

Austrian Integration Fund (Österreichische Integrationsfonds, ÖIF)

IMPACT: The Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) is a fund of the Republic of Austria in charge of integration affairs (social integration of minorities) at both the federal and state levels. In the past few years, the ÖIF has used its platform to promote anti-Muslim views through speakers and reports. The ÖIF supports the anti-Muslim policies of the Austrian People's Party's (ÖVP).

- The **Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) is a fund of the Republic of Austria and “partner of the federal government in promoting integration.”** ÖIF’s website states it was founded in 1960 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Austrian Federal Minister of the Interior (BM.I), in response to the Hungarian crisis of 1956 (a nationwide revolution against the Hungarian People’s Republic and its Soviet-imposed policies). The crisis resulted in a “wave of refugees” and required Austria to build an “institutional framework to take care of refugees.” **ÖIF works with refugees, immigrants, and institutions in the fields of social work, education, and integration.**
- In 1991, the fund was spun off from the Ministry of Interior. **In 2002, the then-United Nations Refugee Fund was renamed ÖIF and its portfolio extended to implementation of the integration agreement.** The document states that immigrants to Austria must learn German in order to qualify for a residence permit. A 2019 report by the social aid organization **Caritas Austria found that “Austria’s requirements for permanent residence and accessing the citizenship are among the most restrictive in Europe and ‘do not take into account immigrants’ real efforts to participate in society to the best of their individual abilities and their local circumstances.”** In August 2020, Minister of Integration Susanne Raab introduced a mandatory unit on antisemitism for refugees in the ÖIF’s integration courses, which are required in order to qualify for asylum and subsidiary protection beneficiaries. Today, the ÖIF has an integration center in every major state capital.
- The ÖIF is financed largely by the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs (BMEIA). **According to journalists Christoph Ulbrich and Sebastian Reinfeldt, nearly all key positions of the ÖIF belong to members of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz’s Austrian People’s Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP).** The journalists discovered that the supervisory board consists entirely of ÖVP careerists, noting: “The entrance ticket to [a] job in the fund is membership in the ÖVP.”
- **Franz Wolf has been director of the ÖIF since 2013. Prior to this, he served as the deputy director of ÖIF from 2005–2009 and a co-chairman of Sebastian Kurz’s cabinet in the Ministry of Integration from 2011–2012.** Members of the supervisory board are Minister of Integration Susanne Raab and Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg, both of whom belong to the ÖVP. ÖVP-affiliated personnel were recruited by the ÖIF and the Ministry of Integration Affairs, despite having shared anti-Semitic content in closed WhatsApp chats.
- The ÖIF and the Ministry of Integration and Foreign Affairs have commissioned and financed several studies about Muslims in Austria, which were then presented to the public by Sebastian Kurz in his former position as Minister of Integration. The presentations of a

Austrian Integration Fund (Österreichische Integrationsfonds, ÖIF)

November 2015 [interim report](#) and February 2016 final [report](#) titled “Evaluation of Islamic Kindergartens in Vienna” served to support [Sebastian Kurz](#) in [his opposition](#) to the Social Democrats, who govern Vienna. According to the report, kindergartens managed by Muslims isolate and separate Muslim children from society. **In September 2017, the ÖIF presented the report “The Role of the Mosque in the Integration Process,” along with Sebastian Kurz. The ÖIF’s summary of the research results claimed that mosques had “fundamentalist tendencies” rejected “Austrian values,” involved a “strong separation by ethnic groups,” and usually had “no room for women.”**

- As political scientist Farid Hafez from the University of Salzburg argued in the [2018 Islamophobia Report on Austria](#), **“the Austrian federal government has used institutions like the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) to produce knowledge about the Muslim other to legitimize their policies.”** The [2017 European Islamophobia Report](#) shows that “the ÖIF stands out with its one-sided invitation policy.” This is **visible in the ÖIF’s regular invitation of anti-Muslim voices, in particular individuals from Germany and Switzerland.** These speakers include Ahmad Mansour (Germany), [Hamed Abdel-Samad](#) (Germany), [Saïda Keller-Messahli](#) (Switzerland), [Seyran Ates](#) (Germany), Zana Ramadani (Germany), and Ilham Manea (Germany). Both [Mansour](#) and [Manea](#) are also affiliated with the major European anti-Muslim think tank the [European Foundation for Democracy](#).
- In January 2018, the ÖIF organized a [panel](#) titled “Muslims have to live according to Europe’s existing values and laws,” which featured Mouhanad Khorchide, Nina Scholz, Oliver Henhapel, and then-head of the integration section in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Susanne Raab. **Khorchide claimed that “in mosques [...] young Muslims are asked to be either good Muslims or Europeans.”** Nina Scholz [argued](#): “There are women who call themselves feminists and defend the veiling of women as female self-empowerment. These women are usually close to conservative Islamic associations and the Muslim Brotherhood and lobby for their cause.” Henhapel, head of the Austrian State’s Kultusamt (Office for Cultural Affairs), which is in charge of the Republic’s relationship to churches and religious denominations, praised the [controversial Islam Act of 2015](#), [saying](#): “The state has created important prerequisites with the Islam Act for the religion to develop free from political influences from abroad by prohibiting foreign financing.” The act was seen as being [discriminatory](#) against Muslims by treating them differently from churches and other religious denominations.
- The ÖIF has organized numerous book talks for writers. **In February 2020, it hosted one featuring French author Pascal Bruckner, author of *Un racisme imaginaire - La Querelle de l’islamophobie* (An Imaginary Racism - The Dispute about Islamophobia).** During the event, he [said](#): “Instead of dealing with the content of criticism (towards Islam), which is often justified, critics are assumed to have an anti-Muslim basic attitude. We must never allow ourselves to be pressured and blackmailed with the accusation of Islamophobia - a word invented to silence the critics of a religion.” In May 2018, ÖIF held another [panel](#) titled “School and Islam: Challenges of Integration” featuring Berlin-based journalist Düzen Tekkal. During the event, **Tekkal claimed that “anti-Semitism, ethnic-religious conflicts, stereotypes towards classmates, overburdened teachers who have little authority, and students from non-educational backgrounds with a high proportion of migrants,” were the reasons for the lack of integration of Muslim**

Austrian Integration Fund (Österreichische Integrationsfonds, ÖIF)

students.

- In June 2018 ÖIF held an [event](#) on “Equality, Islam and Patriarchy,” featuring German-Turkish lawyer and author, [Seyran Ateş](#). **During the discussion, Ateş lent her support to the state policy banning the hijab in school (she opted for a ban for all students under 18), stating,** “If you put a headscarf on girls, you take away their childhood and sexualize them. You force them into the role of a sexual object and restrict their development, which for me is child abuse.” The ÖIF [invited](#) Ateş to give additional talks on July 30 and October 3. The fourteenth [meeting](#) of the Integration Advisory Council in April 2017, featured Seyran Ateş as a key speaker. During the meeting, Ateş spoke about the issue of “integration of women with a migration background,” warned attendees of the “influence of radical mosque associations,” and called for “promoting liberal Islam.”
- The ÖIF has extended multiple invitations to Elham Manea. In [September 2018](#) and [September 2019](#), Manea lectured about “Recognizing Signs of Radicalism and Extremism.” **According to her, “the most visible and successful means of controlling women is the headscarf. Islamists use it to mark their territory.”** Manea [supported](#) the Hijab Ban of the Austrian government and supported the ÖVP’s position to [ban](#) “political Islam.”
- In addition to speaking at ÖIF events, many of these authors regularly write for ÖIF’s publications. **In 2017, Keller-Messahli wrote a piece for the ÖIF on political Islam in the Balkans in which she incorrectly claimed that “all sides did massacres” during the Yugoslavian war, which was primarily a genocide against Bosnian Muslims.** In response, a group of [Balkan Studies experts](#) criticized Keller-Messahli’s arguments. **Florian Bieber, director of the Center for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, wrote that 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*, [noted](#) that Keller-Messahli’s piece [suggested](#) she is “more of a missionary than an expert,” given that it contained many historically false statements.
- In September 2017, Heiko Heinisch, Imet Memedi, and an identified “et al.,” published a report for the ÖIF [titled](#), “The Role of Mosques in the Integration Process.” The ÖIF’s [summary](#) of the research results claimed that the study showed mosques had “fundamentalist tendencies,” rejected “Austrian values,” involved a “strong separation by ethnic groups,” and usually had “no room for women.”
- Following the publication of this [report](#), the ÖIF organized a [panel](#) titled “What Role Mosques Play for the Integration of Muslim Immigrants in Austria.” The event featured Heiko Heinisch, Susanne Schröter, and Constantin Schreiber, journalist and author of the book “Inside Islam - What Is Being Preached in German Mosques.” **During the discussion, Heinisch claimed: “In more than a third of the mosques we investigated, the integration of Muslims into society is actively counteracted. We see fundamentalist tendencies, open nationalism and a rejection of the Austrian majority society and its values.”** Schröter said: “Often, they only appeal to the Muslim identity [...] It is crucial for

Austrian Integration Fund (Österreichische Integrationsfonds, ÖIF)

living together that Muslims perceive themselves primarily as citizens of European society.”

- The ÖIF also invited [Helmut Pisecky](#), head of the think tank [Mar Adentro e.U.](#), to give a [course](#) on “Recognizing Signs of Radicalism and Extremism.” Pisecky has published a few pieces in the conservative daily, *Die Presse*. In one piece, he [argued](#) that “‘Islamophobia’ is the fighting vocabulary of the Islamists.” Pisecky is also the author of a [report](#) for the Foundation for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (FENF), which is the official foundation of the far-right political group, Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), later the Identity & Democracy group in the European Parliament. In the report “[Shari’ah for Europe?](#)” the authors argued that, “From a Western perspective, Islamic norms constitute a form of discrimination of women and violate the principle of one law for all.”
- **The ÖIF is also transnationally connected. As mentioned above, many of the invited speakers are linked to the [European Foundation of Democracy \(EFD\)](#).** One of EFD’s former senior policy advisors and current program director of George Washington University’s Program on Extremism, [Lorenzo Vidino](#), has been invited to Austria and has produced reports for the ÖIF. In August 2017, the Program on Extremism published a report by Vidino on the “[Muslim Brotherhood in Austria](#),” which was co-financed by the ÖIF. On November 29, 2018, the Foreign Ministry’s Advisory Board on Integration met with ÖIF director Franz Wolf, when [Lorenzo Vidino](#) presented a [talk](#) on “Political Islam in Austria.”
- **Shortly before the Austrian government introduced the [face veil ban](#), the ÖIF published a [brochure](#) to address the issue of face-coverings in Islam.** Authors of the brochure included [Keller-Messahli](#) and Mansour. The ÖIF [praised the face veil ban as enabling](#) “the exchange between all people living in the public space.”
- **In [July 2020](#), Minister of Integration [Susanne Raab](#) announced the establishment of the [Documentation Center for Political Islam](#). [Lisa Fellhofer](#), who had worked for the ÖIF since 2010, became its director.** Mouhanad Khorchide from the German University of Münster, a frequent ÖIF guest speaker, became the [head of the scientific board](#) of the Documentation Center. According to Farid Hafez from the University of Salzburg, [this was](#) the “latest step in surveilling Muslims and pushing Muslim civil society organizations to the margin.”