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Counter-terrorism

Chancellor Nehammer visits Cairo to learn from Egypt's counter-terror expertise

- In late April, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer [met with Abdel Fatah al-Sisi](#), President of Egypt, at the Al Ittihadiyah Presidential Palace in Cairo to discuss potential collaboration in various matters such as transportation, renewable energy, green hydrogen, and manufacturing.
- They sought to enhance bilateral trade and increase Austrian investment in Egypt. The discussions also included the Sudanese crisis, the Libyan crisis, the Palestinian cause, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and 'illegal immigration'. The visit resulted in the signing of agreements in the transportation, irrigation, and agriculture sectors.
- During the meeting, President Sisi briefed Chancellor Nehammer on Egypt's efforts in combating terrorism and extremism - which stand out as being especially brutal and repressive, in a country with an [estimated 65,000 political prisoners](#).
- The two leaders shared their experiences in dealing with terrorism and political Islam, with Chancellor Nehammer expressing interest in learning from Egypt's experience.
- Given the fact that Egyptian influence has been highlighted in Operation Luxor from the beginning, Nehammer's remarks should be understood as a clear message to Muslims in Austria, that this government is not aiming to change its course around Muslims and the

debate on 'political Islam' in Austria, and is publicly acknowledging taking inspiration from tyrannical dictator states.

State security agencies undergoing changes, expanding anti-'extremism' activity

- The Austrian government is [implementing a reform](#) of its state security agencies. This includes renaming the state Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (BVT) to state offices for state protection and the fight against extremism, and expanding its focus on pre-crime 'counter-extremism' activity.

These offices will now be responsible for the prevention of attacks against the constitution, while the intelligence part will be handled by the central state protection headquarters in Vienna. The uniformed police officers in the regions and districts will serve as "state protection sensors," providing the central authorities with information about potential extremist threats.

- One of the primary goals of the reform is to expand prevention work against extremism, which will involve officers visiting schools and associations to give talks and presentations.

The Austrian interior minister, Gerhard Karner, emphasised the need for state protection officers to serve as "eyes and ears" for the authorities and to provide them with information quickly, and authorities plan to train 80 "prevention officers" this year, while regular training will be provided to officers to help them recognise 'extremist' symbols and ideologies.

Counter-terrorism

High-ranking BVT agents on trial for hiding Syrian General and double agent accused of torture in Austria

- The new state security agencies will also have their own departments for internet crime, which is on the rise in Austria, as well as for the fight against extremism on the internet. The authorities plan to increase staffing levels to accommodate these new responsibilities.

The head of the state protection agency, Omar Hajjawi-Pirchner, has also [called for expanded powers to monitor communication](#) between suspected extremists via encrypted messaging apps.

The government is considering this request, but the junior coalition partner, the Greens, has expressed opposition to any "mass surveillance" measures.

- This new reform has made the priorities of the Austrian government regarding CVE quite clear, and in line with its fellow European partners.

With this new reform the government aims to expand its surveillance apparatus of communities, instead of focusing on tangible and specific threats, thereby using pre-crime methods to monitor, control, and criminalise already-marginalised communities.

- From April 14, 2023, four former high-ranking officials of Austria's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (BVT) and one senior representative of the Federal Office for Foreigners and Asylum (BFA) [will stand trial](#) for abuse of office at the Vienna Regional Court.

They are accused of having provided asylum in Austria to a Syrian double agent and "torture general", Khaled al-Halabi, at the behest of Israeli foreign intelligence service Mossad despite the lack of legal requirements.

- The suspects are alleged to have been involved in the "White Milk" operation, which sought to provide safe haven for al-Halabi in Austria.

Al-Halabi was said to have been involved in the torture of opponents of the Syrian regime in Raqqa, [whilst also serving as a double agent for Mossad](#).

- Martin W., the former head of a BVT department, ex-BVT espionage chief Bernhard P., and two chief inspectors were indicted by the Economic and Corruption Prosecution Office (WKStA) for providing asylum to the general.

The suspects have denied the allegations. The accused reportedly knew that the general had been involved in torture but proceeded to bring him to Austria regardless.

The charges include the accused having deliberately misled the authorities in order to obtain asylum for the general. The accused's reportage obligations regarding the actual whereabouts and identity of the Syrian general were not fulfilled.

- The proceedings also aim to determine whether the accused have harmed the Republic of Austria's right to criminal prosecution of the general.

Islamophobia

Documentation Centre on Political Islam publishes new report on German Muslim groups

- The Austrian Fund for the Documentation of Religiously Motivated Political Extremism (*Dokumentationsstelle Politischer Islam*; Documentation Center for Political Islam) has [released its first publication of 2023](#), which focuses on so-called Islamist activities on social media.
- The report describes the activities of three groups - "Generation Islam," "Reality Islam," and "Muslim Interaktiv" - and attempts to paint these groups as extremist and responsible for the radicalisation of Muslim youth, especially online.
- While the Centre is funded by the Austrian government, it is significant to note that all three groups are Germany-based, and have been very vocally and boldly condemning the Islamophobic policies of the Austrian state, while also monitoring the actions of the Centre and its affiliated 'academics'.
- The publication of this report fits into the international trend whereby Muslim activism and opposition to state-led Islamophobia are being addressed as extremist and subversive behaviour worthy of state punishment.

Far-right hold anti-Islam rallies headed by former Al-Qaeda propagandist-turned-informant

- In March 2023, reports emerged that Irfan Peci, a former Al-Qaeda propagandist and later informant for the German

intelligence services, had joined forces with the far-right Identitarian Movement in Austria to hold [anti-Islam rallies planned to be executed in April 2023](#).

- Peci, who had previously enjoyed media attention for his supposed expertise on terrorism and deradicalisation, was exposed for making racist comments in private messages and has since become an anti-Muslim agitator while positioning himself as an 'ex-Islamist'.

Along with Martin Sellner, a prominent figure in the Identitarian Movement, Peci announced plans to hold demonstrations against "Islamisation and population replacement" in Vienna, Linz, and Graz, with the aim of putting pressure on the government to bring the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) into power and introduce laws banning "political Islam."

- The two men's previous activities include provoking and confronting opponents of their views, often featuring xenophobic or Islamophobic rhetoric. Peci has previously been involved in attempts to link Green Party politician Alma Zadić to 'radical Islam', and has made appearances at FPÖ events and anti-COVID lockdown demonstrations.

Muslim Youth of Austria face Islamophobic attacks online after Ramadan Iftar event

- The Muslimische Jugend Österreich (MJÖ) has [reported numerous instances of hate comments on social media platforms](#) such as Facebook and Instagram after an event for breaking the fast in the state of Carinthia.
- The MJÖ has handed over the hate comments to the anti-racism organisations Zara and the *Dokustelle* and is discussing further steps.