The Haim Striks Faculty of Law

המרכז למשפט ואנטישמיות
CENTER FOR LAW AND ANTISEMITISM

Interview with a New Research Fellow of the Center for Law and Antisemitism – Dr. Hüseyin Çiçek

We are pleased to introduce the Center for Law and Antisemitism's new Research Fellow, Dr. Hüseyin Çiçek. He is a scholar of religion, law, and political theory, and a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Vienna. His research focuses on antisemitism, political Islam, minority–majority relations, and the role of religion in contemporary legal and political systems, with particular attention to European and Turkish contexts.

In this interview, Dr. Çiçek reflects on the analytical limits of speaking about "Islam in Europe" as a single phenomenon, examines contemporary patterns of antisemitism within Turkish and Kurdish settings, and discusses the erosion of liberal institutions and the role of the scholar in times of polarization and conflict.

Can you tell us a bit about yourself - what led you to study the dynamics between religion, minorities, and identity?

This interest is closely linked to my personal background. As a Kurdish, Zaza-speaking Alevi (Zaza is an Iranian language, often associated with Kurdish communities in eastern Turkey), I engaged with these issues at a very early stage. My first professional training was as a construction worker, and on various construction sites I worked alongside both neo-Nazis and Islamists. In these environments, prejudice and hatred were not abstract concepts but tangible and directly experienced realities.

At the same time, I developed a strong desire to better understand and connect the historical, legal, and religious differences underlying these attitudes. After completing evening school, I decided to study political science, law, theology, and anthropology at the University of Innsbruck. As a Kurdish Alevi, one is constantly pushed into a position of having to define one's identity, one's relationship to Islam, and one's loyalty to the state in which one was born. This continuous attribution and questioning of belonging profoundly shaped my academic path.

How has your personal background shaped your research interests and your perspective as a scholar?

Kurdish Alevis constitute a minority both in their countries of origin and in German-speaking societies. This was the central motivation and background for my scholarly focus on hostility as a general social phenomenon and on antisemitism in particular. I was also fortunate to study with René Girard and his students (a French thinker who wrote extensively on violence, social imitation, and the scapegoat mechanism), where I learned about the relationship between violence and society.

Experiences of exclusion in Turkey as well as in German-speaking contexts led to a growing and sustained interest in these issues. They sharpened my awareness of the mechanisms through which minorities are constructed, marginalized, and instrumentalized, and they have fundamentally shaped my perspective as a scholar of law and the social sciences.

In your view, can we really speak of "Islam in Europe" as a single phenomenon, or are we dealing with very different social and religious groups?

I do not consider it analytically sound to speak of "Islam in Europe" as a single phenomenon. Rather, we are dealing with different forms of Islam, such as Turkish Islam, Arab Islam, and historically established native Muslim communities, for example in Poland or Ukraine, where Islamic communities existed with distinct ethnic characteristics. Differentiation is therefore essential.

In German-speaking countries today, Turkish Muslims and their organizations dominate, followed by Arab Muslim communities and other groups with their own institutional structures. Although all of these groups understand themselves as part of the Umma, they possess distinct identities, interests, and worldviews. Turkish Muslims, not even followers of the Milli Görüş movement (a Turkish Islamist-political movement active also among Turkish communities in Europe), would question the territorial borders of Turkey in the name of the Umma. Moreover, there are resentments and mutual rejection both within and between these groups.

Fear of Muslims in Europe exists for various reasons. Some reject Muslims because they are perceived as foreigners, while others believe that Islam should not have a place in Europe at all. At the same time, we must distinguish between broad perceptions and social reality: when the integration of people with Muslim backgrounds is clearly defined and structured, it in fact leads to broader civic participation and to the exercise of political and social rights. There are countless police officers, lawyers, construction workers, and others who are Muslim and who contribute significantly to the functioning of countries such as Germany.

At the same time, the threat to democratic order does not come from only one group: alongside violent Islamists living in Europe, there are also right-wing extremists - sometimes identifying as Christian - who wish to see today's Germany disappear.

What trends of antisemitism do you currently observe within the Turkish-Muslim diaspora in Europe? Has anything changed since October 7?

Antisemitism functions globally as a kind of binding agent that brings together very different groups, even when they otherwise want nothing to do with one another. Antisemitism in Turkey has never ceased to exist, and Turkish Muslims often view Jews with mistrust and prejudice. This was already the case before October 7. Antisemitism is also widespread among Kurds, and this must be stated explicitly.

The October 7 massacre provided the Turkish government with an opportunity to express its antisemitism more openly on the international stage, particularly by portraying Israel as indifferent toward civilians and the so-called "freedom fighters" of Hamas. Hamas is framed as having a legitimate right to resist Israel by all means, while Israel is depicted as never having seriously intended to establish peace.

What role do Qatar and Turkey play in the dissemination of anti-Jewish rhetoric? Are we dealing with religious ideology, political interests, or both?

Both states pursue a geopolitical interest in leading the Muslim world and make use of the means available to them. Their anti-Jewish or antisemitic rhetoric operates on different levels. Their alliance is no secret.

However, I would not go so far as to equate the Turkish Muslim Brotherhood - that is, the political successors of Necmettin Erbakan (a Turkish Islamist politician and former prime minister, and the founder of the Milli Görüş movement) - with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Neither Erbakan nor Erdoğan will ever abandon Turkish nationalism. This nationalism is not based on an Umma ideology. While Turkish Islam rhetorically references the Umma, it does not question the territorial borders of the nation-state in favor of a fictitious Umma.

You have also studied the impact of religion on foreign policy. How does religion shape perceptions of "the Other?"

Since the end of the Cold War, we can observe a gradual shift away from the liberal constitutional state. In this context, Muslims, Christians, and Jews increasingly use the Other as a projection surface. In various nation-states, we can observe how executive and judicial institutions, as well as liberal democratic values, are undermined and hollowed out with religious justification. Foreign policy often serves as a tool for legitimizing or concealing such developments.

In many cases, Western responses to antisemitism and Islamist extremism seem to trigger counter-radicalization. What causes this dynamic, and how can it be prevented?

This is an important and complex question. Not all minorities in Europe constitute a threat, Muslims included. In Austria, xenophobia became most visible at a time when many immigrants, including Muslims, were already integrated and had shaped urban life through restaurants and other businesses.

There is fear of asymmetrical relationships because the Other is perceived as fundamentally different. At the same time, symmetry between groups can also generate conflict. In this context, only a strong rule of law can ensure order, fairness, and balance.

What do you see as the role of the scholar in times of polarization, conflict, and institutional erosion?

I hope that we as scholars can clearly identify the causes of polarization and precisely expose the erosion of institutions. On a personal level, like many colleagues around the world, I try not to capitulate to these developments but to actively resist them.