



Deradicalization of Foreign Fighters and the Agency of Diaspora

RESEARCH

DŽENETA KARABEGOVIĆ

ASYA METODIEVA

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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ABSTRACT

This paper bridges research on countering violent extremism (CVE), where the role of ethnic and religious diaspora in deradicalization has been understudied and undertheorized, with diaspora and migration literature, which emphasizes diaspora actors as having their own agency and claim-making potential within larger transnational processes. Based on a review of both literatures and insights from interviews, we identify challenges and opportunities presented by the Austrian context and how they contribute to the understanding of the role of diaspora communities in deradicalization processes. Austria presents a relevant case study for several reasons. First, its radical milieu has a long history beginning with the emergence of the jihadi Salafi scene in the 90s and manifesting with foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) who joined ISIS between 2012 and 2017. Second, Austria hosts diverse diaspora populations that consist of multiple generations and is a highly politicized environment. This paper helps contextualize policy responses to foreign fighters. We argue that while diaspora belonging is not the main factor leading to radicalization, social networks that emerge from diasporas play a role in such processes. Thus, policies should de-emphasize religious and ethnic identities and empower social actors within diaspora communities to promote resilience against radicalization.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Dženeta Karabegović

Department of Sociology
and Human Geography,
University of Salzburg,
Salzburg, Austria

[dzeneta.karabegovic@
gmail.com](mailto:dzeneta.karabegovic@gmail.com)

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More than 42,000 foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from 120 countries joined Islamist groups between 2012 and 2017, of which more than 5,000 came from Western Europe and 1,000 from the Balkans. In Europe, on average 30%, or about 1,600 adult FTFs (with more than 200 children), have returned to their home countries (Pisiou & Renard 2022). This trend has led to an increase in programs and policies on deradicalization and reintegration. Despite the initial flow of returnees, only a limited number have been repatriated in recent years. Following the defeat of the so-called ‘caliphate’ in 2019, many FTFs have been detained in north-east Syria, including women and children. This situation presented governments with dilemmas regarding how to manage security risks while considering the repatriation of these captured individuals and their family members.

Many FTFs who left Western Europe had a migration background. Little scholarly work has explored how diaspora and migrant communities contribute (or not) to the deradicalization and reintegration of returnees. Policies more often address the role of institutions and various agencies dealing with such activities. Meanwhile, diaspora belonging appears in political discourse mostly as a ‘feature’ that can contribute to radicalization. Diaspora actors have recognition in research across multiple disciplines, but they do not always have an assigned role in countering violent extremism (CVE) policies, and even if they do, the sometimes-blurry contours of diaspora belonging complicate who among multiple voices in diaspora has the power and responsibilities to contribute to deradicalization. While CVE debates are highly centered around the role of institutions and their interaction with vulnerable communities/individuals, social actors that emerge from these communities and have the potential to be part of deradicalization processes (such as community leaders, social workers, school representatives, and NGOs) often remain abstract at the policy level.

This paper examines the contribution (or the lack thereof) of diaspora actors to deradicalization and reintegration. The study is guided by the following research question: how do stakeholders dealing with CVE understand the involvement of diaspora actors within and alongside other institutional responses to FTFs in Austria. We bridge research on CVE, where the role of ethnic and religious diaspora in deradicalization has been understudied and undertheorized, with diaspora and migration literature, which emphasizes diaspora actors as having their own agency and claim-making potential within larger transnational processes. One of the key theoretical tasks of this paper is to examine the links between institutional and diaspora responses to FTFs. The paper has a strong policy element and aims to enrich knowledge about deradicalization initiatives in Austria and Europe more broadly.

In what follows, the paper focuses on the intersection of CVE and diaspora literatures. We further discuss the role of diaspora communities in processes of radicalization, on one hand, and disengagement and deradicalization, on the other. We incorporate this discussion into ongoing debates in migration studies more broadly, which link radicalization to vulnerability and integration. We present insights into the radicalization of Balkan foreign fighters from Austria and analyze factors that had potentially contributed to the emergence of jihadists from the Balkan/Bosnian diasporas. We study the challenges and opportunities presented by the Austrian context, the role of diaspora communities in deradicalization processes, and how diaspora communities can play a more substantial role in deradicalization processes and prevent the radicalization of vulnerable individuals.

Previous research on CVE focuses on prevention, intervention, and rehabilitative efforts. While ‘counterterrorism’ implies countering an individual who has already taken steps toward committing violence or joining a terrorist group, CVE counters the ideological recruitment, focusing on the root causes of various terrorist motivations, and thus, seeks to prevent the same (Selim 2016: 95). The study of terrorism, including the latest research on IS mobilization, has been dominated by theories of ‘pathways’ with push and pull factors influencing individual trajectories into radicalization (Weine et al. 2013: 328). Consequently, a dominant CVE discourse refers to the need to build resilient communities that would prevent such pathways from recurring. Resilience in the CVE and counter-terrorism literature is not only a property of an individual but of families, communities, organizations, networks, and societies. While community resilience includes shared problem-solving and safe community spaces, resilience varies in relation to culture, context, language, history, and so on (Weine et al. 2013: 329).

Studies on CVE and FTFs place an emphasis on community engagement, which is seen as central to mitigating the risks of terrorism (Cherney & Hartley 2017: 3). The cooperation between policy and security agencies in western jurisdictions and Muslim communities is discussed in depth in relation to the mobilization of IS fighters in 2012 to 2017. Some criticisms point to tensions in such partnerships, such as overcoming distrust and generating trust; balancing the priorities of intelligence gathering, community engagement, and trust building; choosing partners and distinguishing between friend and foe, and levels of consultation and community input (Cherney & Hartley 2017: 1). Scholarship often places less emphasis on migrant communities, but rather prioritizes their religiosity, feeding into the ongoing securitization of migration, evident especially in the EU (Abbas 2012; Humphrey 2009; Huysmans 2002).

Although national CVE approaches refer to community partners, they rarely address who they are and how they are chosen (Weine et al. 2013: 330). Community gatekeepers are often the most well-connected, the most vocal, and the most mainstream or acculturated. However, communities are not homogeneous. They often have leadership rivalries and contested meanings, as well as different political, religious, and ethnic subgroups. This suggests a need to cooperate with multiple voices, particularly in fragmented and divided communities (Weine et al. 2013: 330).

Historically, diaspora communities have been studied as providing support to terrorist organizations and being involved in homeland conflicts (Hockenros 2003). Traditionally recognized as relevant non-state actors in new wars (Kaldor 2007), diaspora communities were ‘attached’ to terrorism as radical actors who took advantage of their positions abroad to fuel wars in their homeland or to influence policies toward war from a distance. Peace and conflict literature has garnered a more nuanced understanding about the variety of roles played by diaspora throughout multiple processes including, more recently, also involving diasporas in transitional justice measures. Diaspora communities have been linked to accelerating conflict dynamics in their former home countries (Lyons & Mandaville 2010), and to processes of post-conflict reconciliation and transitional justice (Karabegović 2018; Koinova & Karabegović 2019; Orjuela 2008, 2018). As the introduction lays out, this article aims to contribute to these debates by expanding on literature related to diaspora communities, and their role at the nexus of radicalization, terrorism, identity, and migration, with a special focus on second and third generation individuals.

Research on diaspora and migrant communities has taken stock of their vulnerability to extremism and radicalization in both scholarship and policy, increasingly examining existing narratives within countries of residence, how migrant and diaspora youth are targeted by the same. Scholars thus argue for differentiating between refugees, first- and second-generation diaspora, examining the impact of religiosity, and other factors in pursuing policy solutions (Haider 2015; Kaya 2020; Osler 2020). Scholars have examined links between migrants and radicalization, including refugees specifically, exploring how migration circumstances influence radicalization differently (Eleftheriadou 2020; McDowell 2020). The transnational component of online communities and communication channels to radicalize migrants, diaspora, and other vulnerable individuals on one hand, as well as to be used as a preventative measure on the other, is further noted in multiple studies (Conversi 2012; Kaya 2020; McDowell 2020).

It is important to note here that diasporas and migrant populations are not monolithic populations, with multiple factions and groups within communities that might have different perspectives and political beliefs (Féron & Lefort 2019; Ragazzi 2012). Second- and third-generation individuals who might not initially identify as belonging to diaspora populations themselves, may, depending on conflict import or events within their broader communities, suddenly find themselves mobilized (Baser 2014) or feel targeted because of their ethnicity or religion by host-country dynamics and thus become more vulnerable to radicalization (Liebmann 2019). This dynamic then becomes increasingly difficult once FTFs, having served their sentences, return to countries where they do not feel welcome or as belonging to their diaspora community, the broader migrant community, or the host country's mainstream population.

This challenge has implications for the multiple outcomes of CVE that stakeholders seek to achieve, especially concerning disengagement¹ and deradicalization, understood here as an attitudinal change (Khalil, Zeuthen, & Marsden 2023: 9). Goals concern not only individuals, but also the immediate social environment to which FTFs return. This includes reducing ties to malign influencers, diminishing the salience of social identities associated with violence, and enhancing ties to prosocial alternatives on both social media and in daily life. Finally, regarding ideology, the goal is to enhance willingness to question beliefs that legitimize and justify violence (Khalil, Zeuthen, & Marsden 2023: 4). Without ties to community members back home or communities of belonging more generally, FTFs have a more difficult time reintegrating.

The literature on diasporas has evolved beyond a simplistic view of them as either conflict perpetrators or peacebuilders, acknowledging their multifaceted roles. Diasporas are recognized for their potential to exacerbate tensions or contribute constructively to conflict resolution. These more nuanced understandings consider the effects of diaspora agency throughout the migration cycle and the impact of international mobility. Meanwhile, the role of diaspora in processes of disengagement and deradicalization has generally been understudied, whether it is in terms of their political engagement and potential as new citizens or through institutional processes beyond lobbying efforts. Scholars often approach these topics from the perspective of securitization (Hoffman 2007). More nascent work highlights the importance of differentiating between women and minors and focusing on their specific circumstances upon return (Cook & Vale 2018). Considering the targeting of migrant

¹ Disengagement is a process at the end of which the individual ceases to get involved in extremist or terrorist acts (Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) 2022).

and diaspora communities in many countries of settlement in Western Europe as potential terrorists or radical actors, their potential engagement in education, prevention, and deradicalization efforts becomes an interesting point of inquiry. Still, diaspora affiliation should not serve as a variable in radicalization, as it has a little explanatory power and creates risks for certain communities to be stigmatized (Weine et al. 2013: 328). Thus, we are interested specifically in the influence of diaspora communities in these deradicalization efforts and how they are considered in policy responses to countering violence.

Scholarly interest in post-Yugoslav diasporas has increased over the last decade. Early research provided different perspectives into Bosnian communities living transnationally with a focus on conflict-generated populations and their integration (Valenta & Ramet 2011) into their new countries. Over time, this research has flourished, considering the role of diaspora actors in foreign policy discourses, lobbying for transitional justice on a transnational level, comparative perspectives, and examining case studies of the Bosnian diaspora, including the ways in which they practice dual citizenship (Franz 2005; Halilovich et al. 2018; Karabegović & Hasić 2019; Karabegović & Mešić 2023). Diaspora mobilization is considered a process (Sökefeld, 2006), often triggered by specific events in the homeland, the country in which diaspora communities settle, and further utilized by diaspora individuals to build support, as demonstrated to date by diaspora scholars focused on multiple contexts (Baser & Toivanen 2018; Féron 2020; Mencutek & Baser 2018).

What is evident from our brief overview is that there is little conversation between terrorism and diaspora scholars with literatures rarely cross-referencing each other and thus developing in parallel rather than in concert with one another. Considering the research on terrorism, we argue radical actors, by virtue of a lack of diaspora governance strategies by their countries of origin (Gamlen 2019; Zapata & Rezaei 2020) or a lack of focus on engaging with deradicalization efforts in countries of residence, take advantage of existing media discourses to steer more individuals into radical milieus. This is evident as many recruits to the jihadi ideology connect more linguistically (as most of the imams preach in German, as evidenced in later sections) and religiously rather than by way of their diaspora background. Thus, we argue it is necessary to reassess how mainstream diaspora populations engage with questions not only of prevention but also of deradicalization to strengthen CVE in policy and the underlying vulnerabilities of diaspora and migrant populations to radicalization. The following section elaborates on our methodological approach.

METHODOLOGY

Our research questions concern the role of diaspora communities and the ways they engage in deradicalization and prevention processes. If they are not engaged, why? Our research is based on extensive desk research of relevant academic and policy research, official documents, as well as 10 expert interviews with individuals in Austria who have worked on issues of radicalization and deradicalization. Our interviewees all have had direct contact with or are part of the existing programs working on and toward deradicalization in Austria, including working within the institutions that help to implement them. As such, they have first-hand experience with the day-to-day challenges and understand how policy responses can be strengthened, especially when considering the potential of diaspora communities being more engaged. Each of the experts has either worked in law enforcement, in religious organizations, within

governmental institutions focused on migration, or has done extensive research on the topic. Some of the individuals were migrants themselves, while others had no migration experience. The questions were split into three categories: (1) knowledge and assessment of the jihadist networks operating in Austria; (2) assessment of the state policy toward foreign fighters and their families; and (3) assessment of the role of the Bosnian diaspora in Austria in radicalization and deradicalization practices. Each of the interviews, conducted between November 2022 and June 2023, lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. They were conducted in person with either of the two researchers, in English or German, primarily in Vienna, with some in Graz as well. Nearly all the interviews were recorded and transcribed. A couple of the interviewees did not want to be recorded. Instead, extensive notes were taken, and the interviews were summarized and discussed between the two researchers. The interviews are all anonymized, and care was taken throughout the research cycle to not identify individuals by name or to specify individuals to protect their privacy. Thus, interviewees were instructed to speak based on their own professional experiences and to share anecdotes without identifying markers.

The case of Austria is particularly relevant, as the majority of FTFs who departed from Austria to Iraq and Syria were predominantly second-generation immigrants from Chechnya, Turkey, and the Balkans (Counter Extremism Project (CEP) 2022). Austria has diverse diaspora populations that consist of multiple generations and has a highly politicized environment in which institutional actors have been accused of Islamophobic targeting of individuals (Sezgin 2019). Moreover, previous research has shown that humanitarian aid distributed in the Yugoslav Wars, mostly the Bosnian one, and channeled through diaspora actors played a role in the establishment of the Salafi scene in Austria. The resources that came through Islamic humanitarian organizations were essential to the rise of actors and activities that contributed to the growth of Salafism in the 1990s and the early 2000s. The subsequently established radical milieu increased the likelihood of some followers becoming FTFs. The role of diaspora-based Salafi influencers became particularly important in the postwar years, as they could cultivate the image of authority figures among their followers (Metodieva 2021). Thus, the Austrian context, especially its governmental responses to radicalization and reintegration, in combination with its numerous diaspora populations and historical engagement with conflict dynamics, provides a relevant case study to explore the intersection between diaspora communities, FTFs, and policy responses to radicalization. Beyond this, the Austrian case can be instructive for other countries in Europe with diaspora populations who might be vulnerable to radicalization amidst increasingly populist political discourse, including Nordic countries. While there is more research on CVE in the context of the UK, which is incorporated in this article, we consider this study to be informative in an additional deradicalization context, especially as Austria has barely experienced terrorist attacks. Other countries with sizeable diaspora populations, such as Sweden and Germany have seen these be increasingly politicized, however, there is less of a history of radicalization, as evident with the Austrian case from the 1990s forward. The following section highlights historical dynamics before elaborating on diaspora potential in deradicalization processes.

FTFS AND RADICALIZATION OF THE DIASPORA IN AUSTRIA OVER TIME

Austria has one of the highest per capita rates of FTFs in the EU. A total of 313 people traveled to Syria and Iraq by the end of 2017. While 55 of these people died there and 94 returned to Austria, 59 were prevented from traveling, and many of

them were convicted under anti-terrorism laws (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2018). Though men comprise the highest number of FTFs from Austria, many women also traveled to the war zones to join husbands, friends, or become IS brides. Many of the individuals who departed from Austria came from a migration background and disadvantaged communities and had experienced racism, religious discrimination, poverty, a lack of opportunity, social and societal rejection, and mental health issues (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2018). The majority belonged to either the Bosnian or Chechen communities. It is important to note here that these numbers represent a very small part of the communities, as Bosnians are among the largest five migrant populations in Austria, with nearly 100,000 living in the country, whereas there are around 26,000 Chechens, according to the Austrian Agency for Statistics. Moreover, these communities often associate themselves more with Austria than their home countries and are considered as some of the best integrated migrant communities in Austria (Migration & Integration 2022).

Around a fifth of the Bosnian foreign fighters who traveled to Syria left from Western Europe, including Austria, rather than Bosnia and Herzegovina, indicating they were living abroad prior to becoming FTFs. The majority of Albanian FTFs from the diaspora were reportedly radicalized in their host countries (Spahiu 2020), where the influence of radical preachers from the Balkans was previously seen as significant (Metodieva 2021). About 20% of the 403 FTFs from Kosovo, for instance, were born or grew up as second- or third-generation immigrants in western European countries (Spahiu 2020). Diaspora fighters were among the strongest IS supporters in the first days of the IS 'caliphate' (Perteshi 2020).

The role of diaspora-based influencers became particularly evident in the recruitment of FTFs. The key links to IS recruitment in Vienna lead to the radical influencer Mirsad O. and the meanwhile closed Altun Alem Mosque in Vienna. Mirsad O., originally from Sandžak, Serbia, played a key role in maintaining a contact network between Bosnian and Serbian Salafists (Hahn 2019). He preached in German and was also quite active on YouTube, where he attracted a lot of young followers. He was well connected to the Balkans, often visiting the Salafi communities in Bosnia. Mirsad O. was arrested in November 2014 and sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2016. Among other things, he was accused of recruiting FTFs in Austria. The circle around him had important logistic and financial responsibilities for the cause of jihad in Europe, maintaining close contacts with other terrorist cells. In fact, Mirsad O. was a contact person in Vienna for two radical influencers, Nusret I. and Bilal B. in Bosnia, who were recruiting FTFs for Syria.

It is important to note here that while Bosnian radical influencers set in diaspora were well connected, their propaganda activities were not aimed at any specific ethnic diaspora groups. On the contrary, they were preaching in German and were seeking to increase their popularity among various diaspora groups across Austria and Western Europe. One of their followers, Kujtim F., an IS supporter, failed to travel to Syria as a foreign fighter twice. Instead, in November 2020, he killed four people in Vienna. When he committed the attack, he was 20-year-old, a dual citizen of Austria and North Macedonia.

Since the defeat of IS in 2019, the Salafi movement in Austria has gradually become more fragmented with smaller networks that overlap in some parts but differ in part due to generational differences. Moreover, the period of 'star preachers' emerging from diasporas seems to have come to an end (Interview 5). Previously prominent radical influencers who were sentenced for recruitment of FTFs are still popular and play a

role in maintaining the status of the radical milieu, because they are now perceived as victims of the (Austrian) state (of the *kufar*) and their legacy remains important on a symbolic level, at least. Balkan radical influencers, who had previously been active, became constrained in coordinating propaganda and networks in Austria. While new figures step in, they have not become particularly prominent, partially due to the enhanced security response against jihadists, thus, they choose to remain less visible.

In political discourses in Austria, Salafism has often been portrayed as the breathing ground of jihadism. Previous research has examined how discourses in media and within public debate have increasingly become securitized, with a particular focus on questions of integration and youth in Austria who may be targeted by radicalized actors (Götsch 2017). More recently, Austria's paradoxical approach of linking integration challenges to Muslims and Muslim migrant communities without providing enough space for their representation in public, including exclusionary citizenship practices, has been problematized in detail (Hafez & Heinisch 2018; Sezgin 2019). At the same time, this has spilled over into parliamentary debates considering most FTFs have valid residence permits in Austria, if not Austrian citizenship. Investigations into potential radicals within these communities are encouraged in terms of general safety, but they are also seen as stigmatizing migrants and Muslim communities in Austria. In its 2018 annual report, Austria's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (BVT) argued that 'Islamist extremism, and Jihadist terrorism in particular, has been a persistent and potentially the largest threat to liberal-democratic societies' (CEP 2022). As such, the constellation of international events and the presence of radical actors have influenced Austria's political debates around integration and Muslim migrant communities, conflating the two rather than drawing on the nuance and the long-standing existence of Muslim minority and migrant communities and their active participation and high levels of integration.

Austrian FTFs are not treated any differently at the institutional level, regardless of their belonging to a diaspora community or not. One of our interviewees, an Austrian terrorism scholar, assesses the Austrian approach to FTFs as 'tough' compared to other European countries. Another interviewee referred to the case of an Austrian girl from Salzburg who joined the IS in Syria and gave birth there. Her parents are Austrians with no migration roots, the family lived in good socioeconomic conditions, yet the daughter converted to Islam and traveled to Syria to join IS. The parents have been trying to bring her back, but the girl is not treated any differently from Bosnian/Chechen FTFs. Still, the view of the larger society, which is also a persistent narrative in the media discourse, suggests that FTFs are mostly Bosnians and Chechens, and 'these are not our people.'

Most FTFs who return are prosecuted and imprisoned upon return. Some return to their old neighborhoods, others relocate. Most experience trauma from inflicting or witnessing violence. Some former FTFs are disillusioned and even remorseful, whereas others remain committed to violent Islamists ideologies, which creates potential for them becoming radical influencers or even 'terrorist sleepers' (Pisiou & Renard 2022: 21). FTFs are a major security concern precisely because of their battlefield experience, training in the use of weapons, and connections to international terrorist networks (Pisiou & Renard 2022: 35). According to Austrian policy, although only a small minority of FTFs return home to commit violent attacks, they may still play a role in radicalization and recruitment activities upon their return.

Austria has been highly reluctant to repatriate adult FTFs from Syria. Four children were brought back from Syria, as in one of the cases, the grandparents living in Austria

had to persistently ask for help from the state authorities. Only after the state could identify the mother of the children being dead, did the children receive help to return to Austria from the Al-Hol camp in Syria. Compared to other governments in Europe, the Austrian approach toward FTFs maintains rather a radical position translated into a 'leave them there' policy. This policy abuses FTFs' human rights and, more specifically, the right to a fair trial. The time spent in Syrian camps and prisons with very poor security and socioeconomic conditions increases the risk of further radicalization and the potential release or escape of FTFs (Metodieva 2022: 4).

Those FTFs who return to Austria are prosecuted and usually charged with membership in a terrorism organization. The most common charges across the EU (including Austria) refer to participation in a terrorist organization, which generally lead to relatively short prison sentences (about 5 years on average). Thus, at the time of writing, many may have completed their sentences and been released. Those who are not Austrian citizens become targets of administrative measures: asylum status/residence permit are not updated. In previous years, some Chechen citizens were deported, but there are some individuals who cannot return to where they came from. Some may remain in Austria as a result, but are unable to work, since they do not have a residence permit. More efforts have been deployed to prosecute returning FTFs for the more serious crimes that they may have committed, with limited success so far. Some countries have also started to strip FTFs of their European citizenship, which could limit their ability to return in the first place (RAN 2022: 36). Those individuals who do return or radicalized individuals who never leave Austria are the focus of deradicalization policies in Austria, which are subsumed within broader Austrian public discourse on extremism, religion, and migrants, which came to the forefront following the terrorist attack in Vienna in 2020. The following section focuses on the complex interplay of diaspora identities, integration, and extremist networks.

DIASPORA DYNAMICS AND RADICALIZATION IN AUSTRIA

The radicalization of Kujtim F. demonstrates that belonging to a particular diaspora group does not necessarily mean that radicalization happens within the framework of a single ethnic or religious group, but rather that radical influencers seek out individuals with migration backgrounds as they are considered more vulnerable. Austrian authorities opened investigations into 21 individuals connected to Kujtim F. and arrested 12 individuals who were in contact with the perpetrator of which a considerable number of individuals shared an ethnic Albanian background (Saal & Lippe 2021). The Vienna attacker grew up in the city he attacked and had little connection to the Balkans. He was connected to the radical milieu in Austria and had jihadi contacts in other European countries (Saal & Lippe 2021). Rather than being integrated within the diaspora and migrant community, he socialized with jihadi sympathizers, while growing up in Ottakring, a multicultural neighborhood in Vienna.

In the European context, scholars emphasize individual experiences of exclusion and discrimination as one of the most powerful triggers for radicalization. Previous research on European jihadists points to the integration failures of the second and third generations Muslims (Nesser 2018; Neumann 2012; 2016; Roy 2010). Neumann asserts that European Muslims often feel that Western societies have not offered them the respect and equality that they believe they deserve (Neumann 2007: 40). Thus, radical Islam in the European context is understood as an alternative offering

a community, a sense of belonging, and acceptance. These explanations have been dominant in research on European jihadists in the West, placing the discussion in the broader debate on multiculturalism and religion in modern society (Coolsaet 2016).

Ultimately, the links of the perpetrator to diaspora communities did not seem to have a particular role in facilitating the involvement of the Vienna attacker in violent extremism, but rather the existing jihadist networks he maintained. He attended two of the mosques in Vienna that were strongly influenced by jihadi Salafists, the Tewhid and Melit-Ibrahim, linked to Nedžad B., another relevant Bosnian radical influencer (Schmid & Marchart 2020). Kujtim F. was better connected to jihadi sympathizers in Austria and often socialized in circles influenced by diaspora radical influencers in Vienna who preyed on his vulnerabilities within Austrian society.

Regardless of the recruitment paths within migrant communities in Austria, it is important to note that those with radical viewpoints find each other and often recruit among individuals in the second and third generation, according to an interviewee who is a social worker in Vienna. In many cases, second- and third-generation young men who grow up together in Vienna, and do not speak Albanian, Bosnian, Serbian, or Chechen with each other communicate in German. Compared to the older Bosnian Salafists who were better connected to each other through social networks set in diaspora (Interview 5), the Salafi attitudes toward the ‘ummah’ enable more recently radicalized individuals to connect to each other, regardless of their ethnic background, fostering a new belonging to the ‘ummah.’ Salafism enables young people to get rid of the question ‘am I Bosnian or Austrian, or Chechen.’ Many share the same neighborhood, come from the same social class: disenfranchised people with often violent family history, share schools and urban spaces. The political context is then utilized to forward their radicalization by recruiters who take advantage of the lack of nuance, or the increased levels of populism in countries of residence, thus feeding into debates about the inability of Muslims and migrants to integrate successfully.

While Austria’s policies toward Muslims have traditionally been considered as a model for European integration of minorities, the increase in legal-political initiatives over the last decade has nurtured a more politicized environment that undermines the same. The trend of a new generation of jihadists departing from religiosity and moving toward criminal networks (Interview 3) demonstrates that the role of religious institutions in CVE is likely to change, leading them to reconsider how they engage with the broader public in terms of education on one hand and prevention and countering violence on the other. This is not reflected in government policies, which have often been aimed at combatting ‘political Islam.’ They have raised serious concerns as this may be misused to foster discrimination and violation of rights, such as freedom of religion, expression, association, and political activities of Austria’s Muslim communities, targeting and alienating them rather than involving them in combatting extremism and similar efforts.

The most prominent case has been that of Farid Hafez, one of Austria’s foremost researchers on Islamophobia and one of the authors of the European Islamophobia Report. His home was raided in late 2020 under the allegation that he was conducting terrorist activities. The search, intrusion, charges, and subsequent investigation were all dismissed due to their unsubstantiated nature, amidst his vocal and persistent argumentation and the support of other academics and public individuals in Austria for nearly 2 years. This has led Hafez to only intensify his criticism of governmental positions and push toward more enlightened policy and engagement in terms of Muslims in Austria in the media, through his scholarship and activism.

In fact, scholars have argued about Austrian public discourse is often dominated by anti-Muslim campaigns fueled by its political parties, which leaves little room for alternative narratives and instead encourages antagonism rather than openness or inquiry (Mattes 2018; Sauer 2022). Hafez's case, mentioned above, is simply one prominent example. This instrumentalization of Muslims does not encourage transparency and reflection on topics related to religion, extremism, migration, and belonging—whether in public discourse or among diaspora populations and makes many feel targeted or marked as not belonging to Austrian society. Moreover, it can be argued that Austria's citizenship regime, which does not allow for many second- and third-generation individuals to become citizens due to the high threshold for citizenship, the highest in Europe (Valchars & Bauböck 2021), often only strengthens this perception. In certain cases, it leads to levels of disenchantment that make individuals extremely vulnerable to radicalization, something recruiters are fully aware of and take advantage of (Metodieva 2022). The next section focuses on Austria's deradicalization initiatives, utilizing interview data to illustrate how mainstream diaspora populations can play a role in the deradicalization of individuals in Austria. It also examines how these efforts can counteract the influence of radical individuals who exploit vulnerabilities within broader diaspora communities.

AUSTRIA'S DERADICALIZATION EFFORTS

Austria's engagement related to combatting extremism (in terms of jihadism) has developed through a combination of governmental, private, and nongovernmental bottom-up initiatives over time. Following the Vienna attack, Austria's government created a new criminal offense of 'religiously motivated extremist connection,' which specifically focuses on organizations that seek to overturn the democratic constitutional order. The government back then called for the creation of a national registry of mosques and imams in the country, which would allow the government to more quickly close radical mosques and sanction those providing space to extremist preachers from abroad (CEP 2022). A reaction coming from migration groups and opposing such policies may further alienate those susceptible to radicalization (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2018). For example, migrants and foreigners who failed to cooperate with integration programs may be denied social benefits (Riedel & Chmielowski 2020). Despite attempts to improve social cohesion and reduce radicalization and violent extremism, some of the measures introduced by Austria in recent years have opened the path to further marginalization and radicalization (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2018). The concern is that such policies seem specifically aimed at migrants, foreigners, and members of the Muslim diaspora communities. A comprehensive overview of the country's deradicalization and CVE measures is beyond the scope of this article, although previous research has demonstrated that more comprehensive resources and research are needed to better understand the Austrian environment (Götsch 2017). Comparative work on deradicalization efforts in other countries has similarly highlighted the need to move beyond simplistic engagement that reproduces existing inequalities between migrants and nonmigrants, especially Muslims and non-Muslims (Liebmann 2019).

There is no or little public discourse by individuals who have gone through deradicalization processes in Austria. Public debate in Austria has shifted in the last decade, firstly because of the Freedom Party and then through centrist political parties, toward an understanding that 'political Islam' is something the country needs to be protected

from (Hafez 2022). This in turn is part of a trend in Austria that equates migrant and diaspora communities with their religious belonging, overestimating the influence of religion in their lives as opposed to other factors (Mourão Permoser et al. 2010).

Meanwhile, in countries such as the UK, individuals such as Ed Husain or Maajid Nawaz have published widely on their views and evolution from Islamism to contribute to education, foster more support for deradicalization programs, shift perspectives, and foster understanding about the vulnerability of youth in diaspora communities through their own experiences. One of the interviewees noted that this might be in part since Austria has not had a lively public debate in terms of extremism, that much of the media discourse is dominated by Islamophobia, and there is a general lack of knowledge about Islam in society. This, along with the country's turn toward populism, is often combined with a securitized perspective on both migrants and Muslims (Hafez 2022; Hödl 2010; Wonisch 2021).

Smaller initiatives at the city level, such as in Vienna or within Islamic centers, focused on detainees and prisoners, have demonstrated their effectiveness in Austria for individuals who return from fighting or are prone to being radicalized while in the country. For example, the city of Vienna works with conflict-generated diaspora communities such as groups from the Western Balkans and Chechens, as well as those who arrived more recently (from Afghanistan and Syria) to build community among each other but also share the same within the broader Austrian context. Individuals, usually those who share a background with migration populations or might be migrants themselves, are employed by the city to work on intercultural dialogue and to promote better understanding. Still, interviewees agreed that more resources and a more comprehensive approach are needed, with an increased amount of public discourse that approaches extremism and the vulnerabilities to it from a less securitized, politicized, and Islamophobic perspective.

Different levels of government and non-state actors, including religious organizations, coordinate the institutional responses aimed at deradicalization, and help individuals reintegrate into society. One of the successful initiatives that include civil society and diaspora actors was a video campaign² that uses the visual framework of IS propaganda to create counter narratives in Austria. The network behind the project consisted of youth workers, filmmakers, scholars of Islamic studies, psychologists, psychotherapists, political scientists, sociologists, education scientists, an Islamic chaplain, and young people (individuals who have left the jihadist subculture, as well as young Muslims who want to take a position against jihadism). The campaign created authentic alternative narratives to jihadist and Islamist-extremist online propaganda by applying online street work and narrative-biography methods. Jamal al-Khatib was inspired by a young prisoner who managed to disengage from the jihadist subculture in Austria. He told his youth worker that he wished to write a book about his experiences and thus, to prevent others from making the same mistakes. In some of the videos, former extremists speak BCS language and discuss topics of religion and the Yugoslav wars, meaning that the campaign aimed to engage viewers with migration background in Austria.

While religious organizations and governmental and nongovernmental initiatives have partnered over the last decade to educate, work toward deradicalization, and

2 The details can be accessed here: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-collection-search/jamal-al-khatib_en.

foster the potential for detainees to reintegrate into Austrian society, there has been less direct engagement with diaspora organizations or communities in the Austrian context (Götsch 2017). Several interviewees explained this is in part due to a fear of association with 'radicalization' or 'extremism' in communities that may be politicized to begin with. Individuals who belong to mainstream diaspora communities often do not feel it is their responsibility to respond to individuals' actions, especially if these have an overall negative impact on their own communities. For many former Yugoslav communities in Austria, there is a sense of belonging to Austrian society and a feeling of being home in Austria. In fact, these groups are often touted as being the 'best integrated' migrant and diaspora communities (Migration & Integration 2022). They are not incentivized to act as a bridge between migrant communities and the broader Austrian public.

Following the Vienna attack, the migrant community belonging to individuals who stood up to the attacker and of victims who themselves belonged to migrant and diaspora communities in Austria was highlighted. In this way, radicalized individuals with migration histories were not only considered as not belonging to Austrian society but also as outsiders in their respective migrant or diaspora communities. Efforts at deradicalization by religious organizations and others become even more challenging as reintegration into society becomes difficult, especially if individuals have been under investigation or away from the communities in which they belong for longer periods of time. One interviewee working on deradicalization in Austria noted, 'It's easy to explain away an absence of a few months, but when this is more like one or two years, it becomes more difficult.' Restoring positive relationships with their families and social networks, especially from migrant communities, is essential. However, in some cases, the social network and family do not have a positive impact or may even be conspiring with the offender while they are in prison (RAN 2022: 63). In some cases, the family feels ashamed and stigmatized by the affiliation of their relative with a terrorist group and does not want to be in contact. If this is the case, it will take time to rebuild relationships and trust (RAN 2022: 63). Thus, a careful assessment is necessary before involving diaspora communities, stepping beyond family and social networks, and potentially exposing individuals to further ostracization among migrant and diaspora communities they might be perceived as being close to.

Creating sustainable options that not only ensure deradicalization efforts succeed but also promote preventative measures without alienating migrant and Muslim communities should be the most important goal for all institutional and noninstitutional actors. Moreover, it is important to remember that there are significant differences between Muslim and migrant communities within Europe. Neumann (2007) finds differences between countries in Southern Europe, where Muslim immigration is recent, and those in which the second and third generations of European Muslims are reaching adolescence. In countries with no second or third generation of European Muslims, neither the language nor the conflict between Western society and traditional culture appear to be pivotal issues (Neumann 2007). Religion can help empower young second- and third-generation European Muslims by fostering and negotiating overarching identities that help them on one hand to maintain their religious practice while also participating within their societies, as has been the case for Muslims in Austria (Hafez 2017).

Rather, the level of politicization in countries of settlement has been demonstrated to securitize religion and migrants and diaspora members who identify as being Muslim, thus vilifying and instrumentalizing whole communities for political gain while at the

same time requiring them to educate and continuously demonstrate their belonging and levels of integration (Hafez 2021). Scholars in diaspora studies inherently understand this tension, having long argued that diaspora populations cannot be considered as homogenous, and that analysis needs to account for the numerous cleavages that may exist within groups (Féron & Lefort 2019). Hence, the role that family, social networks, religious institutions, and broader communities play as well as engagement, employment, and potential education opportunities play must be considered in detail, including the ways in which these interact, in creating policy responses that foster deradicalization and prevent radicalization of other individuals. Examining both government initiatives and diaspora dynamics underscores the crucial need for inclusive policies.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the underexplored role of diasporas in deradicalization efforts. It underscores the necessity of including diaspora communities in deradicalization programs within host countries. This inclusion is vital not only for preventing radicalization but also for facilitating the successful reintegration of individuals who were previously radicalized. Austria's experience with terrorism has been limited compared to other countries in Europe, although it has been the site of radicalization efforts and has experienced a terrorist attack in 2020, which led to renewed debates about deradicalization efforts, the integration of migrant communities, the role of Islam, and Muslim communities' belonging. This article has highlighted the lack of interconnectedness of diaspora studies with deradicalization research to consider how states can improve their CVE practices and focus on public discourse around questions of migrant belonging, Muslim communities, and radicalization. There is a need to engage more with diaspora and migrant communities who are targeted by populist political rhetoric on one hand and expected to help with the reintegration efforts of those who have been radicalized on the other, without being offered concrete tools or being explicitly included in state responses to radicalization or deradicalization.

Considering the increased political engagement of second- and third-generation diaspora individuals, this will only become more salient in Austria. Using the case of post-Yugoslav diaspora communities in Austria, many of whom identify as Muslim and who are maturing politically and increasingly visible and represented in Austria, this article provides perspectives about how to best do this keeping in mind that second and third generation diaspora individuals are particularly targeted by radical actors that are not representative of migrant or diaspora communities overall. Only through inclusive endeavors that seek to both harness and enhance existing social connections can resilient communities, whether in Austria or elsewhere, flourish. For example, this research can thus also inform future comparative research in countries such as Sweden, Germany, and the United Kingdom, countries with sizeable diaspora populations, especially in the second and third generation on one hand, and policy decisions on the other.

We illuminate the role played by radical influencers and their exploitation of political debates surrounding migration, integration, and Islam within the public sphere. This underscores the need for a restructuring of Austria's public discourse concerning Islam and its Muslim communities. Such a revision is imperative to cultivate inclusivity and garner support for Austrian citizens and residents, irrespective of their religious backgrounds.

The article points to the contributions made by diaspora and migrant communities in mitigating radicalization and facilitating deradicalization processes. To enhance these efforts, it is imperative to extend involvement beyond religious organizations and actively engage migrant and diaspora communities that have deep roots in Austria, many of whom possess Austrian citizenship. This targeted approach is crucial, especially given the strategic efforts by radical Salafi actors to exploit ongoing public debates in their favor.

From a security standpoint, prioritizing policies addressing FTFs still detained in Syria, including women and children, is crucial due to the unstable conditions and volatile situation in the region. Emphasizing the active involvement of diaspora actors in formulating and implementing sustainable policies becomes imperative. By focusing on strategies such as having these individuals serve their sentences in Austria before reintegration, policymakers can proactively mitigate the risk of future radicalization. With Austrian citizens still being held in Syria, the relevance of these questions remains, underscoring the need for comprehensive and community-engaged approaches to facilitate successful reintegration.

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AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Dženeta Karabegović  orcid.org/0000-0002-7143-2084

Division of Sociology and Cultural Studies, University of Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria

Asya Metodieva  orcid.org/0000-0002-8775-6227

Institute of International Relations, Prague, Czech Republic

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