communication. Full-body veils in public spaces stand against that and will therefore be prohibited," the agreement said.

The country's coalition also agreed to prohibit police officers, judges, magistrates and public prosecutors from wearing head scarves in the interest of appearing "ideologically and religiously neutral" while serving the state.

The French parliament passed an act more than six years ago that made France the first European Union country to ban the niqab and burqa in public places.

Belgium and some parts of Switzerland followed France's lead and similar bans have been considered in other European countries.

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## **Horror as Christian woman stabbed for reading the Bible in migration centre**

***A Christian woman was stabbed by an asylum seeker after he heard her reading from the bible***

HRWF (04.01.2017) - The 50-year-old woman was only saved by her winter coat when she was attacked with a knife in the accommodation in Timelkam in Voecklamarkt in Upper Austria.

Her alleged attacker is a 22-year-old man from Afghanistan who had taken offence to the fact that the woman had been invited by Christian residents of the property to discuss the bible.

When he found out what she was doing, he stormed into the kitchen where the woman was standing and tried to plunge the knife into her upper body.

Luckily her thick winter coat protected her from serious injury, but she did injure her ear when she fell backwards from the force of the man's violent blows.

He was ordered remanded in custody and taken to Wels Prison in Upper Austria. It is unclear if he has been charged yet.

The horror attack happened just days after a [teenager was battered by a group of migrant men](#) in the Austrian capital of Vienna.

And on Christmas day the [migrant crisis](#) issue was addressed by the [Archbishop of Vienna when he said Austria could not cope](#) with the huge numbers arriving.

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## **Austria's Islamic Reforms**

### **Opinion by Soeren Kern**

**New York Times (07.04.2015) – [New York Times \(07.04.2015\)](#) - In February, the Austrian Parliament amended the country's century-old "Islam Law." The new legislation, though controversial, is a significant achievement. In promoting a moderate, homegrown Islam compatible with democratic values, Austria has taken a positive step to combat extremism while protecting religious liberties.**

The original Islam law, passed in 1912, sought to integrate thousands of Muslims who officially came under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire following its annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908. Predominantly Roman Catholic, Austria-Hungary extended Muslims the same rights of worship as other official religions, and granted state protection to Islamic customs, doctrines and institutions. But the empire's breakup following World War I left just a few hundred Muslims in Austria, and the Islam Law became irrelevant.

The current landscape is vastly different. A 2014 University of Vienna report put the number of Muslims in Austria at over 550,000, or about 7 percent of the national population as of 2012.

The number of Muslims first began to increase in the 1960s and 1970s, with the arrival of tens of thousands of guest workers from the Balkans and Turkey. Refugees from Bosnia and Kosovo followed in the 1990s; more recently, Austria absorbed thousands of asylum-seekers from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. There has also been natural expansion among second- and third-generation immigrants; as of 2009, about half of the country's Muslims were Austrian nationals.

The reforms follow years of lobbying by Muslim leaders, who argued that their people have effectively remained second-class citizens. The updated law confirms Islam's official status and expands Muslim rights. Muslims will be allowed time off from work to observe Islamic holidays and be able to receive spiritual care and halal meals in hospitals, prisons and the armed forces. The law also establishes a theological program for imams at the University of Vienna, where instruction will reinforce European social values.

But other reforms, which Vienna says are aimed at counteracting extremism, are contentious. The updated law bans other countries from financing Islamic groups, and bars foreign clerics from leadership positions in Austrian mosques. All imams must speak German, and Muslim clergy must prove "professional suitability," either by completing the University of Vienna program, or demonstrating equivalent training. Stressing that Austrian law takes precedence over Shariah, it requires Muslim organizations to show a "positive attitude toward society and state," or risk closure. (It remains unclear exactly what constitutes a "positive attitude," or how this will be monitored.)

Austria's reforms set a precedent in Europe, where concerns about extremism have been echoed by other governments. The French prime minister, Manuel Valls, has voiced disapproval of a "reflexive" reliance on foreign funding by France's Muslim institutions.

Sebastian Kurz, Austria's integration minister, says German and Swiss officials have expressed interest in similar financing controls.

Austrian reactions have been mixed. Muslims have generally — if grudgingly — accepted the reforms. The Islamic Religious Community in Austria, an umbrella group that helped draft the amendments, conceded that the outcome “probably comes closest to the needs of both parties.”

But because Austria's Christian and Jewish groups do not face language restrictions, and may receive foreign financing, others find these measures highly discriminatory. Some Muslim organizations have vowed to bring complaints to Austria's Constitutional Court. On the other end of the spectrum, the anti-immigration Freedom Party opposed the law, deeming it ineffective in curbing extremism.

Some objections have merit. A blanket ban on foreign financial support is a blunt instrument that risks alienating Muslims by subjecting them to special rules. And while many Islamic institutions depend on foreign funding, not all of these donors have extremist ties. But the law eschews any attempt to differentiate between foreign sources, and some moderate Islamic groups are unlikely to survive. Even the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, reviewing the proposed bill, found the ban unnecessarily broad.

The language requirements may not achieve much: Extremism is as likely to spread in German as in any other language.

But these measures respond to a real concern. A small yet growing number of Austrian Muslims is embracing radical Islam; officials say nearly 200 have left the country to join jihadist movements in the Middle East. With the reforms, Vienna is acknowledging the current climate while striking a balance between civil liberties and national security.

Freezing foreign revenue streams remains the best way to encourage the development of an independent Austrian Islam. The ban is aimed especially at Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which are vying for leadership of the Sunni Muslim world and whose governments have exported their competing versions of Islam to Austria for decades. Saudi Arabia, which has been accused of sponsoring the spread of Salafism and Wahhabism — anti-Western ideologies that seek to impose Shariah — has financed the construction of mosques in Austria and operated schools and cultural centers. Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has urged Austria's Turkish Muslims to reject assimilation. According to Mr. Kurz, at least 60 Muslim clerics currently working in Austria are Turkish civil servants paid by Ankara's religious affairs directorate.

Funding by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other foreign governments is often aimed at shoring up their broader geopolitical interests. Preserving this patron-client relationship will only impede the full integration of Austria's Muslims. The financial restrictions are necessary in order to break these ties, and will help foster greater self-determination. Austria's updated Islam Law may be imperfect, and Muslims have a right to request more nuanced legislation. But to the extent that the reforms broaden the rights of Austria's Muslims, and help thwart extremist foreign influence, they are essential. One century ago, Austria officially recognized Islam. Today it may again be at the vanguard of Muslim integration.

*Soeren Kern is a senior fellow at the Gatestone Institute, a New York-based nonprofit that reports on international policy.*

**Comment by Erich Mayer (FOREF)**

Soeren Kern's harmonizing conclusion might be a bit too spongy. He is right in stating that due to the new law Muslims in Austria are granted more privileges, e.g. time off from work on Islamic holidays, halal meals in public institutions, etc. However, because numerous passages in the law express a general suspicion toward Muslims, especially Austria-born Muslims feel estranged by the legislation.

Furthermore, critical voices raise doubts that the new law will be effective in targeting extremist influence: The new restriction on foreign funding can be easily circumvented and might lead to underground schemes that are harder to control.

Lastly, the legislation does not consider the diversity of Islamic groups, which would require a separate registration of each individual group according to Austria's "law on faith communities" (BekG 1998), usually valid for other religious groups (state-recognized ones excepted). Instead, all Muslims are recognized ad-hoc as in the former law from 1912, while obliged to accept the newly introduced restrictions and the stigma of posing a potential danger to social order and security.