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The Situation of Muslims in Austria

Islamic Centre Vienna
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History and Demographics

According to the 2001 census Islam is officially acknowledged in Austria with Muslims constituting 4.22% of the population. The latest estimate by the Austrian Integration Fund (OeIF) mentions over half a million Muslims living in Austria, out of a total population of about 8.3 million and a study by the Austrian Society for International Understanding considers the Muslim population at present to be the largest religious minority in Austria overtaking Protestantism.

Austria has granted Muslims the status of a recognised religious community. With its history, Austria has been related to different Muslim communities in the Balkans, in particular after the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878. But already in 1874, the so-called “Anerkennungsgesetz” (Act of Recognition) granted respect for all religions in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the right to build mosques. The first mosque was built in Vienna in 1887 for the Muslims enlisted in the army, and already at that time many Muslims were also employed in the civil service.

After the World War II, new waves of Muslims arrived in the country, mainly from Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia but also from Arab countries and Pakistan - this immigration continued and increased in the 1960’s and 1970’s - and in the 1990’s also from other parts of former Yugoslavia.

In 1971, the Muslims officially registered were only 0.3% of the Austrian population, but this has also been explained as the result of a lack of willingness to openly speak about religious identity.

The federal state Vorarlberg which is very industrialized has the highest Muslim’s presence in the country with 8.36%, followed by the capital Vienna with 7.82%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federal State</th>
<th>Muslim Pop.</th>
<th>Share of the Pop.</th>
<th>District with the Highest Share</th>
<th>Pop.</th>
<th>General Pop. Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vorarlberg</td>
<td>29,334</td>
<td>8.36</td>
<td>Dornbirn</td>
<td>8,969</td>
<td>11.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wien</td>
<td>121,149</td>
<td>7.82</td>
<td>Bezirk (Rudolfsheim-Fünfhaus)</td>
<td>9,534</td>
<td>14.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salzburg</td>
<td>23,137</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>Salzburg (Stadt)</td>
<td>9,735</td>
<td>6.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Österreich</td>
<td>338,988</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oberösterreich</td>
<td>55,581</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>Wels (Stadt)</td>
<td>5,785</td>
<td>10.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tirol</td>
<td>27,117</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>Innsbruck (Stadt)</td>
<td>6,108</td>
<td>5.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niederösterreich</td>
<td>48,730</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>St. Pölten (Stadt)</td>
<td>3,681</td>
<td>7.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kärnten</td>
<td>10,940</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>Villach (Stadt)</td>
<td>1,973</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steiermark</td>
<td>19,007</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>Graz (Stadt)</td>
<td>9,023</td>
<td>3.99</td>
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<td>Burgenland</td>
<td>3,994</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>Mattersberg</td>
<td>1,141</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographic Overview: Riexinger, Martin, Bundesländer nach muslimischem Bevölkerungsanteil (Vienna 2003)
At present, the largest Muslim community is the Turkish, representing around 80% of the Muslim population, followed by Bosnians. More recently, Arabs have become a consistent part of the Muslim population, and there is also a limited Iranian presence in the country.

Legal/Policy Framework

The Austrian Constitution provides for freedom of religion.

The Government is secular. The Roman Catholic Church is the predominant religion in Austria and many Roman Catholic holidays are also government holidays. Nevertheless, the Austrian Muslim community has an almost unique legal status compared to the other European countries.

As mentioned above, the status of religious organizations is governed by the 1874 “Law on Recognition of Churches” which granted Muslims different rights, such as the right to manage independently their community affairs. Protection for all minorities and the right to have important posts in the Austrian administration without ethnic or religious discrimination was granted by the signature of the Saint-Germain agreement in 1919. This law was more recently enhanced by the 1998 “Law on the Status of Religious Confessional Communities” which establishes that religious organizations may be divided into three legal categories: officially recognized religious societies, religious confessional communities and associations. Each category of organization possesses distinct rights, privileges, and responsibilities.

Religious societies have "public corporation" status in Austria. This status permits religious societies to engage in a number of public or quasi-public activities such as the authority to participate in the mandatory church contributions program, to provide religious instruction in public schools, and to bring into the country religious workers to act as ministers, missionaries, or teachers. The government provides financial support for religious teachers at both public and private schools to religious societies as well as financial support to private schools run by any of the officially recognized religious societies.

The Austrian government recognizes 13 religious bodies as religious societies under the 1874 law: The Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant churches (Lutheran and Presbyterian, called "Augsburger" and "Helvetic" confessions), the Islamic Community, the Old Catholic Church, the Jewish Community, the Eastern Orthodox Church (Russian, Greek, Serbian, Romanian and Bulgarian), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the New Apostolic Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Methodist Church of Austria, the Buddhist Community, and the Coptic Orthodox Church.

In 1979, a Constitution of the Islamic Religious Body was proclaimed for "keeping and care of religion among the followers of Islam” and the Islamic Religious Body was recognised as a corporation under public law. Its President is elected according to the Constitution and is subject to public control.

Muslim Organizations

Muslim relations with state are managed by the Islamic Faith Community of Austria (IGGIÖ) created in 1912. The IGGIÖ is responsible for Islamic instruction and chaplaincy and organised the first Austrian Imam Conference in 2005.

The other associations have various dimensions and sometimes an organisation can manage various mosques. One of the most important organisations is the Islamic Centre in Vienna and the Islamic Religious Authority, which is the spiritual representative of Austrian Muslims.
“Muslim Youth Austria” is a youth organisation close to IGGIÖ. Two other important organizations are the Islamic Academy with educational aims and Al-Azhar Institution both in Vienna.

Several Turkish organizations are controlled by the Directorate for Religious Affairs but do not have any political activity. Other Turkish-Muslim groups are Austrian branches of the European organization Millî Görûş. The Islamic Federation is the umbrella organization that coordinates this group formed by an alliance of mosques.

**Islamic Education**

Islamic education has been taught in public schools since 1983. During Muslims holidays, Muslim pupils do not have to attend classes in public schools. The IGGIÖ has a teachers’ training college: the Islamic Religion Educational Academy, a private institution, which serves “a scientifically founded and practice-oriented vocational training on high school level in educational and social fields”. Islamic education is taught in the German language. There are two Islamic schools out of 1,552 private schools recognised by the Austrian government (Österreichische Schulstatistik 2005/2006).

**Bias and Discrimination**

Many Muslim aims have been legally reached, such as the right for Muslims not to work on Islamic holidays – however, some issues still remain unresolved. For instance the law that allows hospitals to take organs from a deceased person without the family's permission (if there is no documentation by the deceased forbidding it) is a problem for the majority of Austrian Muslims.

The Islamic headscarf is legally allowed in Austria but women still have problems to wear it in the labour market and in general, social acceptance of the headscarf has decreased. It seems that this development is not based on racist tendencies among business people, but on their concern about their clients' opinions.

The anti-racism institution ZARA was informed about 745 cases of racist abuses in Austria in 2010. The organisation emphasised that the number of verbal abuses against Muslims wearing head scarves was on the rise.

ZARA also highlighted in its last report the increasing number of anonymously posted racist messages on social networking sites.

Several incidents of discrimination against Muslim women wearing head scarves in schools were reported since June 2003. In October 2003, a teacher at a fashion institute removed the headscarf of a Muslim girl during class, claiming that it posed a danger to her safety. Court-sponsored mediation later determined that she could not be prohibited from wearing a headscarf. Another similar case concerns a high school in the state of Upper Austria, which prohibited students from covering their heads in school. A Muslim parent filed a complaint against discrimination with the local police authorities, who ordered that his daughter be allowed to wear a headscarf. The head of the Upper Austrian State School Council and the Ministry of Education confirmed that Muslim girls and women had the right, according to legal provisions on religious freedom, to wear head scarves.

With regard to these incidents, the third report on Austria published by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) in February 2005 considered that “Muslims are particularly vulnerable to harassment and discrimination when displaying visible signs of their faith. In this respect, it has been reported to ECRI that the climate around Muslim women wearing the headscarf has deteriorated. There have been cases of insults and harassment of these women in the streets.
and of harassment and discrimination in the employment. Teachers have also been reported in some cases to have forcibly removed the head scarves from schoolgirls.”

With regard to halal food, it should be remembered that on May 2004, the Parliament passed an animal protection law prohibiting the slaughtering of animals without anaesthesia. For ritual slaughtering, the law permits post-cut anaesthesia; in addition, the ritual slaughtering must be carried out by "specially trained" and experienced people and take place in the presence of a veterinarian.

In recent years there was an increasing number of anti-Muslim campaigns in the country, in particular since 1999 when the right-wing FPÖ started a strong anti foreigners campaign. "Home not Islam” and "The West in Christian hands" were two predominating slogans of the FPÖ.

In the year 2000, Vienna Muslims in collaboration with various political parties organised a campaign against these attacks. After this, Austrian Muslims increased their political role and the leaders of the big political parties made greater effort to have their vote.

At present, almost all parties have recognised the potential of Muslim voters and therefore campaign in Mosques and Muslim centres. In past elections, the conservative party had a Muslim candidate Sirvan Ekici, the right-wing FPÖ also listed a candidate born in Egypt and the Green Party too had Muslims candidates who, however, did not stress their religious belief.

Another kind of effort to promote a better understanding was an Iftar Banquet organised by the Communist Party during Ramadan 2002 in which the party leader highlighted the Muslim role in Austrian political life. The Austrian People's Party held three Iftar Banquets in 2003 for the Turkish Muslim community.

The issue of building mosques and the height of minarets have also been objects of public debates. In 2008, a law was passed in Carinthia effectively banning the construction of new mosques. The law passed with the votes of the Conservative People's Party and was considered by Jörg Haider, provincial governor, as a sign against the “advancement of Islam”. Haider and the FPÖ have often pronounced anti-Muslim comments such as "The increasing fundamentalism of radical Islam which is penetrating Europe, is threatening the consensus of values which is in danger of getting lost”.

Muslim Cemetery in Vienna
In Vienna cemeteries have long been seen as “interconfessional,” and in 2008 a 3.4-hectare Islamic cemetery was opened. According to the speaker for the cemetery, Ali Ibrahim, “There is no longer an excuse to be repatriated to the homeland for burial, as Islamic rites are respected in Austria as well. When one is buried in the same place in which one has lived, that is true integration.”

On the other hand, Helga Bock, an officer working for one of the largest funeral homes in Austria, highlights that “if a person wishes to be buried in one’s country of origin that does not necessarily mean that that person was not well integrated, and moreover, many such burials do not actually take place since the people in question might have already retired and moved back to their home countries”. The repatriation of corpses itself is usually facilitated by mosque associations, such as the Turkish Islamic Union for Social and Cultural Cooperation in Austria (ATIB), while the costs are paid by years of contributions to a special fund of such associations.

Intercultural dialogue has been promoted by liberal and left-wing parties on the one hand and Muslim organizations on the other hand in order to fight against Muslim discrimination, such as the City-Experts-Talk that was initiated in Vienna by the Greens and other different interreligious initiatives with representatives of Christian, Muslim and Jewish confessions.

Austria also contributed to interreligious dialogue at the European level for example with the organization of the meeting of the “Directors of the Islamic Centers and Imams in Europe” in Graz in 2003 where it was stated among others that “the Islamic message is built on moderation. From this results the clear refusal to any form of fanaticism, extremism and fatalism. Muslims must tell of their loyalty toward constitution and law also in its secular structure.”