Addressing Root Causes – the Example of Bruno Kreisky and Austria’s Confrontation with Middle Eastern Terrorism

by Thomas Riegler

Abstract

The tenure of Austrian chancellor Bruno Kreisky (1970-1983) is best known as a period of socio-political reform that profoundly transformed and modernized the country. Kreisky is also renowned as a statesman whose international stature was disproportional to Austria’s actual geopolitical insignificance. What is less well known is Kreisky’s counterterrorism policy, which is exceptional both in the context of the 1970s and 1980s as well as that of today. In short: Kreisky argued strongly that terrorism could only be tackled if its root causes were addressed. In order to fight terror, the grievances causing it have to be removed as a form of prevention. Kreisky specifically focused on the Middle Eastern conflict, which, from his point of view, could only be solved by means of a just peace. To achieve this result, a legitimate political representation of the Palestinian cause had to be fostered, thereby rendering the rampant “armed struggle” of militant Palestinians obsolete. This article aims to explore and evaluate Kreisky’s unique counterterrorism policy - both in terms of its successes and failures: on the one hand, Kreisky contributed to the international legitimisation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and its chairman, Yassir Arafat, while, on the other hand, Austria suffered some ‘blowback’ in the form of terrorist attacks orchestrated by hard-line Palestinian elements.

Terrorism in Austria

Terrorism is a rare phenomenon in Austria’s recent political culture. A study by the author of this article puts the toll of political violence at 27 dead and 141 wounded between 1945 and 2010.[1] By comparison, the terrorism orchestrated by the Red Army Faction (RAF) in West Germany alone claimed 67 dead and 230 wounded over more than two decades.[2] Among other factors, Austria has been relatively spared from terrorism because of the nature of its post-war political system, which had been devised to provide maximum stability and consensus. Possible areas of conflict were defused by reforms from above during the 1970s and did not produce societal tensions like in neighbouring West Germany or its southern neighbour Italy.[3] Yet a platform for possible conflict existed due to the struggle for minority rights in South Tyrol during the 1950s and 1960s; Austrian right-wingers actively supported the struggle of German-speakers against the dominance of the Italian central state. During the 1970s, the southern province of Carinthia witnessed occasional bomb attacks on infrastructural targets due to a conflict regarding non-German-speakers stressing their minority rights.[4] Left-wing extremism played only a minor role – in 1977 two Viennese students assisted the Western German “2nd June Movement” in holding a prominent Austrian businessman for ransom. Later, in 1995, two activists were killed,
when the explosive device they had planted detonated prematurely. In comparison, right-wing terrorism was a larger factor – reaching a highpoint during the 1990s when a lone perpetrator mailed several “waves” of letter bombs and, on one occasion, planted a booby trap – resulting in four people being killed and 15 others wounded.

To a large extent, terrorism was the work of foreign elements operating on Austria soil: Armenian and Kurdish extremists targeted Iraqi, Iranian and Turkish institutions, while the Libyan secret services tried to kill a prominent dissident on two occasions – but without success. In 1989, three Kurdish politicians were lured into a trap and murdered by Iranian agents. Yet it was Middle Eastern terrorism that formed the single most virulent brand of political violence in Austria: Both in 1973 and 1975 there were two major hostage crises while one bomb attack occurred in 1979. During the 1980s, the country was attacked three more times. All in all, nine people were killed and 71 wounded. Apart from these violent episodes, Austria - and especially Vienna - served mostly as a base or transit point for operations elsewhere.[5] Therefore, the official response to terrorism was limited and avoided to create controversies as it did in the German Federal Republic. Thus, analyst Heinz Vetschera summed up the response of government and society in Austria: “Modern terrorism has induced adaptations rather than innovations in the legal, political and organizational approaches to counter-terrorism.”[6]

**Kreisky and Palestinian Terrorism**

Born in 1911, as the son of Jewish clothing manufacturer, Bruno Kreisky had escaped Nazi persecution by emigrating to Sweden in 1938. Returning to Austria in 1946, he made a political career, rising to foreign minister in 1959 and to chairman of the Socialist party in 1967. A stunning election victory in 1970 made him chancellor. He successfully defended the Social-Democratic party’s electoral hegemony in two successive polls before leaving office in 1983, when the party’s absolute majority was lost. Kreisky’s “reign” soon became the object of nostalgic idealisation. He had left a distinct mark in almost every sphere of policy, but it was his handling of international diplomacy that made Kreisky a politician of international stature and significance. As a skilled negotiator, he strongly believed in the power of dialogue and compromise to overcome even major differences, whether it be Cold War superpower rivalry or the muddles of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

While attracted to “Third World” affairs and the decolonisation struggle in general, and concerned about the effects of the energy crisis of 1973, Kreisky concentrated his mediation efforts especially on Middle Eastern affairs. As an agnostic Jew and one who harboured highly controversial anti-Zionist beliefs, Bruno Kreisky remained highly critical of Israeli actions and was sympathetic towards the Palestinians cause. This identification also stemmed from his own past as a political refugee and an Austrian patriot engaged in the restoration of his home country from Nazi occupation.
In 1974 Yasser Arafat had addressed the United Nations in his famous “gun and olive branch”-speech - thereby providing new possibilities for diplomatic initiatives. Until then – starting in 1967/1968 – Palestinians had concentrated on the “armed struggle” as the sole means to liberate their homeland. Once their commandos began to hijack international flights, the Palestinian cause became almost synonymous with “international terrorism”. While also condemning terrorism, Kreisky was careful when applying the term. For him two forms of terrorist violence existed. Firstly, “terrorism for its own sake”- by which he referred to Italian or West German left-wing extremism. That was derided by Kreisky. He argued that in the context of a democratic society, terrorism was extremely damaging and could lead to a dictatorship. But there was another form of terrorism, one which he approached with a sense of understanding: “Terrorism is one of the political weapons of the underground, of illegality. […] They are cruel and I reject them without constraint. (…) But there are dictatorships, in which underground movements are fighting for freedom and democracy, and occasionally by means of employing terrorism”.[7]

This sort of violence, according to Kreisky, often marked the start of a political movement or a subsequently respectable political career. To emphasise this point, Kreisky frequently brought up the example of the Nobel Peace prize winner and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who had fought both British occupation forces and Arabs in 1940s.

When it came to the crucial question of how to deal with terrorism, Kreisky took the view that one had to address the root causes of the problem. In 1982, when he hosted a reception for Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi, Kreisky stated: “Without a doubt, we are living in a time, where politically motivated terrorist attacks take place frequently. We loathe these actions and fight them with all means. One instrument to prevent this from happening, is to address the causes which lead up to terrorism”.[8] At the same time Kreisky dismissed the notion that a counterterrorism policy relying only on law enforcement measures or the military could be successful. Therefore, when it came to hostage takings, saving the lives of innocent people had absolute priority for him – especially after considering the bloody disaster of the rescue effort for the Israeli athletes during the Munich Olympics in 1972.

In 1973, Austria was for the first time directly confronted with Middle Eastern terrorism: Two gunmen, belonging to the “Eagles of the Palestinian Revolution”, entered a train with Jewish émigrés from the Soviet Union and took three people hostage. After long hours of negotiation, Kreisky granted them a plane to fly out of the country. Furthermore, he imposed restrictions on the transfer of Russian Jews via Austria by closing down a camp operated by the Jewish Agency. This move drew angry protests from Israel and throughout the West, but served its purpose of deflecting attention from the continuing emigration process, which was seen by the Arab world as a hostile demographic strengthening of Israel’s position.[9]

On December 21st, 1975, Illich Ramirez Sanchez (aka Carlos), acting on orders by Wadi Haddad, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - Special Command (PLFP-SC), attacked an OPEC summit in Vienna. This operation against the Organisation of the
Petroleum Exporting Countries, possibly sponsored by Muammar al-Gaddafi, had nothing to do with Austrian politics – its aim was blackmail in the form of a huge ransom to arm the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon. With three people already killed during the takeover of the OPEC building, Kreisky wanted to avoid further bloodshed at all cost. He secured the release of all Austrian employees and provided a flight that took the terrorists and their remaining 33 hostages to Algeria, where the crisis was finally brought to an end after two days. Confronted again with criticism, Kreisky defend his position: “Fighting terror through complete refusal of terrorist’s demands has resulted in the terrorist’s capitulation only in a minority of cases, but all too often in more victims. Apart from that, a strategy of retribution has brought about an escalation of terrorism”. But he conceded that so far negotiations also had not been successful in tackling the problem.

Kreisky’s actions were not unique at that time – most European governments had given in to terrorist demands. Yet a major policy shift was about to take place. Only some days before the OPEC hostage taking, the Dutch government had refused to consider the demands of South Moluccan separatists occupying a passenger train. Two hostages were killed as a result, but shortly afterwards the terrorists surrendered to police. In 1977 the Moluccan separatists from the Dutch diaspora struck again and occupied yet another train. After three weeks, a military rescue mission was finally authorised - it ended in the death of two of the hostages and six of the nine gunmen. Also in 1977, West Germany’s chancellor Helmut Schmidt remained defiant after the Red Army Faction (RAF) had kidnapped industrial leader Hanns-Martin Schleyer. The chancellor even sent the elite police unit GSG-9 to Somalia to storm a passenger jet, which had been taken over by the PLFP-SC in order to strengthen the RAF’s demands. The rescue mission was successful, yet Schleyer was executed in response. Kreisky did not approve of Schmidt’s handling of the crisis, because of the risks involved. He questioned whether a government had in fact the authority to endanger the lives of hostages and reached the conclusion: “In my opinion no government has that right”.

Getting Down to the Root of the Problem

By firmly rejecting counter violence and a policy of “no compromise”, Kreisky took a stand in a “mined” discourse. Basically, then and now, two major schools of thought are clashing. One school, which included Kreisky, stress the importance of addressing the political, social, and economic root causes for terrorism. For the other school of thought, political violence exits detached from objective reasons. Adherents of this second school of thought are primarily interested in the manifestations of the problem and how to “fight” it best. A good example for this is former Israeli UN-ambassador and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In his influential book “Terrorism. How the West Can Win” (1986) he argued: “The attempts to explain away terrorist outrages as the result of the ‘desperation’ of individuals or groups are not only based on a simplistic fallacy; they neatly echo the terrorists’ own assertions, which are meant to legitimise their criminal actions and divert public attention from the real forces behind terrorism.”
“real forces” for Netanyahu were in fact rogue nations, sponsoring terrorist “surrogate warfare” in their struggle against Western democracies. One-sided interpretations like Netanyahu’s have since the 1970s become dominant in the official discourse on terrorism. By negating any context, political violence can, for example, be characterized as simply the product of an “evil ideology”, devoid of any basis in reality. As a consequence, security and military counterstrategies are advocated as if there is no alternative.

The other school of thought analyses the subject in relationship to its root causes. The Irish researcher Louise Richardson, for example, observed in 2006 that most explanations of terrorism centre on war-mongering states and crazy loners, but the “best explanations” can be found on the level of societies that produce terrorism.[13] American expert Martha Crenshaw stated in 1995: “Both causes and consequences of terrorism can only be understood in terms of interaction among political actors, primarily governments and oppositions, at specific points in history.”[14] At the same time, Crenshaw cautioned that explaining terrorism simply in terms of “background conditions” (social, economic, demographic, political, cultural) is insufficient, since terrorism is a complex and diverse phenomenon.[15] In line with this, Norwegian political analyst Tore Bjorgo differentiated between general root causes and “trigger causes” – those “immediate circumstances and events” that motivate and facilitate terrorism.[16] According to Bjorgo, “an outrageous act committed by the enemy, lost wars, massacres, contested elections, policy brutality, or other provocative events”[17] might be the spark that sets off terrorism, while general issues like poverty, unemployment, discrimination or social injustice provide fertile ground for radical groups to legitimise the use of violence in the name of nationalism, revolution, or religion.

In line with this type of discourse, Kreisky’s approach is an excellent example for understanding terrorism as an expression of grievances shaped by the interaction of political and social forces. Instead of dismissing any relationship with politics right away, Kreisky understood terrorism and politics as relating to each other. For him the expulsion of the Palestinians, the conditions in the refugee camps, the military incursions of Israel into neighbouring Lebanon and the lack of an internationally recognized Palestinian representation were responsible for the emergence, escalation, and persistence of Middle Eastern terrorism. On the other hand, it has to be said that Kreisky has neglected the legitimate motives on the part of Israel, like its right to self-defence and the deterrence of terrorism. Also, his stance on the Palestinian issue did not result in de-radicalisation, since Middle Eastern terrorism was also fuelled by factors beyond his limited influence – the regional interests of actors like Iraq, Libya or Syria and the overriding conflict between East and West during the Cold War. This illustrates that addressing root causes is a complex and difficult manoeuvre since there are always powerful interests affected by parties that resent changes to the status quo. This might be a foremost reason why this approach is rarely chosen and terrorism is countered within the traditional security- and defence policy.[18]
Kreisky, Arafat, and the PLO

Despite setbacks, Kreisky’s preventive counterterrorism policy enjoyed some significant successes. By granting the PLO a political dimension, he opened both space and possibilities for the development of moderate forces inside the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. In turn, this weakened the radicals and contributed to the political endorsement of Arafat. It began after the October War of 1973, when the Socialist International (SI) sent Kreisky on several fact-finding missions to Arab countries and to Israel in order to explore possibilities for a settlement of the Middle East conflict. In his concluding report, Kreisky stated that peace was only possible by including the PLO as the rightful representative of the Palestinian people. In 1979, Kreisky broke further ground, by granting the PLO-representative in Vienna diplomatic status. This was the first official recognition of the organisation in the Western world and it was primarily done to inspire other countries to follow. In July 1979, Kreisky hosted a widely reported meeting between Arafat and Willy Brandt, then chairman of the SI, in order to provide further legitimacy for the PLO-leader further.[19]

Yet most of the time Kreisky worked discretely behind the scenes: in 1976 he functioned as patron of secret talks between Israeli peace activists and the PLO special envoy Issam Sartawi. Only one year later, Sartawi and the “red prince”, Ali Hassan Salameh (who was suspected to be the mastermind behind the taking of Israeli hostages at the Munich Olympics in 1972) met a West German government official behind closed doors in Vienna. The PLO offered their counterpart assistance in locating RAF-members in the Middle East in exchange for political recognition.[20] In May 1979, Kreisky opened up another diplomatic channel, this time by bringing together Sartawi and US ambassador Milton A. Wolf.[21]

Chancellor Kreisky also continually warned Arafat about the dangers of terrorism. While Arafat’s own organisation Fatah had abandoned international terrorism in 1974, other groups under the PLO-umbrella continued their armed struggle. In 1979, the Syrian sponsored “Eagles of the Palestinian Revolution” again struck in Austria by bombing the Viennese synagogue. Fortunately, the bomb claimed only material damage, but nonetheless Kreisky was deeply upset. He wrote to Arafat: “I find this sudden rise in Palestinian terrorism extremely damaging to the Palestinian cause. It makes it more difficult for me to enlarge the circle of Palestinian supporters and it negates my previous efforts”. [22] In 1981 there was another crisis of confidence: The PLO representative in Vienna was caught in the presence of two men from Arafat’s own bodyguard while smuggling weapons. Even more damaging proved to be the murder of Issam Sartawi in 1983 by a killer of the rivaling Abu Nidal group. Kreisky blamed Arafat for the death of his close personal friend, because the PLO president had withdrawn his “protective hand” by publically rebuking Sartawi shortly before the murder.[23] Despite this tragedy, Kreisky continued to support the PLO-chairman even after leaving office: For example, in 1985 he toured the Middle East to organise the first major prisoner swaps between Israel and the Palestinians.
Despite these efforts, Austria was standing practically alone with its PLO-friendly course in the Western world. In the context of the Cold War, the US was opposed to negotiations with the “communist” PLO. Furthermore, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 with the explicit aim to destroy the “terroristic” organisation. The PLO itself hardened its position after losing its last base in the Middle East. Even within the Socialist International support for Kreisky was lukewarm at best. One considerable breakthrough was, however, achieved: in 1980 the European Communion passed the declaration of Venice, in which all member states recognised the Palestinian right of self-determination. But mostly, Kreisky’s initiatives bore fruit only with time passing: The idea of a two state solution for Palestine, which enjoys now widespread consensus, had been heralded by Kreisky decades before. Looking back later, Israel’s president Shimon Peres, a long time critic of the chancellor, took a more balanced view. In 2010, he lauded Kreisky for his contribution in bringing about that Arafat became a more and more conciliatory leader.[24]

**Security for Austria**

The most important aim of Kreisky preventive policy was, of course, security for Austria itself. As already mentioned, the country’s function as a transit point for Jewish emigration from the Eastern block to Israel practically involved it in the Middle Eastern conflict. In 1981, Kreisky argued that because of his good relations with the PLO, Austria had been more or less spared by attacks from international terrorism in the past – despite the fact that extremist groups had a strong motive to attack and disrupt the transfer of Soviet Jews. Even after the 1973 hostage crisis there was a considerable risk: In the following year the CIA warned that an “unidentified fedayeen group” planned to shoot down a Jumbo aircraft carrying emigrés in the coming months. [25] In 1975 another alarm was raised: According to the CIA, Salah Khalaf, one of Arafat’s deputies and leader of “Black September”, intended to set off a renewed wave of terrorism – by detonating a bus in Vienna to demonstrate against the Jewish emigration to Israel.[26] The fact that none of these warnings was eventually realised, can be attributed as a success to Kreisky’s policy.

But it was not possible to keep terrorism entirely away from Austria: while Austria was less affected than other European countries like France and Italy, it nevertheless felt the shocks from the Middle Eastern conflict. In 1981 Heinz Nittel, a high-ranking Viennese city official and Jewish representative, was murdered. A few months afterwards, the synagogue was assaulted by two Arab gunmen who killed two worshippers and wounded 22 others. The worst attack took place on December 27th, 1985: Three terrorists attacked the El Al-counter at Vienna’s Schwechat airport with grenades and assault rifles. Three bystanders were killed, 39 wounded. Responsible for all three terrorist plots was the group Al Assifa, led by Sabri al-Bana, widely known under his nom de guerre “Abu Nidal”. Since 1974, Abu Nidal was a sworn enemy of Arafat’s line and instead wanted to “ignite” total chaos in the Middle East by terrorist provocation. He also waged a merciless shadow war against moderates within the PLO and had its most active proponents assassinated - among them he killed Issam Sartawi in 1983.[27] Sartawi had been in frequent
contact with Austrian state police. The disruption of this security cooperation may have formed another objective for Abu Nidal.

Since Austria was supporting Arafat, it had become a target of Al-Assifa like other PLO-friendly countries (Italy, Greece). In targeting Austria, Abu Nidal also met the strategic intentions of his state sponsors – Iraq, Libya, Syria – who wanted to push back Western influence in Middle Eastern affairs. Kreisky’s policy had not caused this wave of violence. It struck Austria as “blowback”, as an unintended consequence of the country’s engagement in a much wider conflict beyond its control. When the Stasi, the East German intelligence agency, with its links with the major protagonists of “international terrorism”, questioned one of its sources in 1981 about Abu Nidal’s motive for assassinating the Austrian politician Heinz Nittel, he pointed to the “relatively stable links between PLO-Chairman Yasser Arafat and chancellor Kreisky for a solution of the Middle Eastern problem”. The source continued to explain: “Through Kreisky negotiations for a realisation of the Camp David peace accords and for the Middle Eastern ambitions of the EC (European Communion) are pursued. (...) Since Abu Nidal is against a political settlement of the Palestinian problem, he obviously wanted to demonstrate to Arafat that by murdering Heinz Nittel, his group would not stand idle when compromises with the US or other imperialistic nations are made”. But there was another motivation for Abu Nidal to threaten Austria: in the wake of the attacks of 1981, three Al-Assifa members had been arrested, among them a high-ranking “officer”. The group wanted to liberate him at all costs. As a consequence, the danger of further acts of terrorism loomed high in Austria for many years. In order to prevent further bloodshed after the 1985 airport attack, a deal was struck. In 1988, the chief of the Austrian state police secretly met with an Al-Assifa representative at Orly airport in Paris. It was agreed that the group would not target Austria again. In return their emissaries were allowed to visit the imprisoned “officer” and to occupy an apartment in Vienna. By allowing such a presence in the capital, the Austrian authorities managed to postpone the pressing issue of an early release of the prisoner. He was a free man by 1995, after serving two thirds of his jail term. At that time, the Al-Assifa base in Vienna did not exist anymore – aided by a foreign intelligence service it had kept operating under close surveillance until 1993. Despite the high risks involved, there was no further act of Palestinian terrorism in Austria. By that time, Kreisky’s successors had already abandoned the former highly visible role of Austria in international affairs and instead concentrated on joining the European Union. In part, this was also a result of the public’s growing concern about terrorism after the wave of attacks in the early 1980s.

Concluding

It was Kreisky himself, who had authorised the first secret negotiations with Al-Assifa in 1982. When those talks stalled and the terrorists subsequently attacked Vienna’s Schwechat airport in 1985, Kreisky had left office two years before. Yet he had tried to thwart the plot by utilizing his contact to Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi. A trusted official was sent on a last minute
mission to Tripoli to appeal to Gaddafi to discourage Abu Nidal from his plans. The Libyan leader agreed to do just that, yet the attack did nevertheless take place. Afterwards Kreisky received an apology – the Libyans had been unable to contact the terrorist commando, which operated out of a base in Syria, in time.[31]

When Kreisky was questioned by a journalist only weeks after the terrorist act, if his preoccupation with the Middle Eastern conflict had somehow drawn the radical elements to Austria, he strongly denied that. Kreisky claimed instead that the fact that 300.00 Russian Jews had emigrated over Austria to Israel for 15 years without a bomb exploding at Schwechat airport, was proof of the success of his policy. He argued that violence was not a sufficient response to Abu Nidal’s terrorism, but pleaded for engaging in a sort of dialogue. When the journalist raised his doubts and suggested that there was no moderation possible when dealing with such people, Kreisky replied: “I would talk to the devil if I could achieve something positive”. [32]

In conclusion, the results of Kreisky’s preventive counterterrorism policy remain mixed: Austria’s security was not particularly enhanced by his contacts to the PLO, since Chairman Arafat never attempted to exercise direct control over the numerous groups composing his organization. Abu Nidal, who had broken links with Arafat in 1974, primarily followed the instructions of his varying state sponsors. These nations – mainly Hafez al-Assad’s Syria – wanted to keep the Palestinian resistance under close control and therefore regarded Kreisky’s initiatives as a form of Western interference. By engaging preventively in the dynamics of the Middle Eastern conflict and by supporting the moderates inside the PLO, Kreisky antagonised the radicals and their sponsors, who, in turn, targeted Austria. But there were no further attacks against the transfer of Russian Jews after the 1973 hijacking, despite the resentment caused by this in the Arab world. Kreisky deserves praise also for another reason: He made the case for addressing the political and social root causes of terrorism and followed this devise. A re-evaluation of this method of dealing with terrorism – by extracting its “roots” and thereby remove its justification – is even more relevant today when a militarily dominated counterterrorism effort draws more and more countries into the vortex of terrorism.

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Notes


[8] Tischrede B. Kreisky, 11. 3. 1982, in: Stiftung Bruno Kreisky Archiv (StBKA), VII.1 Libyen, Box 2 [Translated by Th.R.]


[22] Th. Riegler, op. cit., p. 87 [Translated by Th.R.]


[29] Erschießung der österreichischen Bürgers NITTEL, 1. 7. 1981, BStU (Archiv der Zentralstelle), MfS – HA XXII Nr. 16762 [Translated by Th.R.]

