

SAIDA KELLER-MASSAHLI

IMPACT: Saïda Keller-Messahli is a self-described Islamic human rights activist of Tunisian-Swiss heritage who is among the most prominent voices mainstreaming Islamophobia in Switzerland. She is frequently featured as an interviewee by Swiss media and has often been invited to Austrian state agencies as a public voice and “expert” to support discriminatory policies against Muslims.

- Keller-Messahli asserts that her interest in Islam began in 2003 after she read Abdelwahab Meddeb’s book, *The Malady of Islam*. One year later, in 2004, she founded the [Forum for Progressive Islam](#) and began to participate in interviews with Swiss media, which she has continued to do regularly ever since. **Keller-Messahli’s organization, the Forum for Progressive Islam, claims to represent the silent majority of Muslims.** However, many of its leaders are non-Muslims, including board members such as the Catholic Karl Gruber and the Protestant Pastor Von Thalwil. Elham Manea from the [European Foundation for Democracy](#) is also a [board member](#). The **Forum positions itself against established Muslim religious organizations by presenting itself as a progressive organization centered on human rights and democracy that wants to reform Islam.**
- In 2014, **Keller-Messahli argued in support of a [hijab ban](#) in Swiss schools.** According to her, the hijab sexualizes the female body causing Muslim girls to develop a “disturbed relationship with their bodies.” She also [stated](#) a ban would not conflict with religious freedom, because wearing the hijab is not a religious requirement.
- In an [interview](#) on October 20, 2016, **Keller-Messahli argued that Muslim women who wear the headscarf in the West “push themselves into the corner if they refuse to take off their headscarf, even if a job depends on it.” She went on to describe women’s choices regarding the headscarf as a type of “militancy” that has “nothing to do with spirituality,” but rather is used to “demonstrate to society their ‘purity’ and ‘chastity’ - the headscarf as an accusation against the society that has welcomed them, as a refusal of social integration.”**
- In the same interview, she addressed a question regarding criticism of Islam in Western society [stating](#), “If society were ‘anti-Islam’, it would not accept millions of Muslims and make funds and personnel available for their social integration. We must not adopt the Islamists’ vocabulary, but rather understand that they want exactly this ‘Islamophobia’. It is good for business - teaching Muslims that they are victims and that they should refuse to integrate.”
- In 2017, Keller-Messahli **wrote a [piece](#) for the Austrian Integration Fund (Österreichischer Integrationsfonds, ÖIF) on political Islam in the Balkans that was heavily criticized by a group of Balkan Studies experts.** According to Florian Bieber, director of the Center for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, Keller-Messahli’s article is “[characterized](#) by ignorance and prejudice. The author obviously has little knowledge of the historical development of Islam in the Balkans. The text has few scientific references, otherwise reference is often made to dubious sources.” An article in the Swiss daily newspaper, *NZZ*, [stated](#) that Keller-Messahli’s piece suggested she is “[more of a missionary than an expert](#),” given that it contained many historically false statements.
- In an [interview](#) on January 15, 2017, **Keller-Messahli claimed that the Muslim World League is a “dangerous organization” that “finances preachers” around the globe to “radicalize believers.”** She went on to [state](#) that “the disease of Islam is Islamism, political Islam.”
- In September 2017, Bern state prosecutors opened criminal proceedings against Keller-Messahli accusing her of [having slandered](#) the preacher Abu Ramadan. She publicly claimed that the Libya-born Imam asked God to protect “al-Qaeda and IS fighters” during a prayer he led in Tripoli. The article notes that in reality “the

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Imam does not mention IS or Al-Qaeda” during the prayer in question.

- In an October 2017 interview, **following the full face veil ban implemented in Austria, Keller-Messahli advocated for a headscarf ban in schools in an Austrian newspaper**, [stating](#), “Even a democratic liberal state can defend itself against those who want to abolish democracy. The headscarf marks the girl or woman reducing her to her gender.”
- During a panel discussion in 2017, Keller-Messahli [claimed](#) that she saw many signs of radicalization in the St. Gallen’s mosques. Fredy Fässler, the district president of St. Gallen in charge of security, who also participated in the panel, asked her to report to him if so. “At that time, she assured me that she would do that,” says Fässler, but he hasn’t heard from her since and then [added](#) in 2018: “My impression is growing that she has radicalized [in her views on Muslims]”.
- In February 2017, **Reinhard Schulze, an internationally renowned scholar of Islamic Studies and director of the Forum Islam and Near East at the University of Bern, criticized Keller-Messahli’s book *Islamist Hub Switzerland* (*Islamistische Drehscheibe Schweiz*)**, in which she paints Islamic associations as power-hungry fundamentalists. He [argued](#) the book’s “stereotypical information is presented with evaluative interpretations that do not allow any verification.” **Schulze further alleged that Keller-Messahli employed “‘conspiracies with half-truths’ to support her arguments.”** Another famous scholar of religious studies, Hansjorg Schmid, also [criticized](#) the book, citing a lack of nuance and weakness of sources for Keller-Messahli’s broad claims.
- According to the legal advisor for the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Switzerland (FIOS/FIDS), Nermina Ademović-Omerčić, Keller-Messahli’s book “[characterized](#) most imams as radical and labeled the Islamic organizations in Switzerland, mainly through negative associations, as Saudi mercenaries, Islamists or the wrong interlocutors of naïve Swiss authorities.”
- In a September 2017 article in *NZZ*, **journalist Florian Schoop stated that Keller-Messahli supports a very generalized and negative discourse on Islam and Muslims.** To support this view, he noted that she uses [sentences](#) like “the majority of Imams are Islamist” and “the Burkini is a combat dress of Islamists” as well as labelling the Hijab a “banner of political Islam.”
- In November 2018, Keller-Messahli argued that there were extremely radical Albanian mosques in the town of Wallis. On the same day the police commander in Wallis [disputed](#) her claims. On January 9, 2019, **Keller-Messahli argued that Switzerland was a “retreat area for Islamists,” because “cash flows take place through this financial center.”**
- Keller-Messahli **tries to pressure political institutions to exclude Muslim institutions from the political field by arguing that the institutions are naïve vis-a-vis the “Salafist threat.”** In an effort to counter this “salafist threat,” Keller-Messahli argues its acceptable to build a “[loose cooperation](#)” between ‘secular Muslims’ like herself and [right-wing political parties](#) such as the SVP in Switzerland or the far-right anti-Muslim Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany.
- In addition to writing for the Austrian Integration Fund, **Keller-Messahli has frequently been invited to speak with others who spread anti-Muslim sentiments**, such as [Seyran Ates](#) and Zana Ramadani. Keller-Messahli has endorsed the anti-Muslim [European Citizens’ Initiative against Extremism](#) (Stop Extremism), which was founded by [Seyran Ates](#) and Efgani Dönmez.