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Government shuts seven mosques, prepares to expel 40 Turkey-funded imams

Decision shows failure of Austria's Islam Law, according to human rights organizations

Vienna, 10.06.2018 (HRWF/FOREF Europe) - On Friday, June 8, the government of Austria ordered the closing of seven mosques and the termination of the residence permits of 40 Turkish imams. "Parallel societies, political Islam or radical tendencies have no place in our country," Chancellor Sebastian Kurz of the conservative people's party (ÖVP) explained at a news conference announcing the move last Friday.

Human Rights Without Frontiers and the Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe, both of which have been sharply critical of political Islam as a totalitarian political movement, said that subjecting Islamic religious communities to special regulations contradicts human rights and Rule of Law principles, and is an obstacle to the development of moderate and peaceful Islamic communities in Europe that uphold a separation of church and state.

The measure coincides with the run-up to the Turkish presidential election on June 24. Turks living in Austria and in other countries already have begun casting absentee ballots. Last May, 10.000 expat Turks travelled to Sarajevo to attend an election campaign event in Bosnia-Herzegovina's capital Sarajevo in support of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as Germany, Austria and the Netherlands had prohibited election campaigns of Turkish politicians in their countries. The event was hosted by the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD), an organization that is considered the foreign branch of Erdoğan's party AKP. Around half of the supporters came from Germany and about 2.000 from Austria. In his Sarajevo talk, the Turkish president criticized the European countries that banned his campaigns as anti-democratic and asked his supporters to "demonstrate the strength of European Turks to the whole world", the Austrian newspaper [Die Presse](#) reported.

Against this backdrop, the Austrian government's plan to expel imams supported by Turkey and to crack down on mosques run by controversial organizations is widely understood as a reaction against the promotion of political Islam in Austria. Government officials, however, have [denied](#) any connection of their measure to the upcoming Turkish presidential election. The decision has been justified by claiming that two provisions of the amended "Islam Law" (Islamgesetz) of 2015 have been breached:

First, according to the law, imams in Austria are prohibited from being funded by foreign countries. However, 40 imams of the Turkish-Islamic Union in Austria (ATIB) have been funded by Turkey via a [personnel leasing company in Belgium](#). This was also admitted by ATIB representatives who defended their actions by stating that possibilities for the training and support of imams in Austria were insufficient. The process to withhold or withdraw residence permits of the 40 imams has already been initiated, government officials have announced. Additionally, at least another 20 imams associated with ATIB are going to be investigated.

Secondly, the Islam Law of 2015 explicitly requires Islamic communities to hold a "positive attitude towards society and the state", a term which is open to a broad range of interpretations. This provision was allegedly violated by a Vienna mosque run by the [Nizam i-Alem](#) ("world order") association, which is a member of the European umbrella organization of the splinter party (BBP) of the Turkish ultra-nationalist party MHP. (The far-right youth organization [Grey Wolves](#) has close links to the MHP as its political arm. Several media outlets have identified the Nizam i-Alem mosque as an associate of the Grey Wolves.) According to the Islamic Community in Austria (IGGÖ), the largest Muslim umbrella organization in the country that includes the ATIB as its leading constituent member, confirmed that the mosque was operating illegally without its permission.

Six out of the seven mosques to be shut down, however, do not have any ties to Turkey. These belong to a non-registered association called "Arabic Religious Community" (arabische Kultusgemeinde), a [member](#) of the Austrian Islamic Community that allegedly entertains ties with the European network of the Muslim Brotherhood. (The chairman of the Arabic Religious Community, the Egyptian [Moussa Hassan](#), was convicted last year for embezzling public funds provided for Islamic kindergartens in Vienna.) The mosques are to be closed due to "Salafist statements" by their representatives. The Arabic Religious Community [announced](#) that it will take legal action against the government's measures.

[Another controversial mosque](#) in Vienna run by ATIB is still under investigation. In April this year, pictures emerged that showed children re-enacting scenes of the World War I battle of Gallipoli (1915) on the premises of the mosque and playing martyrs dressed in paramilitary uniforms. Already at that point, Chancellor Kurz announced that the case will be investigated and that the funding of Islamic associations and kindergartens would be scrutinized.

Reactions: Austria "islamophobic" and "racist"

Regular visitors of the mosques affected by the crackdown have denied the accusations and call the government action "politically motivated".

The Islamic Community in Austria (IGGÖ) remarked indignantly in its [statement last Saturday](#) that illegal activities of any association used to be monitored by the interior ministry regardless of religious affiliation. However, with the amended Islam Law now entering into effect, the whole IGGÖ was being discredited when illegal activities of individual actors were penalized "in calculated political manoeuvres".

Statements in reaction to the move of the Austrian government came not only from religious representatives, but also and especially from political figures. Turkish government officials have responded by portraying the action as an attack on Islam itself. Ibrahim Kalin, a senior presidential adviser and spokesman of Erdoğan, [condemned Austria's decision on his Twitter feed](#). "Austria's decision to close seven mosques and expel imams is a reflection of the Islamophobic, racist and discriminatory wave in this

country,” he stated. “It is an attempt to target Muslim communities for the sake of scoring cheap political points.”

Erdoğan threatened with retaliations against Kurz, and claimed in a [speech in Istanbul](#) last Saturday that the actions of the Austrian Chancellor could lead the world into “a war between the cross and the crescent moon”.

Turkey’s eye on Austrian Muslims

Despite their occasional public protests, the IGGÖ officials in fact cooperated intensely with the Austria’s former government, a socialist-conservative (SPÖ/ÖVP) coalition, in drafting the Islam Law of 2015. Their aim was to strengthen the status of the IGGÖ as a representative body of Muslims living in Austria. On the other hand, according to scholar of Islam Ednan Aslan, there were [three main factions](#) within the IGGÖ that struggled to advance their political interests in Austria: the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian government, and the Turkish government. As of June 2016, the Turkish-Islamic Union in Austria (ATIB) has taken control over the IGGÖ, thus cementing the influence of Turkey on Austrian Muslims and [effectively removing](#) the Arabic Religious Community from power. (Correspondingly, the IGGÖ has stated on Saturday that they have [no problem](#) with the government’s announcement to shut down the “private mosques” of the Arabic Religious Community.)

There are an estimated 600.000 Muslims living in Austria, a country with a total population of 8.8 million. About 360.000 are of Turkish origins, among whom one third holds Turkish citizenship. ATIB was founded in 1990 and serves as an umbrella organization for 62 member associations with an estimated 100.000 members. At par with DITIB in Germany, the organization is known to function as the Austrian [branch of the Diyanet](#), the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey, and is bound by instructions of the Turkish Embassy.

Since August 2017, Austria’s public prosecutors are investigating ATIB due to allegations that the organization has been used by Turkey to spy on members of the Gülen-movement. If confirmed that ATIB was involved with intelligence collection, the organization could be [dissolved](#).

Human Rights Activists: Islam Law is discriminatory and seeks to regulate thoughts and attitudes

The provisions of the Islam Law mentioned above have been now implemented by the government for the first time.

The controversy surrounding the government’s move underlines the weakness of the all-inclusive-package of the amended Islam Law, which includes both privileges and highly questionable discriminatory provisions.

The ban on foreign funding is a discriminatory security measure to tackle the political influence of Turkey, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

But according to Willy Fautré, Director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, “A law that indiscriminately criminalizes all forms of foreign financial assistance to a specific religious community is discriminatory and incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. It should be abrogated. Such a law looks like a twin sister of Putin’s law against ‘foreign agents’.”

What is more, by demanding a “positive attitude” toward society and the Constitution from a specific religious group, the law is both discriminatory and an illegal intrusion into the freedom of thought.

“When any law gives a state the power to penalize citizens for their attitudes and thoughts on the basis of vague language, it is inconsistent with basic human rights, and an invitation for political manipulation,” stated Dr. Aaron Rhodes, president of the Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe.

Both organizations strongly urge that Austria’s Islam Law not only needs to be reformed, but it needs to be dissolved and new legislation for religions must be put in place that will ensure the equal treatment of all religions before the law. Such legislation should enable a clear procedure for Islamic associations to register as faith communities independently from umbrella organizations vulnerable to political instrumentalization.

For more information and interviews:

Aaron Rhodes (President, FOREF) +49-170-323-8314
Email: aaronarhodes@gmail.com

Dominic Zoehrer (FOREF) +43 650-6912481
Email: dominic.zoehrer1@gmail.com Blog: foref-europe.org

Willy Fautré (Executive Director, HRWF) +32 2 3456145
Email: w.fautre@hrwf.net Website: <http://www.hrwf.eu>

Putin visits Austria: Will leaders stand up for religious freedom and other human rights?

Press Release: FOREF and HRWF call upon the President and the Chancellor of Austria to raise the issues of religious freedom and human rights in Russia

FOREF/ HRWF (04.05.2018) - When Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with President of the Republic Austria of Austria Alexander Van der Bellen and Federal Chancellor Sebastian Kurz on 5 June 2018, will they express concern about deteriorating human rights in Russia, and use Austria’s influence for the better?

Two international human rights organizations with special focus on the freedom of religion are appealing to the President and Chancellor to do so. The Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe (FOREF, Vienna) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels) both closely monitor human rights and religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation.

“Russia has moved into the vanguard of authoritarian states that infringe on the freedom of religion and conscience, fundamental human rights without which equality before the law and democracy are impossible,” according to Dr. Aaron Rhodes, president of FOREF, who holds Honorary Citizenship in Austria.

“Austria cannot have business as usual with Russia without engaging in the most egregious moral hypocrisy,” he said.

Russia’s ban on the Jehovah’s Witnesses had made criminals of 170,000 peaceful citizens and subjected them to vandalism and other abuse by others.

The ban is apparently part of a comprehensive project to suppress minority religions, undertaken in concert with the Russian Orthodox Church, and with the aim of protecting the "feelings" of members of the Orthodox Community.

Willy Fautré, President of Human Rights Without Frontiers, said, "Numerous Jehovah's Witnesses have been jailed, some for months; the authorities have conducted around 30 police raids and have launched 20 criminal investigations.

"This is an unprecedented assault on the freedom of religion by a member of the Council of Europe, and one seeking economic and political partnership with Austria and other European countries; who will hold Putin accountable?" he added.

Russia's illegal restrictions on religious freedom, while violating human rights and Rule of Law principles, are creating conflict and instability in the society. Muslim communities have come under pressure from "anti-terrorism" legislation and practices.

The Russian Federation, under President Putin's rule, has cracked down on all fundamental rights and freedoms, in addition to the freedom of religion. There is virtually no freedom of expression in the mass media, while citizens are subjected to state controlled propaganda. Numerous independent journalists have been murdered. The government has made the work of independent human rights organizations almost impossible. Russia has invaded a neighboring country and annexed part of its territory and threatened members of the European Union. Critical political voices have been jailed, and elections are managed Soviet-style. Citizens peacefully protecting these policies have been beaten and jailed.

To undertake business deals with the Russian Federation without exercising leverage to improve human rights conditions there would be a betrayal of the universal principles Austria claims to uphold, the two human rights groups insisted.

For more information and interviews:

Aaron Rhodes (President, FOREF) +49-170-323-8314
Email: aaronrhodes@gmail.com

Peter Zoehrer (Executive Director, FOREF) +43 664-523-8794
Email: foref.office@gmail.com Blog: foref-europe.org

Willy Fautré (Executive Director, HRWF) +32 2 3456145
Email: w.fautre@hrwf.net Website: <http://www.hrwf.eu>

Austria seeks hijab ban for primary school students

The Austrian government's intent to ban the hijab is the latest in a series of measures targeting Muslims.

by Patrick Strickland

Al Jazeera (04.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2qdZzp5> - The Austrian government has announced that it will seek to ban the hijab for girls in kindergarten and primary school in the [latest measure targeting Muslims](#) in the country.

Education Minister Heinz Fassmann said on Wednesday that the draft law on the hijab - a headscarf worn by many Muslim women who feel it is part of their religion - would be ready by summer, describing the measure as "symbolic".

The announcement came just days after Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, a member of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPO), proposed such a ban to "protect" girls under the age of 10 and allow them to "integrate" into Austrian society.

The announcement is one in a string of moves critics say [single out and target Muslims](#), including refugees and migrants, in Austria.

In December 2017, the FPO and the right-wing Austrian People's Party (OVP) reached an agreement to form a coalition. It marked the second time since 2000 that the FPO became a junior partner in a governing coalition.

In January, the OVP-FPO coalition introduced a political programme that mentioned Islam some 21 times, prompting criticism of an undue focus on the comparably low number of Muslims living in the country.

That same month, Austria's interior minister, Herbert Kickl of the FPO, said the government should "concentrate" refugees and migrants in one place, sparking widespread criticism in a country where a concentration camp was hosted during the Second World War.

Of the country's 8.75 million people, an estimated 700,000 people identify as Muslims. In October 2017, just weeks before Austrians voted in national elections, the government introduced a ban on the face veil. The law allows authorities to fine violators up to \$180. Both the FPO and the OVP have a lengthy history of pushing [anti-Muslim](#) measures.

'Islamophobia'

A recent report - The European Islamophobia Report 2017 ([PDF](#)) - noted 256 Islamophobic incidents across the country last year. The report concluded that Muslims in Austria can "envisage an increasingly authoritarian form of political behaviour" under the OVP-FPO coalition.

The FPO was founded by former Nazis in 1956. Although it claims to have abandoned its Nazi roots, the FPO has been widely accused of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and racism. While acting as an opposition party up until entering the government in December, the FPO drummed up populist support by [focusing](#) much of its ire on refugees, migrants and Muslims at large, said Sabine Schatz, a spokesperson for the centre-left Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPO).

"In opposition, the FPO combined social issues with racism, especially anti-Muslim racism," she told Al Jazeera. "This made the party successful."

Farid Hafez, a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Bridge Initiative, explained that the FPO has attempted to distance itself from anti-Semitism in order "to legitimise its anti-Muslim racism".

Describing the tactic as a "strategic move", Hafez told Al Jazeera: "With Islamophobia being much more en vogue, the FPO concentrates on this form of racism, which is openly [employed]."

Despite these efforts, the FPO has found itself [embroiled in a spate of controversies](#) tied to anti-Semitism.

In one of those incidents, an attache in Israel was recalled to Austria last month after posting on Facebook a photo of himself wearing a pro-Nazi shirt.

In Suben, an area of northwestern Austria, two local FPO councillors were expelled from the party after they were arrested last month over charges that they had shared Hitler photos and slogans via the WhatsApp messaging app.

The SPO's Schatz said there have been at least 22 similar scandals surrounding the FPO since it joined the government.

"Anti-Semitism and racism are deeply connected with the Freedom Party, its structure and history," she said.

Austria Chancellor Sebastian Kurz of the OVP has declared his support for the plan to bar pupils from wearing headscarves in primary schools and kindergartens.

"We want all girls in Austria to have the same opportunities," he told the Oe1 radio station before the announcement.

'Absurd' questions to prove they are Christian asylum cases

Global Christian News (18.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2mWIZJp> - Christian convert refugees seeking asylum in Austria are being asked "absurdly difficult" questions on theology and Church doctrine by authorities in order to "prove" their conversion, say Austrian church leaders.

Converts have been asked complex questions about the Trinity, been asked to name the date on which the first woman was ordained in Austria and how many sacraments Austrian Free Churches observe; the five different Free Church branches in Austria all have different interpretations. Converts who failed to answer the questions often face their claims for asylum being turned down.

Karl Schiefermaier, a member of the Protestant High Consistory, stated, "This has now reached a stage which is most worrying. The Church and not the State must decide whether or not a baptism is legitimate. Every pastor has the pastoral responsibility to examine and confirm the genuineness of an adult's wish to be baptised."

A total of 859 asylum seekers converted to Christianity in Austria in 2017.

100 Iranian Christians waiting to enter U.S. could be sent back to Iran

By Nina Shea

Washington Free Beacon (09.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2qMfz4U> - U.S. government action could send 100 mostly Christian Iranians stranded in Vienna back to Iran this week, where their return during the harsh government crackdown on dissidents could target them for further persecution, human rights activists warn.

The deportation threat looms despite the Trump administration's and Congress's vocal support for protesters in Iran, who are waging the strongest nationwide uprising against the government in Tehran in eight years.

"These deportations, during a human-rights crackdown in Iran no less, could be a death sentence for these persecuted Christians and other minorities," Nina Shea, an international human rights lawyer who directs the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, told the Washington Free Beacon. "They would undermine the important statements against Iran's repression by President Trump, Vice President Pence and U.N. Ambassador [Nikki Haley]."

"The administration needs to act fast to stop this travesty," she said, noting that the U.S. government could give the refugees notices denying them entry to the U.S. as early as this week. This would leave the Austrians with little choice but to send them back to Iran.

Activists say the timing of the deportation threat is also particularly troublesome for the Trump administration, after the State Department last week designated Iran among 10 countries "of particular concern" for "systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom."

The Iranian Christian refugees traveled to Vienna in January 2017 under a 27-year-old U.S. law passed by Congress to help Jews escape persecution in the Soviet Union. Under a 2004 update of the law, known as the Lautenberg amendment, the State Department has helped tens of thousands of Iranian Jews, Christians, and Baha'is who were at risk in their home country to resettle in the United States.

During the end of the Obama administration, the State Department initially signed off on plans to resettle the latest group of mostly Iranian Christian refugees but then placed a hold on them toward the end of last year before Trump took office, according to Anna Buwalda, executive director of the Jubilee Campaign. The Jubilee Campaign is a nonprofit organization that advocates for religious minorities who suffer persecution in their home countries.

Buwalda says she and other human-rights activists don't know why the U.S. appears to be on the brink of denying them entry to the United States, and no one at the State Department or DHS has provided any answers.

"This is part of the mystery, and nobody's been able to receive any information to explain it," she said.

One-third of the refugees were set to resettle in California, where many of their relatives who have already gone through the refugee resettlement process are located, according to the activists.

The Department of Homeland Security, which has an office in Vienna, helped interview and vet the refugees, along with HIAS, the global Jewish nonprofit that works with the State Department on Lautenberg program refugee cases, Buwalda said.

HIAS referred a request for comment to its partner, the State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. Neither the State Department nor the DHS provided a response.

The refugees, most of them Armenians and Assyrians, have been waiting in Vienna for a year as U.S. courts have weighed in on the constitutionality of the travel ban, and recently were informed they must go back to Iran, according to Shea and Buwalda.

It is unclear if the Trump administration is behind the deportation threat or if Austria is becoming impatient with these cases remaining in limbo.

Human rights groups are urging the administration to take action and are worried the refugees and other priorities involving religious minorities in hotspots around the world

are falling through the cracks as key Trump administration posts remain vacant a year into his presidency.

"The U.S. has broken its promise to Iranian religious minorities," Buwalda said. "They traveled to Vienna at the invitation of the United States, with the understanding that they would soon be reunited with their American families. Instead, the groups of refugees have been forced to wait there for more than a year with no explanation. They have no source of income, and many have spent down their life savings."

"The U.S. government must solve this situation quickly and humanely," she said.

One key post that would normally handle Lautenberg program issues remains vacant. Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback's nomination to the State Department post of ambassador at large for religious freedom is in limbo after Democrats placed a hold on it late last year and blocked the Senate from approving him.

The White House re-nominated Brownback on Monday but has not publicly disclosed whether it intends to expend the political capital to lean on the Senate to quickly confirm him. Senate GOP leaders would have to devote at least three days of precious floor time to hold a floor vote on the nomination if Democrats continue to oppose him instead of passing him quickly by unanimous consent.

The White House did not respond to an inquiry into Brownback's nomination.

Catholic and other Christian leaders have praised the Trump administration's rhetoric on the issue. They point to the administration's National Security Strategy report, unveiled in late December, and its pledge to "protect religious minorities" abroad.

Pence in October received a standing ovation at a dinner devoted to religious freedom issue when he pledged that "help is on the way" to religious minority communities in Iraq struggling to recover from Islamic State genocide.

However, Trump also has yet to appoint a special adviser for international religious freedom at the White House's National Security Council and has kept a special envoy for religious freedom post downgraded in power, as it was during the Obama administration.

The faith office at USAID also remains without a leader.
