

# Austria closes mosques and deports imams

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The right-wing conservative government in Austria is closing seven mosques and deporting up to 60 Turkish imams. The measure is a fundamental attack on the freedom of religion and expression and serves to stir up anti-Islamic and xenophobic sentiments. Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Austrian Peoples Party, ÖVP), his deputy Heinz-Christian Strache (Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ) as well as two other ministers announced the measures in person on Friday in Vienna at a press conference.

The government of Kurz's right-wing conservative ÖVP and the far-right FPÖ justified the closure of the mosques with violations of Austria's "Islam Act." They do not want parallel societies and radicalizing tendencies in Austria, Kurz explained.

The government's action shows that it has now completely adopted the far-right programme of the FPÖ. Their reasoning is reminiscent of the propaganda used to persecute Jews and other minorities 80 years ago, following the "Anschluss" (annexation) of Austria to Nazi Germany.

The basis of the measures is the so-called Islam Act. The Muslim clerics are accused of violating the ban on foreign financing. The government is focusing on the "Turkish-Islamic Union for Cultural and Social Cooperation in Austria" (ATIB), an umbrella organization that represents over 60 Islamic associations in Austria with more than 100,000 members. It belongs to the Turkish religious authority Diyanet and thus stands under the control of the Turkish government. The supposed reason for the charge against the association is that it does not work towards "integration" and builds "parallel societies."

The undemocratic nature of this accusation is shown by a comparison with the Catholic Church, which is dependent on a "foreign power" (the Vatican) to a much greater degree than is the case with ATIB with regard to Turkey. The same accusation could even be

levelled against Jewish communities that have relations with the Israeli government.

With the imams, their families are also to be taken into custody. In two cases, it is already clear that imams are to be expelled and five others have been denied a residence permit. The authorities are currently examining 60 of the 260 imams in Austria. They could lose their residence permits and must then leave the country together with their relatives, affecting a total of 150 people.

Already in April, the Austrian government had announced an examination of the mosques, after children in a Viennese mosque had re-enacted the Battle of Gallipoli from the First World War. In this battle, which saw 350,000 dead and wounded, the Turkish army repulsed an invasion attempt by the Entente Powers. It is therefore still commemorated in Turkey as the "Day of the Fallen."

The absurdity of the allegation against the mosque is illustrated by a glimpse at Australia and New Zealand, where the anniversary of the same battle is commemorated each year as ANZAC Day and even glorified in elementary schools. Both countries had suffered high losses as allies of the British invaders.

The Turkish government has sharply criticized the action against ATIB and spoke of a "crusade" against Muslims. The Muslim religious community IGGÖ also criticized the Austrian government and announced it was launching a legal action.

With the attacks on Muslims, the government's right-wing course has reached a new stage. The government is making it clear that the closure of the mosques and the expulsion of the imams was just the beginning. Chancellor Kurz has threatened that there will be "zero tolerance," and even mooted the dissolution of ATIB. Vice-Chancellor Strache (FPÖ) said, "We are just beginning."

Kurz and Strache have been ruling since last

December. The crackdown on Muslims is part of a systematic attack on refugees and migrants. During the election campaign last year, they demanded harsher immigration controls, the swift removal of rejected asylum seekers, and taking up the fight against radical Islam.

Kurz has recently announced that he will make the payment of social benefits dependent on language skills. “We have to create a system that has one goal in particular, to combat immigration into our social system,” he declared. Strache added, “If you immigrate to Austria, you cannot collect the full minimum income payment from the first day.”

In future, the full amount of the minimum income should only be paid to those who have obtained an Austrian school certificate or equivalent German language skills and can demonstrate they are participating in “integration services,” such as a course on so-called Austrian “values.” Kurz explained, “German becomes the key to access the full minimum income.” In this way, the attacks on migrants also serve to prepare social cuts for all.

The Austrian government, which will take over the presidency of the EU from July, is also endeavouring to further seal off the EU's external borders. If things go according to Kurz, the EU border agency Frontex should intervene more quickly and receive more staff and money.

The so-called Islam Act was introduced by Kurz in 2015, when he worked in the Ministry of the Interior, together with the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) coalition partner. It is therefore hardly surprising that not only FPÖ-affiliated right-wing circles welcome the measures. *Spiegel Online* hailed the attack on Muslims as “a step against the enemies of democracy and freedom.”

SPÖ federal manager Max Lercher even tried to claim the attacks on Muslims for the Social Democrats. The SPÖ had reported “incidents” in the mosques to the then ÖVP-led Interior Ministry in October 2017, he said. According to Lercher, the closure of the mosques was “the first smart measure of this government.”

The party founded by the former Pabloite Peter Pilz is also completely on the FPÖ line. It regards the measure as a first step, however, it does not tackle the “problem of radicalization at its root,” according to Alma Zadic, a National Council member of the Pilz list. Peter Pilz

had long demanded the dissolution of ATIB, but the then ÖVP Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Sobotka had not met this demand, complained Zadic.



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