

On July 7, the Austrian National Assembly passed an act to curb the terror-related activities in the country. The passed law allows the use of electronic ankle bracelets to monitor released terror offenders and imams are required to mandatorily register themselves with the government. The new law makes Austria the first European Union country to ban the 'Muslim Brotherhood', a transnational Sunni Islamist organization. The law is an abiding response from the government to the November 2020 terror attack, which saw a young man killing 04 people and injuring 23 by opening fire indiscriminately in Vienna's busy city center. The new legislation is a major step in a series of efforts made by the conservative government of Sebastian Kurz to restrain extremist Islamic ideology within the country. Currently, Austria has put in more effort than any other European government to address growing extremism in the region. The "Anti-Terrorism Act" was heavily criticized by several institutions when it was presented for the first time last year. The critics including Amnesty International argued that the draft law violates human rights standards on freedom of religion, expression, and association. However, the criticism had very little impact and the act got passed ultimately. Regardless of the criticism surrounding the new anti-terror law, it is certainly a pivotal point in Austria's and EU's integrated approach towards fighting Islamist extremism.

On November 2, 2020, a young sympathizer of the Islamic State (IS) armed with an AK-47 assault rifle, a pistol, and a machete shot down four people and injured 23 before being killed by the Austrian police. The assailant had Austrian and Macedonian citizenship and was jailed in April 2019 after trying to travel to Syria to join Islamic State (IS). He had traveled to Turkey in September 2018 and was deported to Austria and was arrested as a "foreign fighter" in January 2019. He was recently released from jail under new leniency rules for young adults. Investigations following the November 2020 attacks also suggest that the shooting could have been prevented if threats exhibited by illustrious terrorist sympathizers were taken a lot more seriously. The authorities were informed of the assailant's attempt to buy ammunition in Slovakia in July 2020 but failed to monitor his activities. A need for a review of the country's approach to preventing terrorist activity became indispensable. The Austrian anti-terrorists squads raided 60 locations across the country in the aftermath of the attack. The locations were primarily associated with groups like Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood. 30 people got arrested and 20 million euros were seized in cash during the raids. Austria has one of the highest per-capita rates of ISIS militancy within Europe; around 150 people are recognized to have joined ISIS in either Syria or Iraq before returning to the country in recent years. The recent event in Vienna invigorates the Austrian government to adopt a dynamic approach to fight terrorism, and the same has noticeably been observed in this law. By implementing measures that will keep extremists on a tight leash, Sebastian Kurz is seeking to limit radicalization and forestall

terrorist attacks, but in the process can alienate masses of mainstream Muslims living in the European nations.



The new anti-terror law is part of a bigger conglomeration proposed by Kurz's government to fight off "political Islam", which it has identified as one of the biggest threats to the country. The government's anti-terrorism package includes several acts that have been amended recently. The Symbol Act, originally issued in 2014, was later amended to include symbols of various organizations which the government perceived as "Extremist groups". The Symbol act includes the representation, wearing, dissemination, and use of the right-wing extremist identitarian symbols to be completely banned. Since the last amendment, Muslim brotherhood has been the most debatable inclusion in the list of extremist organizations. This places the Brotherhood on a similar threat level designated as terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party. The package also allows a month of imprisonment and a €4,000 fine for individuals who promulgate the brotherhood's literature or broadcast its slogans. The government argues that the goals of these groups are against the fundamental values of the Republic of Austria and the principle of social plurality. On the other hand, the sympathizers of the Muslim brotherhood have argued that the group doesn't pose a terror threat and its ban can have devastating consequences for the Muslim civil society in the country. Nearly a Century-old group, The

Muslim Brotherhood was founded by an Egyptian schoolteacher Hasan al-Banna in 1928.

The primary founding principles revolved around the establishment of an Islamic-centered government and society. Since their inception, they have remained a voice of opposition against monarchies, ultra-nationalists, and military dictatorships in the Arab world. Hence making them a threat to monarchy-ruled countries in the Middle east. Also, The Citizenship Act has been amended to allow people convicted of “terrorism” to be deprived of their citizenship, provided they do not become stateless as a result. Under the amendments made in the Driving license Act, the driver’s license can be withdrawn if the individual gets involved in any crimes such as extortionate kidnapping or serious robbery. Tighten grip over the Muslim institutes and Imams is also a highlight of this new package. The foreign funding ban on mosques (Islam Law 2015) is being strengthened. In the coming days, mosque establishments and the associations behind the mosques will be legally obliged to submit all the monetary documents. Here too, non-compliance will attract harsh sanctions. A new aggravation factor for religiously intended extremist motives is additionally being introduced. This should make it possible to take effective action against new sorts of ideology. Changes within the jurisdiction of Islam will produce a brand new legal basis for closing radical mosques more than ever before. Mosques, as well as imams, must be listed in the new directory. This directory will embody foreign imams and allows a clear summary of that imam with transparency. The government has also created legal bases to improve the data and information exchange between the cultural office and security authorities.



Image source: Anadolu Agency

Muslims in Austria are facing daily hatred after the release of a digital map identifying the locations of more than 600 mosques and associations on May 27 by the government, racist attacks on Muslim's increased, especially attacks against mosques which have become a prime target of racist groups. Vienna and other various cities witnessed anti-Muslim signs being hanged at different locations. Such events can not only have a negative impact on the psychology of resident Muslims but also can act as a catalyst in the radicalization of youth in the country and eventually across the EU. As various international experts are claiming that Muslim organizations do not pose threat. With its long non-militant history, the Austrian government still considers it a national security threat. But cutting down or criminalizing the Brotherhood by any means will not make the nation any safer, especially when the police were not able to prevent the attack on November 2, 2020, as they were already preoccupied with the investigation of alleged members of the Brotherhood. The government's policies, which are labeled as anti-Muslim and particularly are targeted against "political Islam" and the "Muslim Brotherhood" in Austria are troubling as they will have catastrophic consequences for the civil society and human rights groups. If the secret service agencies in Austria continue targeting mainstream Muslim organizations, as the advocates of "political Islam", then chances are the situation will undeniably lead to a growing fallout among the Austrian state and the Muslim population.

Considering religion as a foundation for drafting any law in a country where 7% of the population practices Islamism can lead to prejudice towards a specific section of society. The government is trying to have insight into the finances of the Muslim communities as well as the other communities i.e. The religious community in Austria in the future has to disclose their annual register of assets. The imam directory is mandatorily required to be submitted and the preachers who are coming from abroad must also be included in the directory. The state wants to know exactly who is preaching where and to whom. New regulations also enable the Office of Culture to dissolve mosques more easily than ever. The use of Electronic surveillance ankles to monitor the released convicts is heavily criticized by Human rights activist groups. The use of surveillance will directly allow the government to not only keep a direct eye on the individual but also require a high number of resources to keep the surveillance effective and result-oriented. The future of the European Union seems to be clouded by the presence of rising extremism in the continent.

However, Austria's model will be a good reference point for other countries to draft laws against terrorism. On the other hand, the harsh provisions of the law can act as a reason for radicalization and an uprising of distrust against the authorities. Austria has also put a strong foot to tackle the issue of migration, authorities have already apprehended 15,768 migrants at the Austrian border this year, compared to 21,700 in the whole of 2020. As Austria is one of the chief destinations for migrants within the EU and the Hungarian border is now a hot spot for irregular migration and human trafficking. On July 24, Interior Minister Karl Nehammer and Defense Minister Klaudia announced that 400 troops will be sent to the border with Hungary to improve border security. The number of migrants crossing into Austria from Hungary has increased recently with the majority of the migrants detained at the Hungarian-Austrian border alone. And with the latest US troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan, the numbers of irregular migration will certainly increase in the EU and the government will face a challenge to control the influx of such migrants. Such geopolitical events have in the past been used by extremist groups to infiltrate other targeted nations and can be used to enter Austria as well.



Image source: WSJ

Extremism usually originates from radicalization processes which can make the person susceptible to an extremist ideology, leading them to use violence as a means for reaching their goals and objectives. Youth radicalization should not be disconnected from its social and political context and must be investigated within the broader scope of sociology of conflict and violence studies. Radicalization should not be analyzed as a form of pre-terrorism that could be disrupted before the shift to violence by intensive community surveillance. It should not be analyzed as a linear process but as a relational dynamic. Dynamics of escalation or de-escalation should be taken into account when analyzing radicalization. The government should also review their de-radicalization program to check measures for limiting open radicalization in a way that doesn't interfere much with privacy, monitoring social media, and strict checks on red spots i.e. those religious places/ or places (in general) that are pointed out to be the center of radicalization, improved policing strategies, etc.

Over the years, Austria has taken a large number of initiatives and has set various actions to counter extremism. To a broad understanding of the prevention of violent extremism and de-radicalization and cooperative interaction between the civil society players, official

institutions, security authorities, and the federal provinces, we have arrived at an innovative and future-oriented approach.

The countries in the European Union must congregate to tackle the situation as the situation will affect them in the long run. This can be done by taking the help of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Amnesty, and others in the international community. One of the main objectives of prevention of violence and de-radicalization is to develop a responsible way of dealing with extremist ideologies and to implement respective methods which are based on practical knowledge and experience. The Muslim community must be respected by locals and also be included in society with care and not abuse human rights. The interaction between the government and the Muslim community needs to be strengthened. Humanitarian service groups must help to overcome this gap. The government needs to help by planning and implementing laws and rules which shall not violate basic human rights. The government needs to act swiftly and strongly towards the investigation of alleged crimes and to find out the large-scale impact of these multinationals working in the region.

However, only time will tell if Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's anti-terror gambit will pay off.

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