

## Resisting the Muslim Invasion: an exploration of how Europe's far-right milieu are shaping and informing Islamophobia

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A sense of relief was culpable in Austria as indeed Europe more widely following the defeat of Norbert Hofer in Austria's recent presidential elections. By the narrowest margins, Alexander Van der Bellen - former leader of Austria's *Die Grünen* (Green Party) – had beat Hofer in the polls in order to prevent him from becoming the first far-right head of state in the European Union. Despite having lost the election, the far-right *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Austrian Freedom Party or FPÖ) for whom Hofer was its candidate, was not too despondent. Having won majority votes in more federal states than *Die Grünen*, the deciding factor in the defeat of the FPÖ were postal votes and a mere few thousand at most. Consequently the FPÖ believes that it is now on track to win the country's next parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in the next few years. The FPÖ was also convinced that campaigning on the issue of a 'Muslim invasion' - as Hofer did - was one that would increasingly resonate with a growing number of ordinary people.

The resonance of this message is far from exclusive to Austria. So too has the notion that Europe is being 'invaded' by Muslims and Islam gained traction over the past decade and a half elsewhere; in Poland, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden among others. Routinely citing the mass migration that has occurred since World War II, those looking for contemporary 'evidence' point towards the current Syrian refugee crisis and allegations of the 'Islamification' of various European cities to try and convince increasing numbers of ordinary people of the reality of the

‘invasion’ and more worryingly, the need to resist it. As the argument goes, once here and established in Europe, Muslims seek to destroy the nation states that are perceived to generously afford them a new home (Chris Allen, *Huffington Post*, 29 January 2016). This line of argument informed the motivations of Norway’s Anders Behring Breivik who, shortly before killing eight people with a bomb in Oslo and a further 69 at a summer camp on the island of Utøya, uploaded a manifesto to the internet that sought to justify his actions by citing the need to resist the Islamic invasion of Europe in order to protect its identity, culture and values. Others have sought similar justifications for their actions include Germany’s *Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund* (National Socialist Underground) and Sweden’s Peter Mangs.

But it is the consequential fear that duly emanates from ongoing terror attacks in Paris and Brussels as indeed London and Madrid previously that has been the real catalyst for increasing numbers of ordinary Europeans to not only be more receptive to the messages and ideologies of the far-right but somewhat unprecedentedly, vote for them also. In response, not only has the far-right increasingly shifted away from traditional and historical ideologies focusing on Jews and Judaism but so too have they adopted far more explicit rhetoric about the very real threat Muslims and Islam are seen to pose. The result has been the proliferation of far-right parties and actors using what might best be termed as Islamophobic language. In some ways this is maybe unsurprising. In the contemporary European context, Muslims and Islam are the most transruptive entity within the continent’s burgeoning and ever-expanding borders. Seen to threaten the social, political, economic and cultural, Morey and Yaqin (*Framing Muslims: stereotyping and representation after 9/11*, 2011) suggest that underlying this is the notion that Muslims are a homogenous ‘Other’ comprised of indistinguishable zombie-like individuals that are incapable of independent thought and action and which can easily be whipped into a violent frenzy at any challenge to Islam’s monolithic and fixed

worldview. Continuing the metaphor, the Muslim 'Other' also has the capability to contaminate. Consequently, the threat Muslims pose is seen to be real, ongoing, and at times, apocalyptic. As an 'Other' that threatens to devour Europe as a geographical entity, so too is it seen to want to do the same to Europe's values, democracies, identities and Judeo-Christian heritage.

This in turn feeds another of the far-right's Islamophobic messages about Muslims. As the former leader of France's *Front National* (National Front) Jean Marie Le Pen put it, irrespective of whether a goat is born in a stable or not, a goat can never be a horse (Aurelien Mondon, *The Independent*, 27 September 2012). In other words, Muslims will never truly be European even if they are born. In the right setting, such narratives have been somewhat seductively deployed by the far-right. Take for instance the *British National Party* (BNP). In seeking to gain electoral success, the BNP targeted white, working class communities in locations social and economic deprivation was high and where there were significant Muslim populations. Using campaign slogans such as '*Islam Out of Britain*' and '*Islam Referendum Day*', the BNP combined messages about the 'Otherness' of Muslims with those that sought to blame them for the social ills many white, working class voters were experiencing (Chris Allen, *Politics & Religion*, 2010). An example of this was to suggest that local government funds were being used to build mosques in preference of investing in social housing or local schools. Not only was this successful for the BNP in municipal elections between 2007 and 2010 but so too did it result in the party successfully winning two seats in 2009's European elections and another in the London Assembly. Similar approaches to these are evident elsewhere in the relative successes of *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) in Belgium and the *Dansk Folkeparti* (Danish People's Party) in Denmark.

There is also evidence to suggest that the far-right has begun to adopt a pan-European response to the Muslim 'invasion'. At the national level this can be seen in the way which far-right linked football hooligan networks have put team loyalties aside to focus attention on Muslims and Islam. In the UK, this was evident with the English Defence League, a counter-jihad street level movement which evolved out of football hooligan 'firms' that seemingly preferred to fight the 'Islamification' of Britain in preference of each other (Chris Allen, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 2011). Going beyond the national, recent reports suggest that Russian and English football hooligans are planning to use the match between the two countries at the 2016 European Championships in Marseille as an opportunity to take 'revenge' on the city's Muslim communities (Anthony Bond, *The Mirror*, 23 May 2016). A possibly more strategic and pan-European manifestation appears to be occurring with Germany's *Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (Patriotic Europeans against Islamisation of the Occident or PEGIDA). Having attracted around 40,000 people to its march in Dresden in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015, PEGIDA has increasingly marketed itself as providing a European resistance. As a result, PEGIDA has recently organised protests in Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Spain and Switzerland as also the UK.

As well as becoming increasingly receptive to ordinary voters – and maybe as a response to this - far-right ideologies have also permeated the political mainstream (Humayan Ansari & Farid Hafez, *From the far-right to the mainstream: Islamophobia in party politics and the media*, 2012). While typically more implicit, some within the political mainstream have been rather more overt with their deployment and appropriation of Islamophobic messages. As regards the latter, this can be seen in the statement made by the former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi when he said that Milan would soon be an 'Islamic city'. Similarly, when the *Sverigedemokraterna* (Swedish Democrats) called for the need to limit the 'birth rate' of Muslim migrants to the country it was very similar to

that which was being put forward by those within the country's far-right milieu. A less overt form can be seen in the recent comments of Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban. Speaking about the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, Orban referred to the arrival of vast numbers of Muslim migrants in Europe as being part of a 'master-plan' (Chris Allen, *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, 2016). One might assume that the 'master-plan' was akin to the notions of 'invasion' and 'Islamification' preferred by others.

Maybe most concerning though is the seeming convergence between the views of some on the political left with those located in the far-right. One of the clearest examples of this are in the narratives of self-declared 'socialist', Pim Fortuyn. Having established the Dutch political party, *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (Pim Fortuyn List), Fortuyn gained unprecedented political success on the back of narratives that accentuated the incompatibility of Muslims and Islam with the liberal way of life he believed was definitive of the Netherlands (Chris Allen, *Islamophobia*, 2010). A more recent example however can be seen through the *Résistance Républicaine* (Republican Resistance). A French street movement, it took to the streets of Paris in 2013 with placards bearing slogans including 'Islam out of the Louvre' and 'No to the Islamisation of Alsace-Lorraine'. Focusing on the perceived incompatibility of Muslims with France's secular values and gender equality specifically, Pitt (*Labour Briefing*, 2013) states that those behind the movement had links to left-wing groups including *Mouvement Républicain et Citoyen* (Republican and Citizen Movement) and *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Communist League). There can be little doubt that at least some convergence between the politically left and the far-right has occurred in relation to Muslims and Islam.

Increasingly fluid and reflexive, Europe's far-right and its Islamophobic ideologies in particular can be seen to have not just blurred many of the boundaries that have historically constrained by them but have more contemporarily successfully negotiated them. In doing so, those from within the far-right have been able to reach out and appeal to ordinary citizens right across the European and political spectrum. That is the far-right's greatest success in today's Europe. This can be illustrated by the French context. In the 2014 European elections, *Front National* received around a quarter of all votes; to the extent that it was only in Paris and the west of France where it failed to increase its percentage share. Now led by Marine Le Pen - daughter of former leader, Jean Marie – her message was clear: Muslims and Islam would continue to be a problem and a threat until such time that the Muslim 'Other' becomes more like 'us' (Aurelian Mondon, *The Independent*, 27 September 2012). Whilst this was its political message, the same is evident in the social and cultural also. As such since 2014, debates about the role and place of Muslims in France have been a recurrent feature of the French media's current affairs output. More worryingly, there has been a sharp increase in the number of street-level Islamophobic attacks taking place across the country, the number dramatically increasing after the terror attacks in Paris in January and November 2015. It is also not unlinked that two of the most widely read and widely discussed books in the country have been a novel by Michel Houellebecq titled *Soumission* (Submission) which imagines a France governed by a Muslim political party and a non-fiction book titled *Le Suicide Français* (The French Suicide) which questions the impact of Muslim immigration to France.

Bilefsky and Fisher (*New York Times*, 11 October 2006) suggest that in the contemporary European climate, an invisible line has been crossed when it comes to Muslims and Islam. For Allen (*Islamophobia*, 2010), not only does this have significant social, political and cultural impact but so too does it feed an ideological Islamophobia. This is important because as he goes on, Islamophobia

affects the way in which Muslims and Islam are contemporarily thought, spoken and written about; perceived, conceived and subsequently referred to; included and also excluded. Because of this, Islamophobia can no longer be seen - as indeed Muslims and Islam can no longer be seen – as something that can be relegated or dismissed to the fringes of contemporary European society. Whether contextualised socially, politically or economically, Islamophobia contemporarily informs and provides meaning about who and indeed what Muslims and Islam are currently seen and more importantly, understood to be. And one of the most important ways in which this occurs is through the political spaces, spaces that are increasingly influenced and informed by those from within the far-right. As Allen (*Politics & Religion*, 2010) goes on, these spaces provide the conduit through which meaning and knowledge about certain groups and individuals enters into the mainstream of societal thought and understanding, in turn becoming a part of that which is normative.

So while it may be that a sense of relief was palpable in the wake of the recent defeat of Hofer in the Austrian presidential elections, the underlying problem is still within touching distance, to the extent that Europe's Islamophobia is not going to go away. Pessimistically, the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis and political focus on Islamic State will among other factors mean that the situation will continue to deteriorate. While nation states in Western Europe have already seen the impact of a resurgent far-right, the sheer number of refugees arriving in Eastern Europe has the potential to provide a fertile seedbed for the far-right there too. While this sentiment is likely to first find form at street-level, there is a very real potential for these to rapidly inform and transform the political mainstream also. However, it is not only large numbers of refugees that will give further impetus to Europe's already resurgent far-right. Terror attacks that continue to be perpetrated by Europe-born Muslims will also have detrimental ramifications. If those from within the political mainstream fail to respond accordingly, those in the far-right will be waiting to not only voice their opposition but so too

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opportunistically fill the political void if the need arises. In doing so, those far-right voices will continue to exploit the view that Europe is under siege from an invading Islamic 'Other' that will increasingly need to be resisted by whatever means necessary. And that is an extremely worrying scenario.