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Yaşar Aydın & Buket Ökten Sipahioğlu

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## The German Government's Policy on Islam and Its Reflections on Turks in Germany

Yaşar Aydın<sup>a</sup>  & Buket Ökten Sipahioğlu<sup>b</sup> 

<sup>a</sup> Protestant University of Applied Sciences- School of Social Work and Deaconry Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany; <sup>b</sup> European Union Research and Application Center, Ankara University, Ankara, Turkey

### Abstract

Turkish-origin people living in Germany have always been a subject of discussion, since there is a significant Turkish population that mostly immigrated in 1960's through labor agreements. There are also other Muslim populations in Germany, such as African, Iranian, and Palestinian, however, Turkish Muslims living in Germany are the most populous migrant group in Germany and a popular target for anti-Muslim racism. This study focuses on German policies towards Islam and Muslims living in Germany. Before deeply analyzing the German Federal Government's policy on Islam, there is a discussion about the kind of Islam that would be appreciated by Germany. Accordingly, an evaluation of the perception of Islam in Germany using the example Muslim Turks in Germany follows. Meanwhile, in the subsequent section, there is a discussion about the German Islam Conference and its outputs. The German Islam Conference is one of German politicians' important projects for the integration of Muslims into Germany. In order to understand what Germany really wants to attain, either the empowerment or the assimilation of Muslims, the study focuses on discourse and aims to shed light on the current situation of the perception of Islam in Germany, as well as how Turks are affected by this discourse.

### Keywords

Islam, Germany, Turks, Muslims, German Islam Conference

### Introduction

Turks<sup>1</sup> in Germany have always been a subject of discussions since there is a significant Turkish population that immigrated mostly after the 1960's through bilateral labor ag-

<sup>1</sup> In this article, we use the word ›Turk‹ in terms of territory and citizenship to refer to all current and former citizens of the Republic of Turkey without regard to ethnicity, religion, and culture.

reements. Beginning in the 1990s, with the rise of the *Clash of Civilizations* paradigm (Huntington, 1996), migrants from Muslim countries have been perceived primarily through the lenses of religion. In the 1970s, Turks became, in the eyes of the majority, identified only as guest workers before they were acknowledged as Turks and then they later became synonymous with Muslims (Schneider, et al., 2013, p. 8).

After the September 11<sup>th</sup> terror attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, an ongoing controversial debate on Islam and Muslims began (Bade, 2013). This debate included topics such as, Islam's belonging Germany, its compatibility with European values and norms of democracy, Muslim's willingness or aversion to integrate themselves into democratically organized, plural societies and other similar topics.

At the same time, anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia, including resentment and hostility toward Islam and Muslims, increased in Germany as well as several other countries in Europe. Muslims face many difficulties in their everyday lives as well as in their political, educational, and business lives (Khan, 2020).

The German policy towards Muslims and Islam in Germany has been the target of criticism as well. It is often said that the German government wants an Islam that is compatible with Germany, or more specifically, with the political constitution of Germany (*Grundgesetz*). However, what this really means and the benchmarks of such compatibility are unclear. Also, the degree to which Germany is attempting to create or promote a version of Islam that suits Germany and is compatible with liberal democratic norms and values is not clear. This article addresses these key points about the Islam controversy by examining the German Islam Conference, which was intended to integrate Islam into German political and law systems and thereby, establish an integration policy for Muslims in Germany (Halm et al., n.d.).

This research addresses the concept of Islam from both sides and includes those who argue that Islam belongs in Germany and those who deny this. Additionally, the presumptions, arguments, insights, ideas, and norms that both positions rely on to support their stance are examined

Political discourse on integration and security concerns about Islam and hence about Muslim groups varies most of the time in Germany. In a recent example, German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, claimed that Islam, as well as Christianity and Judaism, belong in Germany. She further substantiates her statement with the argument that it is meaningless to deny the inclusion of approximately four million Muslims in Germany into the "imagined community" (Anderson, 2016). On the contrary, German interior minister, Horst Seehofer, alleged several times that Germany is shaped by Christianity and Islam did not contribute to German culture and therefore does not belong in Germany (Seehofer, 2018).

This article aims to analyze these issues through media discourse, including comments and op-eds on the Islam controversy, statements from mainstream politicians and state-elites, and documents from the last German Islam Conference. The article consists of three main parts. The first part briefly describes Islam and Turkish Muslims in Germany and their historical background. In the second part, examines the Islam controversy and the Federal German Government's Islam policy. This part illuminates how the perception of Islam held by politicians has evolved in Germany over the past decades. Here, a main focus is on the controversial question of whether Islam belongs in Germany or not. A main reference point is the German Islam Conference. The third part discusses the background and the means and goals of the German Islam Conference. Additionally, the dilemma about empowering or assimilating Muslims finds a place in this discussion. In this sense, the study aims to contribute to relevant discussions and highlight points about Germany's Islamic policy that have not been deeply analyzed before.

### Islam and Turkish Muslims in Germany

Muslim migration to Germany started with large-scale migration from Turkey in 1961. Germany and Turkey signed a formal labor recruitment agreement in this year with the framework that guest workers were to be recruited for a limited time, and they were to leave at the end of their contracts. Later this limitation was lifted and a large number of Turks settled in Germany, many of them brought their partners and children who were left in Turkey, to Germany. Others returned to Turkey either forever or for a while and came back again. From the 1960s to the 1980s, nearly four million people emigrated from Turkey into Germany. Most of these migrants from Turkey were Muslims, except for a small Christian minority.

From the German perspective, the recruitment of foreign workers, not only from Turkey, but also from countries such as Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Yugoslavia, and Morocco, was a tool to satisfy unmet labor demands in the midst of the postwar economic boom (*Wirtschaftswunder*). From 1961 to the present, the number of Turks grew from a few thousands to more than three million. The Turkey-Germany migration occurred roughly in six waves, each with distinct characteristics.

The first emigrants, after the recruitment agreement from Turkey to Germany, were contracted workers. Short-term contracts were abandoned because of criticism from German industry representatives and employers but Turks remained, in the minds of Germans, guest workers, who were supposed to return to Turkey (Sayari, 1986). After the halt of foreign labor recruitment in 1973 (*Anwerbestopp*), amid worsening the economic conditions in Germany, Turkish workers chose to remain in Germany, and their partners and children joined them. In addition to the family members of Turkish

emigrants, Germany also became a destination for irregular migrants from Turkey, who either entered illegally or overstayed their tourist visas (Hunn, 2011, p. 49).

During the late 1970s political turmoil in Turkey encouraged many Turks to seek refuge in Germany. The 1980 military coup d'état intensified this politically driven migration. Politicization of the migration from Turkey to Germany gave fuel to the fragmentation of the Turkish community in Germany in social, political, and even cultural terms. In the 1990s, armed conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish nationalist rebel organization, and the Turkish government led many Kurdish people to seek refuge and political asylum in Germany. In the 1990s, the Kurdish diaspora in Germany became clearly visible in social, economic, and political terms, and the political activities of Kurdish people and their organizations peaked (Aydın, 2016). Migration between Turkey and Germany has been highly diverse, consisting of several different flows, including labor migration, family reunion, educational migration, political migration, and more recently, returnees, and transnational migrants.

Until the 1980s, a large number of Muslim migrants in Germany were from Turkey, only a small part of them were from other states, such as Morocco, Yugoslavia, and Bosnia. Later Germany attracted migrants from countries with Muslim populations such as Iran, Afghanistan, Albania, Bulgaria, and Greece, and as of 2014, refugees from Syria. As a consequence, the proportion of Muslims with a Turkish migrant background began to decrease. It fell from 67.5 percent in the year 2011 to 50.6 percent in 2015. Turkey still highest percentage as a country of origin, but now, every second Muslim comes from another country (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2021).

New Muslim immigrants come mainly from regions that have so far been little represented in Germany, including The Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and Africa south of the Sahara. Most Muslims of Turkish origin have been living in Germany for more than 30 years (BMI, 2021). Below, Table 1 further examines the regions of origin for Muslims in Germany and their proportions.

**Table 1.** Roots of Muslim Population in Germany and their proportions

	<b>2008</b>	<b>2015</b>
Middle East	8.1 %	17.1 %
South East Europe	13.6 %	11.5 %
South East Asia	4.6 %	8.2 %
North Africa	6.9 %	5.8 %
South Africa	1.4 %	2.5 %
Central Asia / CIS	0.4 %	2.4 %
Iran	1.7 %	1.9 %

Source: [BMI, 2021](#).

Muslim life in Germany is diverse in terms of belief, religiosity, religious practice, and ethnic and national origin. Current figures on the faiths of Muslims in Germany are not available. Due to immigrants’ regions of origin, however, it can be assumed that Sunnis continue to be by far the largest religious denomination (approximately 75 percent), followed by Alevis with a proportion of approximately 13 percent, and Shiites with a proportion of approximately 7 percent ([BMI, 2021](#)).

According to the German Islam Conference study, *Islamic Community Life in Germany*, (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees [BAMF], 2012), at least 2,350 mosque communities are estimated to exist in Germany. An imam is active in around 2,180 Islamic mosques associations. The majority are still being assigned to Germany from Turkey on a temporary basis. The largest Sunni-influenced umbrella organizations are the Turkish-Islamic Union with approximately 900 mosques, the Islamic Council for the Federal Republic of Germany, including the Milli Görüş Islamic Community with approximately 400 mosques, the Association of Islamic Cultural Centers with approximately 300 mosques, as well as the Central Council of Muslims in Germany with approximately 300 mosques.

There are also other confessional umbrella organizations such as the Alevi Community of Germany with approximately 100 communities, the Islamic Community of Shiite communities in Germany with approximately 140 communities, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat with no umbrella organization ([BMI, 2021](#)).

## Federal German Government's Policy on Islam

### *Perception of Islam in Germany*

About 65 percent to 70 percent of the population in Germany are followers of the Christian religion. They are more or less evenly split between the mainstream denominations of Lutheran-Protestantism and Calvinism united in the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Roman Catholic Church. Due to the historical development of religion in Germany, these denominations are concentrated in specific regions ([Religion in Germany, n.d.](#)). It is not surprising that the predominate religion in Germany is Christianity because it has a very long 1,300-year history of Christian tradition. Islam, contrarily, is a comparatively recent religion in Germany.

Islam is not officially recognized in Germany. Rather than being recognized as a religion, the Muslim community desires to have a public legal personality in order to benefit from constitutional rights as a requirement for the traditional state-religion relationship. Although no progress was made about the Muslim community's desires at federal level, several steps were taken by states. With the settlement of Muslims in Germany starting in the 1970s, Islamic communities wanted to be subject to the traditional relationship between the state and religious communities through state contracts (*Staatsvertrag*). With these agreements, Muslim communities would be recognized and strive to achieve the goal of fully enjoying their constitutional rights. Following contracts signed between state governments of Hamburg and Bremen and Muslim communities, Lower Saxony and Rhineland-Palatinate started negotiations for a state contract with Muslim communities ([Müller, 2021](#)).

The local governments in Germany preferred to evaluate the issues in the context of integrating the immigrants rather than give them the constitutional right of freedom of religion. Hence, Muslims could not overcome the organizational structures and benefit federally from the aforementioned freedoms. In Germany, the procedure to gain the status of a religious community and which conditions have to meet to be considered as a religious community are not clearly defined. Most of the religious communities fulfill the condition of creating and sustaining a congregation, however, various other conditions have been put forward and some Muslim organizations are not able to be recognized. It is obvious with these and similar examples that Muslim communities in the country are not welcomed at all ([Aslan, 2019, p. 9-11](#)).

A 2017 Religion Monitor study was carried out by the German Religious Diversity Foundation (*Bertelsmann Stiftung*), called Religious Diversity and Democracy and a 2019 follow-up survey offer useful findings. According to this study, 89 percent of the German population supports democracy. Among Christians, 93 percent of those surveyed express this view, as do 91 percent of Muslims, and 83 percent of nonreligious people. Approximately 80 percent of German citizens also value

the protection of minority interests as a fundamental principle of liberal democracy (El-Menouar, 2019). Overall, about half of those surveyed perceive Islam as a threat. This proportion is higher in eastern Germany (57 percent) than in the western Germany (50 percent). These findings, recorded in the Spring 2019, are largely similar to the results of previous *Religion Monitor* surveys taken in 2013, 2015, and 2017. Yasemin Al-Menouar, the foundation's expert on religion explains, "evidently, many people nowadays view Islam more as a political ideology and less as a religion and therefore not deserving of religious tolerance." In her view, this has been amplified by societal debates and media reports in the past years, which often cast Islam in a negative and critical light. This study and its results clearly indicate that Islam, either evaluated as a religion or an ideology, is perceived as a threat in Germany by a considerable amount of the population.

### *Islam Controversy – Does Islam belong in Germany or not?*

In 2013, unsealed confidential British documents revealed that in 1982, German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, tried to carry out a radical plan in order to reduce the number of Turks living in Germany by 50 percent within four years (Hacking, 2013). According to the British document, Kohl was the opinion that Turks were "incapable of integration and, incidentally, unwilling to integrate" due to their "very distinctive culture". By culture, Kohl meant religion, Islam (Hacking, 2013).

18 years later, in 2010, the German President, Christian Wulff, made a different statement regarding Islam. He urged German people to recognize that the religion of Islam and its followers have a legitimate place in Germany. Wulff told an audience in the northern city of Bremen, "Christianity is without doubt part of German identity. Judaism is without doubt part of German identity. Such is our Judaeo-Christian heritage. But Islam has now also become part of German identity," in a speech to mark the Twentieth Anniversary of German Unity on October 3, 2010 (Wulff, 2010).

Although a milestone in German discourse on Islam, Wulff's statement that Islam belongs in Germany remained disputed. While liberal democrats, standing for a more open, multicultural society celebrated it, conservatives and right-wing politicians refused. According to media coverage in *Deutsche Welle* (2019), the then leader of Germany's Left party (*Die Linke*), Gregor Gysi, positively appreciated Wulff's assertion that Islam and Muslims belong in Germany. "No other German president has ever posed this question on the occasion of the anniversary of German reunification the way President Wulff did in his speech last night", Gysi said. While agreeing with president Wulff, German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, also expressed some reservations. Chancellor Merkel demanded that Muslims living in Germany also conform to fundamental German values. Similar reservations to Wulff's call for religious unity were



expressed by Norbert Geis, a member of parliament belonging to the Christian Social Union party, the Bavaria-based sister party to Chancellor Merkel's Christian Democratic Union. Geis said that Wulff's statement that "Islam also belongs in Germany" should not be construed as meaning Islam and Christianity have an equal footing in the country. "Islam does not belong in Germany in the same way that Judaism and Christianity do. It would be false and far from reality to make such a comparison", he added on *Deutschlandfunk* (Dannenberg & Borrud, 2010).

In the same year, Thilo Sarrazin, a high-ranking German politician, provoked a heated national debate that lasted several months with his in August 2010 book, *Germany Does Away with Itself*. In his book, he argued that ethnic Germans are having too few children, while Muslim immigrants are having too many. He mobilized fears towards Muslims by predicting that within 80 years, Muslims will make up a majority in Germany (Sarrazin, 2010). He also expressed that he believes that "intelligence is inherited, not nurtured", and "since Muslims are less intelligent" than ethnic Germans, the population will be, so in his conclusion, dumbed down. He concluded that to solve a growing demographic problem, Germany will require immigrants, but he says that bringing more Muslims into the country will only make matters worse. With his statements and arguments, Sarrazin contributed to the anti-Islam atmosphere in Germany (Slackman, 2010).

Sarrazin's anti-Islamic sentiments coincide with Islam-skepticism in parts of the German media. A good example is the weekly political magazine *Der Spiegel* that attracted attention with Islam-skeptic front pages and cover stories. For example, in *Der Spiegel* (Hecking, 2013) appeared the text "Germans and foreigners: Dangerously foreign. The failure of the multicultural society". A picture of a woman waving a Turkish flag with an aggressive expression adorns the front page. To the right of it were male adolescents playing with chains and knives. To the left of them little girls with black headscarves, who are probably reading the Koran in a religion-school. The sub-text and the message of the picture are obvious, Turkish migrants are strangers to us because of their affinity for violence and their religious affiliation, and they endanger our society.

Another example from *Der Spiegel* (Hecking, 2013) has a woman with a black headscarf and black dress, and the text, "Daughters of Allah without rights. Muslim women in Germany." This cover story implies the message, Islam is a repressive religion, oppresses women and keeps them in a status of lawlessness, also in Germany.

In a more recent example, the liberal-conservative political magazine, *Cicero*, in December 2020, an illustration appeared with a hooded man, probably a terrorist, on the front page and the words, "Terror alarm. How Islamism, violence and migration are related?" In the cover story, Ruud Koopmans complains about the "export of Islamist ideology to Western democracies", which must be consistently prevented. As

an example, reference is made to funding from abroad and organizations, such as the Turkish Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (Koopmans, 2020).

In his contribution, Koopmans uses a number of examples to draw an image of Islam that poses a threat to democratic society. In this context, it is pointed out that every sixth Muslim in France thinks that violence against civilians is justified in order to defend Islam against its enemies. Koopmans does not hesitate even to refer to an outdated study from 2007, according to which around 45 percent of Muslims in Europe consider the rules of the Koran to be more important than democracy.

In the following article of the same volume of *Cicero* (Koopmans, 2020), which includes discussions with the psychologist, Ahmad Mansour, and politician, Martin Hikel, from the Social Democratic Party, and Barbara John from the Christian Democratic Union, where they complain that the left supports political Islam.

Later, a group of dissidents who either grew up in or have roots in Islamic countries took part in the reproduction of an image of Islam that contradicts the plural-democratic society of Germany. They criticized Islam as a “religion of suppression” and even stated the existence of an “Islamic fascism” (Abdel-Samed, 2014), referring to their own negative experiences with the Islamic tradition or the praxis of religiosity in Muslims.

As the German author, Daniel Bax, wrote,

Critics of Islam in Germany such as Necla Kelek, Henryk M. Broder, and their supporters imagine themselves to be at war with Islam, which for them overrides the necessity for democratic procedures. Bahners takes great pleasure in dissecting their vocabulary, their shrill warnings against appeasement and giving in, their contempt of tolerance or their insistence on a leading culture and Judeo-Christian tradition (Bax, 2011).

Recently, Ahmed Mansour, an author and psychologist with an Arabic-Israeli background, stated in the liberal-conservative newspaper, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, that “Islam has never been integrated into any other culture, nor will it in Europe” (Strauß, 2021). This shows that the perception of Islam among people in the public who are skeptical of Islam is that Islam cannot be integrated into the plural, democratic society in Germany and has to be excluded.

To summarize, pioneers of Islamophobia, such as Necla Kelek, Ralf Giardano, and Thilo Sarrazin, presented culturalist and racist arguments against Islam and Muslims, which were cited in hate forums and anti-Islamic networks without facing legal consequences. Today, authors who are skeptic of Islam, such as Ahmed Mansour, continue this tradition with a culturalist critique of Islam, where he portrays it as unique

and in opposition to democracy, liberalism, and pluralism. They find approval and an audience in some parts of the population and in turn, contribute to the resentment against Islam.

Anti-Islamism resonates especially with those who are unsettled and worried about the side effects of globalization, the reorganization of the social state, and immigration. According to the German historian Klaus Bade, the Sarrazin debate, Islamophobia, and right-extremist terror are the result of a repressed debate on new identity in an immigrant society, and they reveal a paradox (Bade, 2013; Aydın, 2013), in that there is an increasing acceptance of cultural pluralism especially among the younger population. Exclusionary debates and practices are what Bade calls “negative integration” and are a reaction to the acceptance of cultural pluralism and express the self-assurance of the majority by the exclusion of a large Muslim minority (Bade, 2013; Aydın, 2013).

### *The Case of DİTİB*

The controversy about the Turkish Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (*Diyamet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği* [DİTİB]), is important in two ways. First, it shows Islamophobia and the consequences that arise from it. Second, it shows the expectation of the federal government, the media, and a great part of the society towards Islam and Muslims.

Activities of the DİTİB have been widely criticized as posing a barrier for Turkish Muslims’ integration into German society, and the DİTİB has consequently come under fire from German state institutions, politicians, and the media.

Since 1985, the DİTİB has acted as the religious umbrella organization for mosques in Germany and was founded by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyamet İşleri Başkanlığı* [DİB]) in order to meet the religious needs of the Turkish expatriate community. Apart from the provisions for religious services, the secular Turkish state founded the organization in an effort to counter-balance various anti-secular religious orders. These included the Islamic Cultural Center of the Süleymançıs (İslam Kültür Merkezleri Birliği [İKMB] or *Verband der Islamischen Kulturzentren* [VİKZ]) and the Milli Görüş Islamic Community (İslâm Toplumı Millî Görüş or *Islamische Gemeinschaft Millî Görüş* [İGMG]). Most prominently during the 1990s, the Turkish state believed that the activities of the above-mentioned groups threatened the collective identity of Turkish diaspora members, as well as the identity of the secular Turkish state. Following the rise of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* [AKP]), the Turkish government shifted its orientation towards these groups, now counting them as partners rather than threats. In the same spirit, the DİTİB ceased to function as the tool of the secular state and has been transformed into an instrument for Ankara’s foreign and diaspora policy, as it is supervised and controlled

by the DİTİB (Aydın, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

From the German perspective, the DİTİB is officially an important partner in matters of faith and integration. Therefore, it is a member of the German Islam Conference (*Deutsche Islam Konferenz*). However, recently the DİTİB has been at the center of controversial debates and has become a target of criticism. Christoph de Vries, a politician from the German governing party, CDU (Christian Democratic Union), called for the suspension of the DİTİB's membership in the German Islam Conference, while underlining the organization's dependence on Ankara and its so-called lack of reliability in terms of accountability to the German state (German Islam Conference, n.d.).

The debate about religious communities is more political than it is juridical. According to German law, a religious association has the right to subordinate itself to a foreign state, as it is in the case of the DİTİB. Neither foreign funding (*Fremdfinanzierung*) nor an organizational connection compromises the qualification of DİTİB's status as a religious community. However, in order to be legal, the organization has to come to this decision independently; the result of a democratic decision-making process and a common voice, as well as a consensus in religious matters is essential. The status of religious communities for an association can only be denied if it violates the provisions of the Basic Law (Aydın, 2019).

The German domestic intelligence service, BfV (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*), has considered classifying DİTİB either as a suspect or an observed organization. Hence, such classification would endanger DİTİB's membership in the German Islam Conference and the continuance of its funding from the central government. It is important to note that the deterioration of the DİTİB's reputation did not take place all of a sudden, but instead was gradual. Certainly, the failed coup attempt in Turkey can be highlighted as a milestone. After this event, the Turkish government tried to tighten its grip on the Turkish community by exploiting the DİTİB. This put the organization at the epicenter of criticism (Aydın, 2019).

However, the German government's policy change in relation to the DİTİB cannot be explained on the basis of Turkish politics alone. Rather, after seeing the side effects of the bond with a foreign country, Berlin sought to form a new DİTİB-like body that would have no ties with Ankara and solely accountable only to itself. This, it is reasoned, would not only help moderate the political activities of the Turkish community in Germany but would also enhance their integration into the larger society.

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<sup>2</sup> For more details on the DİTİB controversy in Germany see Aydın (2019), where this issue is portrayed more elaborately. This subchapter draws mainly on the former just mentioned article.

## German Islam Conference

### Background

The German Islam Conference (GIC or *Deutsche Islam Konferenz*) was founded in 2006 by the former Minister of the Interior, Wolfgang Schäuble, as the first national reaction, involving federal, regional, and local authorities, to the relatively recent presence, in historical terms, of Muslims as a significant population group in Germany (Aguilar, 2017, p. 623). The fundamental and overarching goal of the GIC is permanent and regular nationwide dialogue between the German government and Muslims and their representation in Germany. There was no such institutionalized dialogue before the GIC was founded. The aim of this ongoing dialogue in the GIC is to seek and find an understanding and/or solutions to specific issues and everyday practical problems, such as Islamic religious instruction in state schools, teaching Islamic theology at universities, Islamic welfare and pastoral care, as well as the construction of Mosques and the prevention of hostility towards Muslims and the prevention of religious-based Islamist extremism. The results of the discussions and consultations included recommendations, handouts, and information in the form of publications. Another goal of the GIC is to expand knowledge about Muslim life in Germany and to improve the data about Muslim life in Germany, Islamic community life in Germany, and determine how many Muslims live in Germany (GIC, n.d.).

The overriding political concern of the Federal Government in pursuing the GIC is to promote an Islam that suits Germany, with ideas like, Muslim life should be able to develop stronger references to German reality, Muslims should understand themselves more naturally as part of life in society as a whole and feel accepted, and there should be clearer progress in the legal integration of Muslim communities into the cooperation-based relationship between the state and religious communities in Germany (GIC, n.d.). The participants in the conferences are determined by the German Interior Minister. By declaring the will to promote an Islam that suits Germany, the GIC reproduces the broadly circulated assessment in society that Islam does not already suit German society.

### Main Stages and Goals of the GIC

#### First German Islam Conference

Established organizations such as the DİTİB, the Islamic Council (*Islamrat*), and the Central Council of Muslims (ZMD) were invited to the first German Islam Conference, in which some secular and anti-Islamic individual participants were in the minority. Issues such as common values, the issue of security, and the organization of religion lessons were discussed in the 1<sup>st</sup> GIC held in 2006. As a result of these discussions, one year before Islam was included in the curriculum in 2008, Alevism entered schools

as a religious course (Eli a ık, 2018).

### *Second German Islam Conference*

In the shadow of the debate over whether Muslims are adequately represented or not, the second German Islam Conference convened in Berlin and was held on May 17, 2010. The main theme of the conference was the integration of Muslims into society. Representatives from federal and state governments, municipalities, and Muslims attended the the GIC meeting hosted by the Minister of the Interior, Tomas de Maizi ere. In a statement to the press after the meeting, de Maizi ere emphasized that Islam is a part of Germany. Stating that people from different religions live together in Germany, de Maizi ere also said that their goal is to support the harmony of Muslims through participation in society. (Danıřman, 2010). The Minister of Internal Affairs pointed out that there are two stages of harmonization: “The first element is the structural-institutional dimension. It covers legal issues related to religion and similar issues. It also has a social dimension. So, there is institutional and social harmony here” (Danıřman, 2010).

The Central Council of Moroccans in Germany and the Islamic Union of Bosnians in Germany were some of the new members to attend the conference. The Central Council of Muslims in Germany decided not to participate before the meeting and the seat remained empty. The Islamic Council, on the other hand, was not invited on the grounds that an investigation was being conducted against the directors and one of the members of the Milli G r ř Islamic Community.

### *Third German Islam Conference*

In 2014, the work program for the current legislative session, ending in September 2017, was adopted. The main topics were welfare by and for Muslims and Muslim chaplaincy in public institutions. In both fields, the German Islam Conference adopted conclusions including many projects to be implemented in the coming years (German Islam Conference, Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, n.d.).

### *Fourth German Islam Conference*

The Fourth German Islam Conference was held on November 28-29, 2018 and had three panels entitled, Integration Support in the Field, Imam Training in Germany, and Muslims in Germany – German Muslims. The program emphasized over and over again how important it is to include diversity and the pluralism of Muslims in the GIC (Mete, 2018). Horst Seehofer, Germany Interior Minister, launched this conference. He is known for his recent discourse about Islam not being a part of Germany and how Germany is shaped by Christianity in his interview with the German tabloid newspaper *Bild* in March, 2018 (DW, 2019). According to Eli a ık (2018), it cannot be seen as a coincidence that enlightenment and secularism are constantly mentioned in

all of the German Islam Conferences. The emphasis on inspiring secular religion and enlightened Muslims is a reflection of the thesis of the secular unification of Muslims to combat radicalization. For this purpose, efforts are made to increase the number and influence of secular groups in the conference of Islam. Such distinctions also create images of good Muslim vs. bad Muslim.

Aguilar (2017, p. 639) argues that the case of the GIC sheds light on new dynamics about the German government's attempt to deal with Islam in the public domain, that is, the project of staging a dialogue platform between the state and Muslim organizations in order to set up the basis for the appearance of a German Islam in the public sphere. Yet, the GIC's highly calculated range of projects does not preclude the impossibility to resist, challenge, and appropriate some of those power techniques since some of them also constitute rights, though the GIC frames them as integration tools.

Yeneroğlu (2018), proposes the following in order to reach the GIC goal: The existence of different religions and lifestyles with equal rights should not be seen as a threat to social cohesion, because this unity is actually strengthened by the freedom of diversity. Integration should not mean unification. Having equal rights in a libertarian society develops not from being the same, but from the other and the *otherness* of the other (Yeneroğlu, 2018).

Former Islamic Community General Secretary (IGMG), Oğuz Üçüncü, asked before the first GIC whether the conference was a forum for discussion on religion and values or would it be an environment where confidence-building measures are discussed between Muslims and security units. He also questioned if it is a matter of the state making concrete negotiations with Muslims so that Islam and Muslims can be legally and politically integrated into the Federal Republic of Germany. Üçüncü's criticism focused on the fact that integration and Islamic policies should not be confused and that Islam had not been brought into equal legal status with other religions in Germany. According to Üçüncü, bringing Islam to equal legal status with other religions would help to solve many problems (Bilgü, 2021).

Taking all the above discussed considerations into account; it can be suggested that the German Islam Conference strays from its main purpose. The first meeting was hosted by Wolfgang Schaeuble and gave hope to the majority of Muslims in Germany to make their voices heard and have their expectations met. However, in the last meeting which was held in 2018 and hosted by Horst Seehofer, who thinks that Islam does not belong to Germany, the GIC was far away from meeting the expectations of the Muslim population in Germany. Inasmuch that, German Interior Minister Seehofer, sparked a scandal that became famous as the *Blutwurst* (a food cooked with pork) scandal after the opening of the conference. By letting Blutwurst be served at the German Islam Conference, it was clearly demonstrated that German politicians either do not

know or, worse, do not care about the rules that Muslims observe about eating and drinking. This detail also revealed the contradictions of the German Islamic Conference itself (Hafiz, 2019). It is a matter of curiosity if there will be a fifth GIC next year, 2022, and what will be the main subject and the target group it will address.

## Final Discussion

In summary, the question of empowering or assimilating Muslims in Germany remains. German policy about Islam and hence about Muslims was always been distant, and this is not a surprise in a leading European country where the predominant religion is Christianity. Islam is not officially recognized in Germany despite the fact that it is the second most prominent religion in terms of population. As a result, Muslim communities cannot fully benefit from constitutional rights. In studies, like the one that was carried out by *Bartelsmann Stiftung*, a German Foundation, (El-Menouar, 2019) Islam is perceived as a threat to Germany and also is seen as a political ideology rather than a religion. Moreover, it is also known that Islamophobia is on the rise throughout most European countries.

Although the first migration flows from Turkey to Germany started for work purposes, it continued and diversified with family reunions, educational migrations, migration for political purposes, and returnee migrants. Today, the number of Turkish origin migrants in Germany is expressed in millions and their Islam-related organizations and associations are more than thousands. But nevertheless, the political, as well as official, status of Islam in Germany is controversially debated. The statements from German politicians often lead controversies about the discussion of whether the Islam belongs in Germany. It may be wise to summarize this discourse as a clue to whether Islam will ever be recognized in Germany, like Christianity or even like Judaism. At the same time, the pioneers of Islamophobia such as Necla Kelek, Ralf Giardano, and Thilo Sarrazin add fuel to the fire by presenting racist and culturalist propaganda against Islam and Muslims.

The first German Islam Conference, which was held in 2006 and the last in 2018, is far away from meeting the expectations of Islamic community in Germany. Rather, it has transformed or was actually was planned to be a project that aims to control and transform the Islamic faith and Muslims to create a German Islam. This kind of a German Islam does not have much similarity with the perception of Islam that Turkish Muslims desire to keep alive. This kind of German Islam project should be rejected and well-established Muslim Turkish institutions located in Germany should be restructured in line with the needs and demands of the Muslim-Turkish society, especially the Muslim youth, while taking into account local factors.


The German government's policy concerning Islam and the DİTİB is driven by



security and integrationist ideals, it can also be said soft-assimilationist concerns as well. In the case of the DİTİB, German mainstream politics and the media want to create a new organizational structure and shape and control Islam in a rather top-down manner. It seems that Berlin seeks to form a new DİTİB-like body that will have no or very weak ties with Ankara and will be solely accountable only to itself. This is highly problematic because it will not help to moderate radicals, rather it could give tailwind to radicals and even weaken moderate Muslims. Finally, Germany's aim to create or promote a version of Islam in a top-down manner is not perfectly compatible with liberal democratic norms and values that celebrate autonomy and that allow the building of religious organizations and practicing one's own religiosity.

## Orcid

Yaşar Aydın  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5354-2389>

Buket Ökten Sipahioğlu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3815-6732>

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