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ABSTRACT

This article uses the Kurdish diaspora in Austria to describe its diversity in Europe. Despite many attempts by different political actors of the Kurdish national movement to organize and present a common diaspora, the Kurdish diaspora in Europe reflects the entire diversity and thus also the political divisions of Kurdistan. The example of Austria does not necessarily stand for all European states, as we sometimes have very different migration histories in different European states. This means that the Kurdish communities are not only very different in size but are also made up of very different groups. The Kurdish diaspora in Austria is characterized by great political, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. This reflects almost the entire diversity of the region of origin. The diversity of the Kurdish diaspora described here is therefore not necessarily transferable to all other Kurdish communities in Europe, but some of the characteristics of the Kurdish diaspora can be identified.

This article begins with a historical overview of the various Kurdish migrant groups and will then discuss the diversity of the Kurdish diaspora in Austria as part of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. It is based on long-term participant observation and a series of conversations and formal interviews conducted with activists and members of the Kurdish communities in Austria over the last 20 years. The author did not conduct this research exclusively for this article, but for sev-

eral publications on this topic, mainly in German. Where the text refers to individual statements by specific interviewees, these are cited.

KEYWORDS: Austria, Diaspora, politics, language, religion.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article aborde la diaspora kurde en Autriche pour illustrer la diversité de cette communauté en Europe. Malgré de nombreuses tentatives de différents acteurs politiques du mouvement national kurde pour organiser et représenter une diaspora unie, la diaspora kurde en Europe reflète toute la diversité - et par conséquent les divisions politiques - du Kurdistan. L'exemple de l'Autriche ne représente pas nécessairement tous les États européens, car chaque pays peut présenter des parcours migratoires très différents. Ainsi, les communautés kurdes diffèrent non seulement en taille, mais aussi dans leur composition. La diaspora kurde en Autriche se distingue par une grande diversité politique, culturelle, religieuse et linguistique, qui reflète presque toute la diversité de sa région d'origine. La diversité de la diaspora kurde décrite ici n'est donc pas nécessairement transférable à d'autres communautés kurdes en Europe, bien que certaines de ses caractéristiques puissent être identifiées ailleurs. Cet article commence par un aperçu historique des différents groupes migrants kurdes et aborde ensuite la diversité de la diaspora kurde en Autriche en tant que partie intégrante de la diaspora kurde en Europe. Il repose sur des observations participantes menées sur le long terme et une série d'entretiens formels et informels réalisés avec des activistes et des membres des communautés kurdes d'Autriche au cours des vingt dernières années. L'auteur n'a pas mené cette recherche exclusivement pour cet article, mais dans le cadre de plusieurs publications sur le sujet, rédigées principalement en allemand. Lorsqu'il est fait référence à des déclarations individuelles de certains interviewés, celles-ci sont citées.

MOTS CLÉS : Autriche, diaspora, politique, langue, religion.

From Iraq to Austria: The first Kurdish-Austrian university student

As a small and economically backward residual state, the Austria of the First Republic was not a destination for Kurdish migrants. Even in the years after 1945, Austria was not initially a migration destination for Kurds. After the Second World War, early Kurdish exiles found refuge mainly in the Soviet Union and France, where colonial connections existed and where there was also a certain interest in Kurdish language and culture.

However, when the first short-lived Kurdish student association in Europe was founded in 1949, involving students from various parts of Kurdistan who were studying in different European countries, we find a student from Austria, the Iraqi Kurd Abdulla Qadir, who had co-founded one of the earliest Islamic organizations in Austria as the leader of Jamiat al-Islam (Marouf 2002, 54). The Jamiat al-Islam was a pan-Islamic organization of Central Asian origin that only existed for a short time. It was based in the US occupation zone in Salzburg and mainly looked after stranded Muslim members of Nazi auxiliary troops from the Soviet Union and South-East Europe (Krammel / Abdelkarim 2008, 53f). It can be assumed that Qadir had not studied in Vienna but in Salzburg, which could also explain the fact that none of the Kurdish students who came to Vienna somewhat later could remember Abdulla Qadir and that this - possibly first - Kurdish student in Austria was largely forgotten.

The first Kurds came to Vienna in the 1950s as students from Iraq. The first of these students known to us today, who was to become a focal point for new Kurds over time, was Wiriya Rawenduzy. Born in 1929, he came to Vienna on August 11, 1953 to study medicine, which he had begun in Baghdad. Rawenduzy thus came to Austria during the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq and from here followed the fall of the monarchy in 1958, the Kurdish uprisings of the 1970s and 1980s. Over time, Rawenduzy became an important contact point for various Kurdish intellectuals and politicians from Iraq.

Rawenduzy was not a politician himself, but had been politically active as a student and had repeatedly come into conflict with the Iraqi authorities and the British, who still had a strong presence at the time, in Baghdad. As his family name suggests, Rawenduzy came from the former capital of the Kurdish principality of Soran, Rawanduz, where his family was part of the local upper class. In Vienna, he finally began to network with other Kurdish students in Europe who had come to Europe primarily in search of academic education and not for political reasons. Rawenduzy told me in an interview shortly before his death: "At that time there were actually no other Kurds in Vienna, neither from Iraq

nor from other parts of Kurdistan. There were only a few students from Kurdistan in the whole of Europe, so it was only logical for us to network in Europe.”¹

Rawenduzy became a first point of contact for many Kurds from Iraq who came later, who were sought out across parties and generations and who, as a doctor, became increasingly respected in the Iraqi-Kurdish community as he grew older. Looking back, he reported: “If someone came from Kurdistan, the family usually sent them to me straight away because they knew at home that I was in Vienna. In the beginning, I was the only point of contact for many people who came from Kurdistan.”²

Rawenduzy knew his way around Austria, was well integrated into the political and intellectual establishment and even knew Bruno Kreisky, who ruled as chancellor from 1970 to 1983. Kreisky came to him for help in December 1975 when a group led by Ilich Ramírez Sánchez was looking for an Arabic-speaking doctor to provide medical care for the German terrorist Hans-Joachim Klein from the Revolutionary Cells (RZ) who had been shot (Weiss 2004)

From Iraq and Iran to Austria: Kurdish exiles

1975 was also the year in which Mullah Mustafa Barzani’s great uprising in Iraq collapsed after the Algeria Agreement between Iran and Iraq and thousands of Peshmerga, the armed fighters of the Kurds, fled from Iraq to Iran and found themselves in makeshift refugee camps there.

Austria at the time pursued a different refugee policy than it does today. After the military coup in Chile in 1973, the social democratic government of Bruno Kreisky had already actively brought left-wing politically active refugees from Chile to Austria. This was to be repeated with the Iraqi Kurds. In 1976, 41 Iraqi Kurds were initially flown out of the refugee camps in Iran to Austria. Another group followed four weeks later. (Schmidinger 2019, 273) Many of these first-generation Iraqi-Kurdish refugees studied in Austria and took an active part in social and political life. Today, many of them became professionally successful academics like Fatima Khanakah and her sister Gelas or - in the case of Aziz Miran - political representatives as district deputies for the Social Democratic Party in Vienna.

However, this wave of first exiles from the Iraqi part of Kurdistan was only the first wave of Iraqi-Kurdish refugees in Austria. The defeat of Barzani was fol-

¹ Interview with Wiriya Rawendzy, 10. Oktober 2009.

² Interview with Wiriya Rawendzy, 10. Oktober 2009.

lowed by the uprising of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and a brutal war waged by Saddam Hussein against the Kurdish civilian population through the Anfal campaign. Survivors fled to various European countries in the 1980s, including Austria, where Iraqi Kurds were already living. The later refugees settled not only in Vienna, but also in Graz, Linz, Carinthia and other provinces. After the Iraqi army's poison gas attack on the Kurdish city of Halabja on March 16, 1988, survivors were also brought to Austria for treatment. Some of them still live here today.

But there were not only political refugees from Iraq who came to Austria from Kurdistan. The Shah's authoritarian system in Iran had already driven intellectuals and politically active members of the opposition into exile in the 1970s. Some of them also ended up in Austria. However, the hopes that many Iranian Kurds had placed in the 1979 revolution proved to be deceptive. A brief period of de facto self-administration in the Kurdish regions was followed by the violent suppression of Kurdish political parties by the new regime under Ayatollah Khomeini. Activists and functionaries of the Kurdistan-Iran Democratic Party and the left-wing Komalah also found their way into exile in Austria and settled mainly in Vienna, where they tried to network with other Kurds as well as with other exiled Iraqis.

Like the Iraqi Kurds, many of the Iranian Kurds belonged to the politically active, educated Kurdish elite. It was relatively easy for many of them to gain a foothold in Austria and become involved professionally, socially, and politically. The fact that links to Iran were never severed can still be seen in various aspects today. On the one hand, many Iranian Kurds are still very actively following developments in their old homeland and are campaigning from Austria for change or even the overthrow of the regime in Iran. On the other hand, splits in the Kurdistan Democratic Party - Iran in 2006 also led to a split in Iranian-Kurdish associations in Vienna, which aligned themselves with one of the two new parties (Schmidinger 2013b: 329).

With the political exiles from Iraq and Iran, Vienna also increasingly became an important place for Kurdish diplomacy. Unfortunately, this was most clearly visible at the absolute low point of Austrian-Kurdish relations. On July 13, 1989, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, Secretary General of the Kurdistan Democratic Party - Iran, was shot dead in Vienna together with his assistant Ghaderi Azar and the Iraqi Kurd Fadhil Rassoul during negotiations with an Iranian delegation. The Iranian agents who carried out the murder were able to leave Austria unhindered. Unlike the murder of Ghassemlou's successor Sharafkandi in Berlin in 1992, Ghassemlou's murder was never tried in court.

From Turkey to Austria: Kurdish exiles and labour migrants

By far the largest group of Kurds in Austria, however, did not come from Iraq and Iran, but from Turkey. From the very beginning, Kurds formed a significant part of the migrant workers who were recruited as “guest workers” following Austria’s recruitment agreement with Turkey in 1964. As most of the migrant workers came from the poorer parts of Turkey, most of the initially male workers who were employed in industry and construction in Austria were men from Central and Eastern Anatolia. Many came from Yozgat, where, in addition to the Turkish rural population, there were also Turkishized Kurds, from the Zazaki-speaking Dersim or from the Kurdish-speaking regions of Eastern Anatolia.

The Austrian society was largely unaware of the diversity of people from Turkey. Anyone who worked on a building site or in an industrial company in the 1970s, had dark hair and a moustache, was usually simply “a Turk” from an Austrian perspective and often had to deal with the corresponding racism against “the Turks”. The awareness that there were Kurds among these workers only developed in Austria because of the political and military conflict in Turkey. To this day, word has not gotten around that there were Circassians, Armenians or Assyrians among these migrant workers.

Contrary to the original intention of a “rotation principle”, many of the “guest workers” from Turkey ultimately remained in Austria. This also laid the foundation for the largest Kurdish diaspora in Austria.

Many Kurdish workers from Turkey initially organized themselves in left-wing Turkish associations, which also corresponded to political developments in Turkey. In Austria in particular supporters of the Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist–Leninist (Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist), the Revolutionary Left (Devrimci Sol), the Revolutionary Path (Devrimci Yol) were strong among the workers from Turkey, but also groups like the Turkish Revolutionary Communist Party (Türkiye Devrimci Komünist Partisi, TDKP), who supported Enver Hoxha’s Albania, or Liberation (Kurtuluş) and People’s Liberation (Halkın Kurtuluşu) had its supporters in Austria. This active left-wing radical scene was by no means limited to Vienna but was also present in other regions with many migrant workers from Turkey, especially in Lower Austria, Upper Austria, and the westernmost Austrian state of Vorarlberg. (Schmidinger 2020a: 38).

It was not until 1979 that an explicitly Kurdish Workers’ Association was

founded in Austria, whose tasks included providing legal advice to Kurdish migrant workers, but which also endeavoured to revive Kurdish traditions (Sohler / Waldrauch / Schmidinger 2013: 109).

The small association, which was supported by the trade union, only attracted a relatively small group of migrant workers of Turkish origin. In this first phase, relatively few of the workers were interested in their specifically Kurdish culture and Kurdish organization. This only changed with the political upheavals in Turkey.

After the military coup of September 12, 1980, left-wing intellectuals from Turkey came to Europe as refugees, including Kurdish political activists who tried to continue their political work here. In Austria, this, together with the beginning of the armed struggle of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in August 1984, contributed significantly to the politicization of many Kurdish migrant workers. Many only rediscovered their Kurdish identity, which had been suppressed in Turkey, in Austria.

In the second half of the 1980s, Kurds from Turkey organized themselves not only in left-wing Turkish organizations, which were particularly popular among the Zaza-speaking Alevis from Dersim, but also increasingly in explicitly Kurdish organizations, which were characterized from the outset by party-political disputes between various Kurdish parties and groups.

In line with developments in Turkish Kurdistan, however, it was mainly groups close to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that prevailed until the end of the 1980s. In 1992, FEYKOM (Federation of Kurdish Associations in Austria) was founded as an umbrella organization of PKK-affiliated associations. This still exists today. Since then, FEYKOM has organized large political and cultural events in Vienna, but is also active with its associations in Vorarlberg, Tyrol, Salzburg (Schmidinger 2020b: 80), Styria (Grond 2020: 114) and Upper and Lower Austria (Özkan 2021: 61; Şimşek 2021: 78). Rivalling this, however, KOMKAR (Federation of Workers' Associations from Kurdistan) also exists to this day as a front organization of Kemal Burkay's Socialist Party of Kurdistan (PSK) (Sohler / Waldrauch / Schmidinger 2013: 110).

In contrast to Germany, Kurdish organizations with links to Turkey were never systematically politically persecuted in Austria. In Austria, the prevailing attitude towards the PKK over decades and across political camps was that organizations with political ties to the PKK were considered legitimate exile organizations if they were not guilty of any acts of violence in Austria. Austria was thus spared

the sometimes fierce conflicts between the authorities and PKK supporters in Germany. Although there were isolated attempts by the ÖVP and FPÖ, but also by the then Green MP and later ÖVP MP Efgani Dönmez, to push a ban on PKK structures in Austria, this basic attitude of the authorities did not change when the ÖVP and FPÖ came to power in 2000 or when the ÖVP and FPÖ came to power again in 2017. The Kurdish New Year celebrations (Newroz) organized by FEY-KOM are not only regularly attended by speakers from the SPÖ, the Greens and the trade unions. The ÖVP also reads a greeting telegram there every year.

However, left-wing Kurds from Turkey certainly have the best relations with the SPÖ, the Greens and the KPÖ - with the latter especially in Graz and Salzburg where the KPÖ is represented in the city and municipal councils as well as in the provincial parliament. Since 2021, a communist has even been mayor of Graz. This means that the party plays a much bigger role in Austria's second largest city than anywhere else.

Social Democrats, Greens and Communists repeatedly issued critical statements on the human rights situation in Turkey and expressed their support for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question. Left-wing Kurds of Turkish Kurdish origin such as Berivan Aslan and Şenol Akkılıç were and are active in both parties and represent important links between the Kurdish diaspora and Austrian politics. Both parties also maintain good relations with the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and its successor, the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Parti). Both Parties are left-wing pro-Kurdish parties represented in the Turkish parliament and include sympathizers of the PKK as well as other left-wing Kurdish and Turkish groups.

However, it would be grossly simplistic to consider only the sympathizers of various left-wing currents of the Kurdish national movement as the entirety of Kurds of Turkish origin in Austria. By no means all Kurdish migrants from Turkey sympathize with the PKK or with left-wing Kurdish and Turkish organizations. Kurds from Turkey can also be found in pro-Turkish Islamic organizations and there are also a considerable number of Kurdish sympathizers of Turkish President Erdoğan in Austria. Many of these pro-Turkish Islamic-conservative Kurds hide their Kurdish identity and saw integration into an "Islamic identity" as an opportunity for their own social advancement. With the increasingly nationalist turn of Erdoğan's ruling AKP party, some of these pro-government Kurds have withdrawn from their positions into privacy. However, the Islamic-conservative umbrella organization Milli Görüş, which does not belong to the AKP but to a rival political-Islamic movement, still has a number of Kurdish members.

In Vienna, Vorarlberg and Tyrol, there are also groups of sympathizers of Hizbullahî Kurdî, a separate Kurdish Islamist organization that was involved in military conflicts with the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s and today maintains a small party in Turkish Kurdistan, the Hûda Par. The Austrian sympathizers of Hizbullahî Kurdî maintain their own small mosque communities both in Innsbruck and in Vienna. Their mosque in the Vorarlberg municipality of Hard closed down during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the parliamentary elections on September 29, 2024, an activist from Hezbollahî Kurdî ran together with other Islamist and left-wing activists for the "Gaza list" founded for these elections.

From Syria to Austria: Kurdish war refugees

Of the various Kurdish diasporas in Austria, that of the Syrian Kurds is the most recent phenomenon. Although individual Kurds from Syria have been coming to Austria as students since the 1960s, these have remained isolated cases, some of whom have returned to Syria after their studies or settled in Austria, mostly as doctors. Similar to the Iraqi Kurds, some of these well-established men played an important role for later new arrivals, but until 2004 no Syrian-Kurdish diaspora developed with its own activities or associations (Schmidinger 2013a: 244).

Individual political activists from illegal Kurdish parties have come to Austria as refugees since the turn of the millennium. However, since the unrest in Qamishli in March 2004, which was followed by a massive wave of repression by the Syrian regime, significantly more young Syrian-Kurdish activists have come to Austria. Initially, it was mainly young men who came, as they were more politically active and suffered more from repression but were also more likely to take the risk of fleeing via Turkey and the Mediterranean. The resulting new Syrian-Kurdish diaspora was very political from the outset and characterized by party-political divisions. Activists from the Azadî party around Jamal Omari, which would eventually form the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Syria (PDK-S) with other parties in 2014, were the most active exiles during this phase. There were also some activists from the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (Al-Parti) and the two Yekîtî parties. In 2004, the first association of Syrian Kurds was the cross-party "Association of Kurds from Syria in Austria", which attempted to bundle the exile activities of the parties for several years (Schmidinger 2019: 279).

A climax of Syrian-Kurdish exile activities during this first phase of the Syrian-Kurdish diaspora "was the state visit of Syrian President Assad in April 2009. Assad, who was given an emphatically friendly reception by Austrian politicians and the public at the time, arrived with a sixty-strong business del-

egation, the largest he had ever taken on a trip abroad.” (Schmidinger 2013a: 250).

However, the most spectacular action of these early exiles took place in 2011 after the start of the protests in Syria. After the assassination of opposition politician Mişel Temo on October 7, 2011, Syrian-Kurdish opposition activists squatters the Syrian embassy in Vienna on the night of October 7-8. Eleven of the occupiers were briefly arrested (Schmidinger 2013a: 251).

With the beginning of the Syrian civil war, significantly more Syrian Kurds came to Austria. These included refugees from the civil war as well as activists from parties that opposed the Kurdish self-government established by the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Some of these political activists already came to Austria after the 2004 Qamishli riots. Supporters of the opposition to the PYD thus initially dominated the Syrian-Kurdish exiles, as supporters of the PYD tended to participate in the establishment of the self-administration in Syrian-Kurdistan. It was only with the Islamic State’s (IS) war against Kobanê in 2014 and the Turkish occupation of Efrîn in 2018 that PYD supporters also came to Austria. The Syrian-Kurdish diaspora is therefore also politically divided in Austria.

Regardless of these political conflicts, cultural activists and intellectuals among the Syrian Kurds have been trying to do more cultural and language work in recent years. The Kurdish Cultural Institute in Vienna, which was founded in October 2017, is making an important contribution to cultural work within the diaspora.

Across countries and times: Kurdish language diversity in Austria

The whole linguistic diversity of the Kurdish language is reflected in the Kurdish diaspora in Austria. Of course, any analysis of the linguistic diversity of the Kurds comes up against the problem of which variants of western Iranian language forms should be counted as Kurdish. As we know, the affiliation of Zazakî or Lakî, Feylî and Lorî is also controversial among the speakers of these variants and politically motivated differences of opinion about the affiliation of these language variants with Kurdish are often hostile. In Austria, this is particularly true for the comparatively large group of people who speak Zazakî or at least feel a historical connection to Zazakî. If all these groups are mentioned here, this should not be seen as an appropriation of these speakers for Kurdish. The author of this article takes the self-attribution of the respective speakers

seriously and considers the distinction between dialect and language to be highly political. In this respect, a decision should not be made here - especially not by a non-linguist - about the linguistic affiliation of these language forms to Kurdish.

While these debates are rarely held in Austria for the southern language forms and only comparatively few speakers of these dialects/languages live in Austria, there is a sometimes quite heated dispute within a small group of Zaza-activists about the independence or affiliation of Zazakî to Kurdish. Some of the involved activists also link the linguistic identity with the religious identity of Alevism (Arslan 2017) although there are also Sunni-Muslim Zazakî speakers both in Turkey and in Austria.

While many of the Kurds who immigrated from Turkey are linguistically assimilated to Turkish, there are families in which Kurmancî, Zazakî or the central-Anatolian Şêxbizinî is passed on to the next generation. However, the linguistic assimilation of the younger generation is partly counterbalanced by a politically motivated interest in the language, which is not necessarily sufficient to revitalize the language, but is often limited to learning a few phrases and political slogans.

As Kurmancî, the most widespread variant of Kurdish, was and is much more vital in Syria than in Turkey, thanks to the Syrian Kurds that arrived since the war in Syria, much more Kurdish can be heard in Austria today. This could give a new impetus to mother-tongue teaching in Austrian schools. It remains to be seen whether the much more Turkicized Kurds of Turkish origin will also benefit from the vitality of Kurmancî spoken by Syrian Kurds.

Among the Iraqi and Iranian Kurds, however, the Soranî and the Iraqi Badînî, which belongs to the Kurmancî, were always vital and were often passed on to the next generation in the diaspora. Multilingualism is also widespread among many Kurds from Iraq and Iran. Those who can speak Kurdish usually also speak Arabic, Persian or Turkish and eventually learned German in Austria. However, this multilingualism is rarely recognized and valued by society or the education system which brings cognitive and emotional disadvantages for children who grow up in such families (Garnitschnig 2013: 79). Languages from the Middle East do not have the same prestige in Austria as Western European languages.

Austria is one of the European countries where there are mother tongue lessons in schools if enough parents register their children for this. Kurdish was offered

for the first time in the 1994/95 school year. Soranî was taught until 2001/01. Kurmancî and Zazakî were stopped after a year. In 2010/11 Kurmancî and Zazakî were reintroduced. (Garnitschnig 2013: 82) However, Zazakî had to be stopped due to lack of demand. Kurmancî is still taught in Vienna today. Due to a lack of demand from parents, there have never been any Kurdish lessons outside of Vienna. Kurdish parents are also often more likely to enroll their children in native language lessons in Arabic or Turkish, as this is considered the more prestigious language in the educational system of their country of origin.

Since the 1993/94 school year there have also been extracurricular Saturday classes for Sorani. This developed into a weekend school that still exists today, which is supported by the autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq and where around 50 students are taught at several levels. These lessons take place every Saturday from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. in the rented premises of the Rennweg Higher Technical College in Vienna.³

For adults there were occasional Kurmancî courses at some adult education centers and at the language center of the University of Vienna. Ultimately, however, the demand here was always too small to establish these courses permanently. The Kurdish courses offered by the Kurdish Cultural Institute in Vienna, which was founded by Syrian Kurds in 2017 and which offers regular Kurmancî courses but has also occasionally held Soranî and Zazakî courses, have proven to be more sustainable.

Across faiths and divisions: Kurdish religious diversity in Austria

As in Kurdistan itself, the majority of Kurds in Austria at least formally belong to Sunni Islam. However, only a few Kurdish mosques have emerged so far and by no means all Muslim Kurds practice their religion. As in all religions, there are many different forms of religious practice, ranging from strict orthodoxy to a completely secular way of life.

If they come from Turkey, practising Muslims of Kurdish origin have often joined other Turkish-oriented mosque communities. Here, the mosques of the Islamic Federation (Millî Görüş) have proven to be less nationalistic than those with a direct connection to the Diyanet. This is why there seems to be a relatively large number of Kurds in the mosques of the Islamic Federation. Ümit

³ <http://austria.gov.krd/kurdische-schule-in-wien-startet-in-das-neue-schuljahr/> (31 January 2024)

Vural, the president of the official state-recognized Islamic Religious Community in Austria (IGGÖ), who has been in office since 2018 and was re-elected in 2023, is also a Kurd from the Islamic Federation and publicly acknowledges his Kurdish identity.

There is a mosque community of the Islamic Community of Kurdistan (Civaka Îslamiya Kurdistanê, CÎK) in Vienna that is not a member of the IGGÖ. The CÎK runs mosque communities throughout Europe that are close to the Kurdish movement.

There is also a small mosque congregation led by a Syrian-Kurdish imam, although it is mainly attended by Arabic-speaking worshippers and the Friday sermon is not held in Kurdish. In Innsbruck, Vienna and until recently in Hard (Vorarlberg) mosques were founded by supporters of the Hizbullahî Kurdî..

There are also a number of Shiite Feyli Kurds in Vienna, most of whom attend an Iraqi Shiite mosque. The chairman of the state-recognized Islamic Shiite religious community, Salem Hassan, is a Feyli Kurd from Iraq.

Since a strong Alevi diaspora has also developed in Austria as part of the migrant workforce from Turkey, there are also a number of Alevi associations, some of which are rivals. There are currently three state-recognized Alevi religious communities in Austria, each with a different status. One of them, which has the strongest state recognition, considers itself to be part of Islam and is closest to Turkey. This organization called itself originally Islamic Alevi Community in Austria (Islamische Alevitische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich, IAGÖ), but renamed itself Alevi Religious Community in Austria (Alevitische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich, ALEVI) when it got the full recognition as a legally recognised religious society.

One of the Alevi associations is predominantly made up of former left-wing groups from Dêrsim and does not consider itself to be Muslim, the so called Free Alevis Austria (Frei-Aleviten Österreich). And one is explicitly close to the Kurdish movement and considers its Alevism to be a form of Zoroastrianism, the so called Old Alevi Confession Community (Alt-Alevitische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich; AAGÖ).

The latter is certainly the smallest of the three Alevi religious communities. However, there are also Kurds in the other two associations. In contrast to ALEVI, the Free Alevis Austria and the Old Alevi Confession Community are only recognized as denominational communities, which entails considerably fewer private privileges than full recognition as legally recognised religious societies.

There are also around 100 Yarsan (Ahl-e Haqq or in Iraq also Kaka'i) from the Iraqi and Iranian parts of Kurdistan in Austria, although they are only organized as a private association. In June 2019 many of the Yarsan from Iran founded this association, which has around eighty members. As with the Alevis, there are also well-known debates among the Yarsan about their relationship to Islam. The association, which is organized in Vienna, represents an explicitly non-Islamic position. This distance from Islam is expressed in the association's name, Yarsan-Kurds Austria (Yarsan-Kurden Österreich). Froud Haydari, the *Pîr* (religious cleric) for the association claims the Yarsan have 'nothing whatsoever to do with Islam'.⁴

Especially since the genocide of the so-called Islamic State against the Yazidis, more and more Yazidis have come to Austria from Iraq. Although the community is still nowhere near as big as in Germany, it is growing not only in Vienna, but also in Upper and Lower Austria and Tyrol. A few hundred Yazidis from Armenia, Turkey, Georgia, and Iraq settled in Austria at the beginning of the 2000s. However, since 2014, refugees from Iraq have increased this number several times. The first attempts at organization were made in 2007, when a Yazidi Association in Austria (Verein der Yeziden in Österreich) was founded in Linz, but it did not exist for long (Schlatter 2013: 191).

The first Yazidi organizational attempts took place in Vienna in 2010. However, the founders soon fell out and within a very short time there were at least three very small rival groups in Vienna. The Yazidis in Austria are torn by strong political conflicts, which are exacerbated by the involvement of the various Kurdish parties but also run along different countries of origin. Although there has always been a willingness on the part of the city of Vienna to support the Yazidis in their organizational attempts and although the total number of Yazidis in Austria would at least be sufficient for an official recognition as a denominational community, every attempt for a permanent organization or state recognition has so far failed.

A case of enormous diversity: The Kurdish Diaspora(s) in Austria

This panorama of the Kurdish diaspora in Austria shows that it is very difficult to speak of a Kurdish diaspora in the singular. Political, linguistic, and religious divisions are also visible in the diaspora.

This does not mean that there are no contacts between different groups. Ho-

⁴ Interview with Froud Haydari, Pîr and co-founder of the Yarsan-Kurden Österreich, 12 May 2022.

wever, events held by various associations and communities are only attended by a few intellectuals with other backgrounds in exceptional cases. The author of this article has known it happen several times that Kurdish groups asked him about contacts with other groups from other parts of Kurdistan because they didn't even know each other. There are a few individuals who maintain contacts with various circles of this very diverse diaspora. Overall, most groups stay among themselves.

The role of the Kurdish parties in the diaspora also plays an important role, reinforcing existing distances. Even if there are a few non-party associations, the importance of parties as quasi-state actors is still enormous, even in the diaspora. Especially in the younger generation, this leads to some distancing themselves from the diaspora. Successful young Kurds of the second and third generation now tend to stay away from the organized diaspora, which is becoming an obvious problem for many long-standing associations.

It remains to be seen whether a second or third generation diaspora will develop that is at least partially autonomous from the conflicts in the countries of origin and will still see itself as Kurdish, or whether this turning away from the parties by the younger generation will also lead to a turning away from the Kurdish language, culture, and identity.

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