

## **Are Greens Speaking out Against Islamophobia?**

**Article by Samir Jeraj**

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Compared to most other political movements, Greens have a track record of inclusive politics, and have long welcomed refugees and Muslims into their ranks. But without a comprehensive approach to the issue of Islamophobia, Green parties sometimes fall into patterns of institutionalised prejudice.

On 9 November 2020, nearly 1000 members of Austria's security forces raided the homes of 70 people and organisations. The targets were the alleged "roots of political Islam" in the country, but in the three years since not a single person has been convicted, and the raids were ruled unlawful. While many saw the operation as an example of the Islamophobia of Christian Democrat Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, it was a Green Party politician, Justice Minister Alma Zadić, who was formally accountable.

In Europe, Islamophobia is a prejudice that goes back centuries and is layered with the historical experiences of wars, colonisation, and empire. More recently, the US-initiated "war on terror", multiple conflicts in the Middle East, and the "migration crisis" have all added to the current wave of anti-Islam sentiment, further exacerbated by Hamas's attacks inside Israel last year. With EU elections just three months away, resurgent Islamophobia could benefit far-right parties with a hard line on migration, such as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany. But even Green parties and politicians are not always without prejudice towards Islam.

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German Greens have found themselves in a difficult position since 7 October, trying to balance Germany's historically strong relationship with Israel and the legacy of the Holocaust with the need to address rising antisemitism and Islamophobia in the country. In November, Green Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck referred to unacceptable "Islamist demonstrations" in Berlin and across Germany. Habeck also accused Islamic associations in the country of failing to speak out against antisemitism, and threatened to deport people without a residence permit who perpetrated allegedly antisemitic acts. Half of the 5.5 million Muslims in Germany are not citizens, in part because the possibility of holding dual citizenship has only recently been introduced.

### **Institutionalised discrimination**

Green parties have a mixed relationship with faith. Radical and progressive Christianity had an influence on green movements, along with atheist and secularist traditions of leftist and liberal politics. Moreover, there are the perspectives of refugees, whom Greens have long welcomed into their ranks. Among them are many who have fled their home countries because of persecution in the name of religion or by religious authorities.

Greens are more comfortable discussing racism and xenophobia than faith-based discrimination, particularly Islamophobia. Lacking a clear approach or perspective on the subject, they have largely fallen into line with mainstream political currents.

“Whenever the Green party is in power, a lot of the institutionalised Islamophobia also becomes part of green governmental responsibility,” said Farid Hafez, who was one of those unjustly arrested by the Austrian authorities in 2020. Hafez, who is an academic specialising in Islamophobia and has published extensively on the far right, doesn’t believe that Green minister Zadić was motivated by Islamophobia. After all, the politicians who defended him most were also Green Party representatives.

One of them was Faika El-Nagashi, an MP since 2019. In her view, Islamophobia entered Austrian mainstream politics in 2015, when Sebastian Kurz became chancellor. “Instead of attacking Muslims very superficially and directly, they were talking about a phenomenon that they called ‘political Islam’, that was difficult to grasp. There was no clear definition of it,” she said.

One of the first targets of the Right’s culture wars were “Islamic” kindergartens in Vienna, which were accused of fostering extremism. The research behind this claim was deeply problematic and later discredited, but the response of political parties, including the Greens, was to suggest that there was some substance to the allegations, and that they needed to be looked into.

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“I was the spokeswoman for integration, I had to deal with the issue. And I was liaising a lot with representatives of various Muslim communities,” El-Nagashi said. She was criticised from within the Green Party and by right-wing think tankers for engaging with Muslim civil society organisations, and was accused of proximity with the Muslim Brotherhood. “There is no deep understanding of the political agenda of vilification of Muslims, or of the anti-Muslim tropes and mechanisms at work. And there is this underlying mistrust towards the issue [of Islamophobia]. But there’s also no strategy to deal with it in general,” El-Nagashi said.

This was evident in 2020, when the Greens became the junior coalition partner to Sebastian Kurz’s Christian Democrats. El-Nagashi feels that her party did not push back against the Islamophobic parts of the coalition agreement, for example regarding the extension of the headscarf ban in schools (a measure that was later declared discriminatory by Austria’s Constitutional Court). “The story towards the outside is that we are the party for climate and environmental issues. We were always strong on both climate and environment and human rights, but entering this government coalition painfully compromised the human rights component for us,” El-Nagashi said.

Hafez argues that, more broadly, strategies to dissuade, marginalise and criminalise political and civil activism by Muslims have proven effective in continental Europe. “If you want to make it into politics as a person with a Muslim background, make sure you have no relationship whatsoever to any Muslim society,” he said.

## **Lonely fight**

Mariam Salem was inspired to join the Swedish Green Party when she saw Yvonne Ruwaida, a Green politician of Palestinian origin, at an election event over 20 years ago. “She was talking about Palestine and how engaged the Green Party is in the Palestinian issue and I got very interested,” Salem said. She was approached to be part of the electoral list for local elections, and unexpectedly found herself second on the list.

“From the day those lists became public, we had one particular party that started writing about me mostly on a blog, but also sending articles to the local papers,” she said. The attacks continued for over a year, with articles and statements suggesting that Salem had a hidden agenda, that she was an Islamist in favour of Sharia law. Salem was also the target of verbal attacks and defamatory rumours. “It was really unpleasant, and I wasn’t really expecting that kind of behaviour because I hadn’t been involved in any kind of politics,” Salem said.

The response from her party was problematic. “Partially, I felt that they [the party] had support [for me]. And partially, I also felt that they were afraid that any of those rumours would be true. And then that would be really bad for the party,” Salem said. In public, she was always defended, but she was not fully trusted. “I felt really lonely in these matters because I don’t think they really understood how it was. If you’re not in that place, you don’t really know. It’s hard to grasp how it is for the person in the middle of it,” she added.

## **Steps forward and blunders**

For some Green parties, Islamophobia is an issue they have yet to seriously engage with because the Muslim population in their countries is small. In Poland, for example, the main issue related to Muslims and Islamophobia are illegal pushbacks against asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East on the border with Belarus.

When it comes to Muslim representation, the UK is an outlier in Europe. The country has a relatively powerful set of Muslim civil society organisations, and representation of Muslims across the political spectrum. Moreover, the current Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and the First Minister of Scotland Humza Yousaf are Muslims.

In recent months, the Green Party of England and Wales has seen its support among Muslims rise, thanks in part to its strong position on Israel’s war in Gaza. “The Green Party is a much more professional organisation [and] has been able to get its platform out about Gaza more clearly,” said Benali Hamdache, a Green councillor in North London. He adds that the party has been consistent in supporting human rights in conflicts in Yemen, Sudan, and Kashmir, as part of its foreign policy. “I think the party hasn’t necessarily been afraid to be nuanced and clear in its principles, and I think that has been received well,” he said.

But there is also a longer-term trend. “I think the party’s outreach to the Muslim community is growing. And I think there is an increasing opportunity as ties to the Labour Party fray,” said Hamdache. Hamdache is one of a number of Muslims who have won local political office as Green representatives. The most prominent of them is perhaps Magid Magid, who started as a councillor on Sheffield City Council in 2016 and was later elected to the EU Parliament.

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However, the Greens in England and Wales have also made some blunders. In 2019 their then co-leader Jonathan Bartley supported a ban on halal (and kosher) meat, which was not party policy. Earlier this year, a Green candidate in a high-profile byelection in an area with a large Muslim population was found to have a history of Islamophobic statements on social media.

Hamdache says that what is important is engaging with Muslims as voters, and supporting and investing in candidates who can voice their perspectives and concerns as Green representatives.

## **Standing up against prejudice**

What is concerning on a European scale, according to Hafez, is evidence that Islamophobic ideas and discourse have seeped into Green parties too. “Slowly but surely, you can see how certain arguments that have been popularised in the hegemonic discourse are now reproduced and have found their way into Green party platforms,” he said. Examples include discourse that targets and marginalises Muslim communities, such as debates around “parallel societies,” “Muslim ghettos”, and “no-go zones”. “That speaks to this general tendency of the popularisation of Islamophobia and the mainstreaming of state Islamophobia. Greens are not, and do not stand, in opposition to that,” he said.

Several European countries have also attempted to effectively create a domesticated version of Islam, something that Hafez calls a “deeply authoritarian attitude”. European politicians, including most Greens, do not see these attempts from a critical perspective; on the contrary, these policies are seen as part of the solution in the fight against racism. In Germany, where there are deeply problematic attempts to create a domesticated, national version of German “Muslimness”, Hafez found that when Greens held relevant ministries, it made little difference. “I think one of the problems that we are seeing within the Greens, often when they represent a more white, privileged elite, is that they simply don’t care,” Hafez said.

“I mostly think that people perceive me as a pain, because I always say these things, and most people don’t perceive them the same way I do,” echoed Salem. Green parties are not yet a united voice against Islamophobia in its deepest sense. The values of universal human rights and freedoms, which Greens embrace, together with meaningful engagement with Muslim communities and civil societies, provide a basis to counter the phenomenon. However, moving from principle to action also requires confidence and courage in the face of unfair accusations of extremism. It requires support for those inside and outside the party who speak out against prejudice. “Even today, if I talked about Islamophobia, I would be accused of using Muslim Brotherhood terminology,” said El-Nagasi.



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