

Die verborgene Moschee: zur Sichtbarkeit muslimischer Gebetsräume in Wien.

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In 2017, the Islamic Religious Community in Austria (*Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich*, IGGiÖ) counted around 400 mosques and prayer rooms¹ serving the approximately 700,000 Muslims who live in Austria.² Making up more than eight per cent of the total population of Austria, the Islamic religious community represents the second largest religious tradition—or largest non-Christian minority—in Austria. The largest concentration of Muslims, estimated at fourteen per cent in 2016, live in the capital city of Vienna (Goujon, Jurasszovich, and Potančoková 2017: 8). In this context it is often pointed out that unlike many other countries in Europe, Austria has a long-standing tradition of integration with Islam. As early as 1912, Muslims began to enjoy the same rights as Christians and Jews when the Austro-Hungarian empire officially recognised Islam, reflecting the fact that around 600,000 Muslims lived in its territory. In the context of migration from Muslim-majority countries that has more recently led to an increase in the Muslim population in Austria, a new Islam Law was passed by the Austrian

1 The figure is frequently mentioned in the media and was confirmed by the IGGiÖ when I contacted them on February 23, 2018, although it is not stated on their website; for reasons of data protection, only about sixty mosques are listed on the IGGiÖ webpages; <http://www.derislam.at/iggo/?c=content&cssid=Gebetsräumen-keiten&navid=260&par=300> (accessed: February 15, 2018).

2 Since the national census of 2001, no data on religious affiliation may be collected in censuses in Austria. Because there is no state-registered data on religious communities, there are only estimates of the representation of some religions, such as Islam in Austria. It is important to note that estimates of the study “Religious Denominations in Vienna & Austria,” for instance, also consider the most recent migration movements and subsequent asylum applications when calculating the religious composition of the population of Austria and Vienna in 2016 (Goujon, Jurasszovich, and Potančoková 2017: 16).

parliament in February 2015.³ This so-called Integration Act (*Integrationsgesetz*) intends to promote “Islam with a European character” (*Islam europäischer Prägung*).⁴

Closely associated with the growing presence of Muslims in Austria is the discussion of the Islamisation of Austrian public space, with special reference to the issue of mosques as principal symbols of Islam. Given the paucity of studies on Islamic religious buildings in Austria and Vienna, Josef Peter Schuller’s 2013 study *Die verborgene Moschee: Zur Sichtbarkeit muslimischer Gebetsräume in Wien* (The Hidden Mosque: On the Visibility of Muslim Prayer Rooms in Vienna) is a particularly valuable reference. Written before the new law came into effect, his carefully phrased title refers precisely to the religious *invisibility* of Islam within the Viennese urban space. This is evidenced by the fact that there is only one purpose-built mosque (i.e., with a minaret) in the city, the Vienna Islamic Centre (*Islamisches Zentrum Wien*), located at the periphery of Vienna in the twenty-first district (built in 1979). Thirty years after the construction of the Vienna Islamic Centre, a second Austrian mosque was built in 2009, this time in Bad Vöslau in Lower Austria (with two minarets). Elsewhere in the country, there are also two prayer rooms to which short minarets were later attached: in Telfs (Tyrol) and in Saalfelden (Salzburg).

Mosques serve as sacred spaces for Muslims to convene, pray, and worship. They also play a central part in Muslim communal life. As ‘community centres,’ many assume social and cultural roles and offer a variety of services, such as religious education and family counselling. They thus act as institutional and symbolic representations of Muslim life and, by openly and publicly marking Islam’s urban visibility, reflect the evolution of Islam from the private to the public sphere. As such, these religious buildings can also represent the artistic and architectural identity of an Islamic community. However, since there are only two purpose-built mosques in Austria, Schuller, an architect with a background in religious studies, has confined his study (completed within the framework of the project “Cartography of the Religions of Vienna” of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Vienna) to the ‘hidden mosque.’ As indicated by the subtitle, this euphemism alludes to the Islamic prayer room (Arabic *al-muṣallā*), often referred to as a ‘backyard’ mosque (*Hinterhofmoschee*). Located in former stores and flats, basements, industrial buildings, warehouses, or storerooms, they serve as national

3 https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Islamgesetz/Islam_Law.pdf (accessed: February 15, 2018).

4 https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Integrationsgesetz/20171006_IntG_Gesetzestext_Uebersetzung_final.pdf (accessed: February 15, 2018).

(linked to the countries of origin), ethnic (associated with ethno-linguistic specificity), and transnational (religious and political) markers. They are often temporary for various reasons. The small number of public mosques and the much larger number of ‘backyard’ mosques indicates that the practise of the Islamic faith in Austria is often forced into the (semi-)private sphere. This situation has direct bearing on both the Viennese and Muslim citizens’ perceptions of the mosque. As Schuller points out, such religious buildings are an important indicator of the extent to which a religious group is recognised by, and integrated into, the host society.

Schuller’s analysis of the subject matter reflects a generally sympathetic understanding of the significance of the ‘mosque’ for Muslims in Austria. In the first chapter, he briefly sketches his methodology and the aim of the research project: to survey the presence of Muslim prayer rooms in the Viennese public space. Addresses of the prayer spaces were collected on the basis of internet research and contacts with selected institutions (the city of Vienna, the IGGiÖ, and the Islamic Federation in Vienna). The sites were then visited and documented with photographs but none of the prayer spaces were contacted. The surveyed sites were categorised according to type of construction (free-standing buildings, street-facing, basement or backyard locations, settings in remote industrial zones, or facilities that could only be accessed through premises that served other purposes), visibility in public space, ‘ethnicity’ or ‘nationality’ of the space, and designation. Schuller cautions that this study inevitably only reflects the situation at a given time, representing “a first step” that necessitates a follow-up during which all of the sites will also be contacted (p. 159).

The second chapter summarises the histories of immigration in Austria and of Islam in Austria. The third chapter offers an overview of the major Muslim organisations, consisting of Turkish associations and federations—the Turkish-Islamic Union for Cultural and Social Cooperation (ATIB), the Islamic Federation in Vienna (IFW), the Union of Islamic Cultural Centres in Austria (UIKZ), diverse nationalist groups, and the ‘Nurculuk’ Movement—Bosnian-Islamic associations, the Union of Albanian Muslims in Austria, Shiite associations, Alevite umbrella organisations—the Federation of Alevite Communities in Austria (AABF) and the Islamic Alevite Community of Faith in Austria (IAGÖ)—other groups without an umbrella organisation, and the IGGiÖ.

The fourth chapter gives a brief insight into the architecture and urban planning of mosques in Muslim countries and of mosques and prayer spaces in Austria, followed by a discussion concerning religion and public space in Austria as a mirror of Austrian society. The general conflict, as Schuller points out, involves Muslim visibility in Austrian public space, with debates

about the mosque and the headscarf being the most visible and widespread indicators of the more general climate around Islam and attitudes towards Muslims in Austria. However, he adds that visibility and the concomitant growing public consciousness of the debates on Islam are a basic prerequisite for a more mature dialogue, in which a sensitive approach to the desires and fears of the 'other' will be required (pp. 76-77). This is followed by a description of the principles governing the construction of buildings in the city of Vienna, the Viennese Architecture Declaration of 2005, the Viennese Urban Development Plan (STEP 05) and its Progress Report of 2010, as well as the Diversity Monitoring of the Department for Integration and Diversity (MA 17) of the city of Vienna.

The fifth chapter moves on to the debate over mosque-building as a consequence of the visibility of Islam within urban spaces, framed in terms of Austrian public policy. These, Schuller argues, should be seen in the context of the fact that the constitutional state guarantees freedom of religion as a universal human right. In Austria, the Basic State Law (*Staatsgrundgesetz*) and the St. Germain Treaty (*Staatsvertrag von St. Germain*) contain the basis for the constitutional guarantees of the freedom of religion, which is also established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and protected by the European Human Rights Convention and the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These legal frameworks underscore the state's religious and ideological neutrality, prohibiting it from interfering in the internal affairs of a religious community, both with respect to its doctrinal opinions and the practical aspects of religious practice.

Practical implementations, such as mosque-building, however, depend on regulations at the state level (i.e., zoning plans, building regulations) or at the municipal level (i.e., building procedures). Spatial development plans and zoning plans serve to ensure that the urban area is structured and sustainably designed and developed. Schuller concludes that, so long as all regulations are fulfilled, no arguments can be brought against mosque-building. There are various ancillary laws to be observed, such as, for instance, requirements that the new building and its use must not result in noise, excessive traffic, pollution, etc. However, these requirements apply to all kinds of buildings, not just mosques. If all building regulations are complied with, including ancillary building laws and technical regulations, then a mosque-building project can hardly be affected by building regulations. On the basis of Austrian fundamental rights, the state may not interfere with the design of religiously-used buildings, provided that these are necessary for religious worship. Hence, in theory, mosque constructions are difficult to curtail. However, local and national mass media also play an important role in the resistance to mosque-building in Austria.

Taking ‘hidden’ and temporary ‘mosques’ as a focal point, the sixth chapter presents the actual survey. Aside from the only purpose-built mosque in Vienna, the above-mentioned Vienna Islamic Centre built in 1979, Schuller identified, visited, documented, and photographed 190 ‘mosques’ in Vienna (that is prayer spaces that are listed on the internet or by the city of Vienna, the IGGiÖ, and the IFW). This was done with the aim of documenting the location of the prayer sites, how they reveal themselves from the outside, and their visibility within the urban space. It should be noted that, while it is fairly easy to document the number of purpose-built mosques, the recording of prayer spaces is inevitably more complex and, thus, often not very precise. Their exact number is unknown and presumably much higher, since many of these spaces do not appear on lists, are not registered, and/or are not visible from the outside. Schuller then categorises the sites according to: name, symbol, or name and symbol, to analyse their visibility; whether they belong to one of five different nationalities, are multi-national, inter-confessional, or have no clear attribution, underscoring the heterogeneous identities of Islamic cultures in Vienna; and whether the term ‘mosque’ was added to the designation in Arabic (*masğid*), in Turkish (*camii*), or in German (*Moschee*). This leaves one to wonder whether the average Viennese citizen could discern the sites as Muslim places of worship on the basis of their exterior (street view) and their names and/or symbols. As Schuller’s useful photographic documentation shows, this is sometimes not obvious, once again underscoring the largely invisible aspect of Muslim prayer spaces.

The seventh and final chapter considers the medium-term prospects for mosque-building in Vienna. Two issues are associated with the multifaceted and complex subject of ‘mosque-building’, as well as the related debate on integration (*Integrationsdebatte*): First, the connection between religion and man-made environment, as well as the question of their visibility in public space; and second, the national, ethnic and religious identity of the Muslim population itself. According to Schuller, both issues are reflected in the present survey, which shows that ‘mosques’ in Vienna “are for the most part visually underrepresented, inappropriately accommodated and designed in a repellent manner” (p. 163).⁵ Indirectly, city planning and building laws are jointly responsible for the existence of these *Hinterhofmoscheen*. It would contribute to the integration of the Muslim population into Viennese and Austrian society if the identity-creating function of representative religious buildings were to be recognised and if more mosques could be built (p. 167). Schuller, however, sees in Viennese building laws a form of “passive

5 “So sind einerseits Moscheen in Wien größtenteils visuell unterrepräsentiert, baulich unangemessen untergebracht und abweisend gestaltet [...]”

resistance.” Officially, public authorities (half-heartedly) profess to cultural and religious pluralism in Austria but the building regulations they enact make it possible to slow down or even reject mosque-building projects (p. 172).

Since mosques are places whose inner workings are largely unknown to the non-Muslim population, there have been initiatives to open them up and make them more transparent, such as the ‘Day of Open Mosques’ (*Tag der offenen Moscheen*). This was organised as early as April 8, 2000, by the Initiative of Muslim Austrians (*Initiative muslimischer Österreicher*), five years earlier than the ‘Long Night of Churches’ (*Lange Nacht der Kirchen*) in 2005.

Schuller’s study makes the heterogeneity of Islamic cultures visible, thus contributing to a more multifaceted and complex debate about Islam in the West. In order to achieve greater acceptance in Austrian society, and to reduce fears of and prejudices against the ‘other,’ Schuller advocates the placing of the cultural aspect of religion increasingly to the fore. Such an approach requires more commitment on the part of the Muslim population, for example during religious events but also through clear statements and differentiation from some of its formidable contemporary manifestations (including, obviously, the emergence of transnational Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism) (p. 174). Schuller concludes by calling upon all actors to no longer regard diversity and religious plurality as a threat but, rather, to see it as a resource that can enrich one’s own life (p. 175).

A few marginal notes may be added here. References to some important publications on mosques in Austria, such as Ernst Furlinger’s contemporary research project on the mosque-building conflict in Bad Vöslau and his publications focusing on the associated pan-Austrian debate (Furlinger 2010), are missing. To show that there are analogous developments in other Western European countries, as Schuller himself notes (p. 159), it would have been helpful to place the study within an international context.⁶ However, this might be a task for the follow-up study. Overall, in compiling this material, Schuller’s work makes a welcome contribution to the study of contemporary ‘mosques,’ and more specifically prayer rooms, in Vienna and Austria, as well as to the dynamics of Islam in Austria. It thereby draws attention to another significant variable in the study of the phenomenon, namely the significant role that mosque-building could play in the integration process. This would manifest both physically and spatially the fact that Austrian Islam is

⁶ See, for instance, Erkoçu and Buğdacı 2009; Maussen 2009; Avcioğlu 2008; Zemke 2008; Hüttermann 2006; Schmitt 2003; Kraft 2002; Holod and Khan 1997; Eade 1996; Metcalf 1996; Serageldin and Steele 1996.

being treated as a religious tradition with equal rights, a notion which could indeed help promote an “Islam with a European character” in Austria.

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