Why is Austria coming after the Muslim Brotherhood?

In late May, the Austrian government published the addresses of more than 620 mosques and Muslim associations in Austria. According to the integration ministry, its purpose was "to fight political ideologies, not religion".

This was the latest in a series of moves the Austrian government has made to fight "political Islam", which it has identified as one of the main threats the country faces. In the process, the Austrian authorities have started targeting the real and imagined Muslim Brotherhood.

Despite various expert analyses claiming the organisation does not pose a terror threat, its long non-militant history, and conclusions by other Western governments that it does not merit a terror designation, the Austrian government perceives it as a national security threat.

But clamping down on or criminalising the Brotherhood would not make the country any safer. This became especially obvious when the secret service was not able to prevent the murderous attack on November 2, 2020 due to its preoccupation with an investigation into alleged members of the Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood was established in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, a school teacher in Egypt, as a religious revivalist movement, emphasising education and social services. Al-Banna advocated for establishing a more Islamically-oriented government and society and challenging colonial rule.

By the 1940s, the Brotherhood had more than a million members in Egypt. In the 1950s and 1960s the movement influenced the establishment of other Islamic movements and eventually political parties in Muslim-majority countries such as Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Syria, and others.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, after some members, namely Sayyid Qutb, had started preaching armed resistance against the brutal crackdown on dissent launched by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Muslim Brotherhood officially renounced violence. In the following decades, it engaged in the political process in Egypt, fielding candidates in parliamentary elections. In the Gulf, Brotherhood members were welcomed and lived freely, and in states like Bahrain and Kuwait even established branches.

In European countries, exiled members of the Brotherhood started engaging locally as well as on a pan-European level, but never set up an organisation formally controlled by the Brotherhood leadership in Egypt. Hence, some institutions are influenced by founding members, but have not become official affiliates.

The Arab Spring of 2011 opened up the political scene in a number of Arab countries, allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to compete in free elections. In Tunisia, the Brotherhood-affiliated Ennahdha Party, and in Egypt, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) became governing forces.

The toppling of authoritarian regimes and the calls for greater political freedom, which the Muslim Brotherhood was involved in, alarmed some Gulf monarchies, who started perceiving it as a threat and took action to stop the pro-democracy wave sweeping through the region.

The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia banned the Brotherhood on their territory and supported counter-revolutionary forces in Egypt and elsewhere, which led to the coup against democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi of the FJP. While running an anti-Brotherhood campaign in the Middle East, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, joined by Egypt under General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, also started lobbying Western countries to ban the organisation, which until then had not been considered a threat in the West.

They insisted that the Brotherhood is a terrorist organisation, despite the fact that terror groups like ISIS have publicly called the organisation and its leaders apostates.

No terror designation in the West

A year after the coup against the Brotherhood in Egypt, British Prime Minister David Cameron asked Sir John Jenkins, the British ambassador to Saudi Arabia, to lead a government review of the organisation to assess its beliefs, especially its stance towards extremism and violence. This report was intended to inform British government policy towards the Brotherhood.

Published in 2015, the report concluded that while the Brotherhood has pursued non-violent incremental political change, it might still be willing to use violence in pursuit of its goals. Jenkins' conclusions were harshly criticised by Britain's Foreign Affairs Select Committee, especially its failure to consider the coup against Morsi and the violent crackdown on the organisation. Despite significant pressures from the Saudi and Emirati governments, the report did not lead to any ban or terror designation of the Brotherhood in the UK.

Lobbying efforts against the organisation were also made in Washington, where in 2015 Senator Ted Cruz and Representative Mario Diaz-Balart introduced a bill to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation. The legislation did not pass in Congress, but the issue came up again during the Trump presidency.

According to Daniel Benjamin, former counterterrorism coordinator at the State Department, the administration looked into it in 2017 and 2018 but concluded that there was no basis for such a designation. CIA experts were also against it, arguing that such a designation "may fuel extremism", while civil rights organisations, like the American Civil Liberties Union, feared that such a move "could result in government attacks on American Muslim civil society".

Austria's crusade against 'political Islam'

After reviews of the Muslim Brotherhood were launched in the US and the UK in the mid-2010s, Austria also followed suit, with the Austrian Integration Fund and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Fight against Terrorism commissioning a report from Lorenzo Vidino, Director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, who is known for his conspiratorial views of Islamist organisations. It concluded that "Brotherhood promotes a narrative that, through its use of victimhood and justification of violence, creates a fertile environment for radicalisation."

A year after the coup the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) came to power in December 2017, four months after the report was released. Within months of taking office, they decided to expand an extremist symbol law to include foreign militant and non-militant organisations, including the Muslim Brotherhood. This effectively put the Brotherhood on the same threat level as groups that have been designated as terrorist, such as al-Qaeda, ISIS and the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

In November 2020, after a former ISIS sympathiser killed four people and injured 23 in Vienna, the Austrian police launched an operation codenamed "Luxor" against an alleged network of the Muslim Brotherhood, raiding homes, businesses and associations and arresting dozens of people.

The operation, which was unrelated to the militant attack, as it was the conclusion of a massive intelligence-gathering effort that lasted more than a year, did not result in any convictions, possibly because the prosecution is yet to find concrete evidence that crimes have been committed by the people targeted in the raids. Nevertheless, the Austrian Minister of Interior Karl Nehammer characterised it as a success.

In the aftermath of the attack and the operation, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz announced a package of measures to fight terrorism, including stripping suspects of their citizenship, closing mosques, and criminalising "political Islam". But an independent committee established by the government discovered that the Austrian secret service's preoccupation with "Operation Luxor" hindered them from focusing on the attacker and called plans to ban "political Islam" "superfluous". Human rights organisations like Amnesty International also criticised the move.

While the ÖVP's conservative ideology feeds much of its anti-Muslim drive, this intelligence operation may be linked to foreign lobbying. Investigative journalists have pointed out that even though "Operation Luxor" was supposed to be countering terror threats in Austria, the police was ordered to look for money rather than weapons and explosives.

And in the prosecution documents authorising the raids, there is a reference to acts that could "cause serious or prolonged disturbance of public life or serious damage to economic life … in Egypt, Gaza Strip and in Israel", not Austria. This leads to the question of why the Austrian security agencies were doing the bidding of their Egyptian and Israeli colleagues when they could have worked to counter actual terror threats on Austrian soil.

Marginalising Muslim civil society

The government's anti-Muslim policies, and particularly the drive against "political Islam" and the "Muslim Brotherhood" in Austria are troubling as they can have devastating consequences for the Muslim civil society and human rights groups currently challenging Islamophobia in Europe.

If the Austrian secret service continues targeting mainstream Muslim organisations, such as the legally recognised Muslim Religious Community in Austria, as advocates of "political Islam", this will inevitably lead to a growing divide between the Austrian state and the Muslim population. If activist and scholarly work on Islamophobia continues to be perceived as threatening or somehow conspiratorial – as Vidino has suggested it should be – this would marginalise further Muslim and anti-racist activists and academics.

Designating or de facto treating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation in a European country would create a precedent that would encourage similar official terror designations in the rest of the continent. Such a development would legitimise the brutal repression of political opposition in many Muslim-majority countries, including the killing and imprisonment of pro-democracy-minded individuals.

Please stop calling the UK government far right

Social media platforms such as TikTok have provided teenagers and young adults all over the world with a voice on political issues. Social media can be a useful outlet for political opinions, particularly if you are still too young to vote.

But, among young British users of social media, there is growing a popular "eat the rich" ideology which is slowly contributing to terms such as "right wing" and "far right" becoming interchangeable.

Reddit threads and TikTok feeds are booming with young people expressing their disapproval for the current Conservative government in the UK. In all fairness, it would be hard to expect anything different after the numerous mistakes this government has made over the COVID pandemic.

These included locking down too late, introducing schemes such as "Eat Out to Help" which essentially subsidised wealthy and middle-class people to go out to the sorts of restaurants young people mostly can't afford anyway, failing to source adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) for health workers and an utter failure to help or support students who found themselves unable to go to university for much of a year.

It is unsurprising that many young people, especially those who are part of Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), don't feel their needs are understood or represented by the ruling party. In their anger, many have resorted to the term "far right" to express their disapproval.

One of the users I stumbled across on TikTok not long ago stated in a video: "I really hate this thing that we British people do, where we act like America is so much worse than us, when we literally have a far-right government." The user was complaining about a pop star who had been critical of the US.

Unfortunately, lots of younger people in the UK seem to think like this, but I don't think many of them have much of an idea of what it is to live under a truly far-right regime.

It is true that, in 2019, many members of Britain First (which is a far-right British political organisation) switched to the Conservative Party after Boris Johnson cancelled an inquiry into Islamophobia within the party. The following year, just before the pandemic began, Tory MP Daniel Kawczynski was invited to speak at a nationalist conference in Rome, Italy, alongside the actually far-right Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán. But those incidents don't make the UK government far right. It is right that they should generate concern but, frankly, calling the UK government far right can sound offensive to those who have had to live their lives in countries which actually are dominated by far-right politics. People like myself.

I am 25 and I was born and raised in Poland. I left the country for good back in 2016. The political landscape of that time, especially the attitudes towards migrants and ever-growing anti-LGBTQ sentiments (something which affects me directly on a daily basis) were among my reasons to do so. By comparison, the UK is downright liberal and it makes me uncomfortable to think someone might even consider the current UK government as far right.

This in no way signals my approval for all the Conservative party's policies.

But in a country where same-sex marriage has been legal since 2014, where women have rights to terminate a pregnancy up until the 23rd week and do not have to resort to life-threatening, back-street abortions, where anti-discrimination laws have been in place for years – the government is not "far right". A month after Wales elected its first-ever gender-queer identifying mayor, Owen Hurcum, in May this year, Hungary passed a law banning all LGBTQ content from schools and children's TV. This speaks volumes.

Hungary and Poland are places where we can see exactly what far-right politics can lead to. Orbán doesn't waste time on discourse.

aljazeera

Afghans will not bow to...

From P1

"The absolute majority of the people of Afghanistan, they want a peaceful settlement, inclusive peaceful settlement," Abdullah said in an interview with Reuters. "Without it, what is the scenario? Continue fighting forever?

That's not a solution."

He added: "There was perhaps some optimism when negotiations started during the Trump administration that Taliban may be willing because they had showed those signs that had created an optimism."

This comes as Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan in an interview with Arabnews has said that his country will not take military action against the Taliban if they carry out a full military takeover of Afghanistan.

The Kabul Times

Afghans living in US demand for a democratic Afghanistan, press Pakistan...

From P1

The protestors carried banners, one of which read: "We want a Democratic Afghanistan".

The diaspora stressed that the people of Afghanistan want Pakistan to take practical and transparent steps to close the Taliban bases and end its support for the insurgent group in the wake of the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Afghans had among the banners with calls for Pakistan that read "Taliban has sanctuary in Pakistan."

"We are here to welcome our President Ashraf Ghani but our main purpose to gather here is to stop the proxy war in Afghanistan that Pakistan has been supporting and they are trying to destabilize the region," said Sharifullah Sharafat an Afghan American now living in Washington DC.

Khalida, a woman activist among the crowd, shared her vision of her homeland. "Our government is totally Islamic, but Pakistan wants to put their way of Islam in Afghanistan. We want our government to have a constitutional law," she said.

The Afghan diaspora is worried about Pakistan's failure to live up to its promises of containing the Taliban has contributed to the unending cycle of violence in Afghanistan.

"Pakistan needs to stop backing Taliban, they need to stop supporting terror. As a US citizen I also appeal to the Biden administration to end all financial aid to Pakistan," Mirwais, a demonstrator said while speaking to ANI.

Meanwhile, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani said that he warned Biden that Washington's move of withdrawing troops will have consequences for both sides, though he did not ask Biden to delay the withdrawal.

"President Biden's decision is a transformational decision that is going to have consequential results both for the people of Afghanistan and for the people of the United States in the region," President Ghani said during remarks in Washington.

Furthermore, the Afghan President announced that Afghan security forces have taken back a number of districts that had fallen to the Taliban in southern and northern Afghanistan. President Ghani called on the Taliban for a ceasefire and to return to the political process.

The Kabul Times

FACT SHEET: Continued U.S. support for...

From P2

Mobilizing diplomatic support for peace and stability

The United States continues to press for a just and durable peace in Afghanistan.

The United States recognizes that the best way to protect our interests and the interests of the Afghan people is through an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led negotiated settlement. Following intensive efforts by the State Department and a number of our key allies and partners, formal Afghanistan Peace Negotiations started last year for the first time since 2001

. We continue to urge all Afghan parties to engage urgently and meaningfully in peace talks aimed at achieving a just and durable settlement that includes protections for the rights of all Afghans, including women and minorities. The appointment of Mr. Jean Arnault as the United Nations Secretary General's personal representative on Afghanistan and regional issues reflects the critical role of the United Nations in bringing together Afghan sides and regional stakeholders to end Afghanistan's more than 40-year war.

Standing with Partners in Support of the Afghan people. Building on the broad international support for the Afghan people, the United States will encourage our partners to continue their security and development assistance, including through the Afghan National Army Trust Fund (ANATF), Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA), and the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). The United States will also work closely with other major donors to ensure continued development and humanitarian assistance to help the Afghan people.