

THE GERMAN CONFERENCE ON ISLAM

Islam is part of Germany and part of Europe, part of our present and part of our future. We wish to encourage the Muslims in Germany to develop their talents and to help us take our country forward. The time has come for the German Conference on Islam to mark the beginning of a new way of living together.

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Against the background of terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, London and Madrid, Baghdad and Kabul, Djerba and Istanbul, many people have developed a new awareness of the fragility in our societies. More than a few are concerned that the relations between Christians and Muslims, including those in Germany, may become dominated by an atmosphere of fear, suspicion and prejudice.

Germany is currently home to more than three million Muslims. These include almost two million Turks, who form the largest national minority by far, and who represent 26 percent of the population without a German passport.

The majority of them came to this country decades ago, bringing with them their traditions and customs, religion and culture. At that time, nobody thought that the Turks would become such a significant element in German society. Instead, everyone –not only Germans, but also by the immigrants who came here as guest workers– assumed that they would return to their home country after a few years. At some point, this pattern changed. Many remained in Germany, or, in the words of film director Fatih Akin, who is of Turkish origin, “forgot to go back”.

Today, 35 percent of the people of Turkish origin living in Germany were born here. The children and grandchildren of immigrants consider themselves to be Germans of Turkish descent. Most of them like living here. However, for some, Germany remains a foreign country, even in the second and third generation.

How can mutual relations in Germany be further improved? How can we achieve a situation in which Muslims in Germany consider themselves to be German Muslims, identifying themselves with this country, its language, its culture and its laws without feeling that they conflict with their religious ideas? What can and must Muslims themselves do, and how can the German state –the Federation as well as the Länder– help make integration easier?

In order to create prospects for a shared future, we must try to address the problems which place a burden on mutual relations in our country. Religious tuition in Koran schools and in state schools, the headscarf, the training of imams, the role of women and girls, and halal slaughtering are just a few of the key issues here. The high level of unemployment among Muslims of the second and third generation in particular is frequently caused by the fact that they have no qualifications, and is of concern not only to the Federal Government. Aside from everyday problems such as this, terror-ism has also increased the level of fear and distrust among the general public. Many Muslims are unfairly subject to general suspicion and are relegated to the margins without being fully accepted into German society.

We take all of these concerns very seriously. The Federal Government places a great deal of importance on the intercultural dialogue with Islam. For this reason, I called the first German Conference on Islam last September.

With the Conference on Islam, the Federal Ministry of the Interior aims to improve the religious and socio-political integration of the Muslim population in Germany. The conference is intended as a long-term process of negotiation and communication between the German state and representatives of the Muslim population in Germany, lasting between two and three years.

Many people have asked why this is only happening now. This accusation may be justified, but it does not take us forward. We can only achieve our goals by looking to the future and tackling the tasks which lie ahead. The delay may well be due to the fact that we did not at first think the immigrants would stay in Germany permanently. Now we know that things turned out differently. For this reason, the time has come for the German Conference on Islam to mark the beginning of a new way of living together.

Islam is part of Germany and part of Europe, part of our present and part of our future. Muslims are welcome in Germany. We wish to encourage them to develop their talents and to help us take our country forward.

The representatives of Germany's state and federal governments at the German Conference on Islam have made it clear that Muslims also have their part to play. We believe that the path to beneficial mutual relations is a process in which cultural and religious differences should be recognized, while at the same time fully accepting the free and democratic basic order. The fundamental rules for coexistence, which are protected by our legal and value system, are binding for everyone living in Germany.

In order to enable us to use the Conference on Islam to create an opportunity for a new way of living together, we ask that Muslims accept the basic principles of harmonious mutual relations: The German legal and value system, the German language and the social conventions which apply in Germany. This path to our society is re-lected by the motto of the German Conference on Islam: "Muslims in Germany - German Muslims".

Here, the key question for me is: How can we achieve a situation in which Muslims in Germany identify themselves even more strongly as German Muslims, in which they feel at home in this country and become even more engaged and actively involved in its social issues? How can all of us in Germany, regardless of our religion, live together harmoniously, and how can we avoid at the same time opening up new rifts due to our different religious beliefs? Here, we need first of all to sit down and discuss what brings us together in all our diversity, while at the same time finding ways of sincerely articulating what separates us from each other.

If we are unable to agree on what brings us together as Germans, regardless of whether we are Muslims, Jews, atheists or Christians, none of our efforts at integration will achieve their aim. What good is the best route to integration for someone who is unable or unwilling to find any common ground? Does a

person who does not learn our language really wish to live here? Here, political or legal institutions alone are not enough to ensure successful integration. Also a constitution is by itself insufficient. It requires other supporting pillars to ensure that it can be applied in real life by the citizens of this country.

Both sides –the state and the citizens– must play their part if integration is to succeed. The aim of this conference is not only to develop recommendations for politicians or the state; it is also a call to all religious groups to view the opportunity of freedom as a responsibility arising out of their religious belief.

This responsibility is part of the framework of our liberal democracy, which we must protect against any internal or external threat. After all, part of our history and our European identity is the fact that, alongside the struggle to find the correct relationship between state and religion, many of the freedoms we enjoy today were won only after centuries of bitter conflict: The right to freedom of expression, freedom of the press, equality between men and women, free, fair and secret elections –all these things, which many people in this country take for granted, are anything but self-evident in many other countries in the world. Europe had to undergo the Reformation, the Enlightenment and a series of wars in order to arrive where it is today: a Union which currently consists of 27 countries, all committed to promoting freedom, peace and the rule of law. For our state, protecting this precious and fragile peace, ensuring that the rights of individuals are respected, and at the same time providing for their security, is the highest and most important goal.

The German Conference on Islam aims to do more than simply initiate a non-binding dialogue. It aims to specify where we wish to be in five, ten or thirty years' time, and how we can work together to achieve this goal.

If we wish to describe what we expect from each other, and what is reasonable to expect from each other in this society, we must first ask what we demand of ourselves. Here, we will find that despite all the controversy surrounding the role of women or the relationship between religion and the constitutional state, for example, Islam offers something that many people in Germany are at risk of losing: The emphasis on the importance of the family, respect for one's elders, an awareness of and pride in one's own history, culture, religion and tradition, and daily life lived in accordance with one's religious convictions. It is precisely in connection with these issues that Muslims have a great deal to contribute in our society.

Alongside all the legal issues, the debate with Islam is also a discussion regarding the role of the individual in modern society. This is perhaps the most fruitful and the most challenging aspect. This age of globalization, in which cultures are meeting and merging, force us to take our bearings. The rapid expansion of free markets since 1989 has brought about many changes. The freedom of the markets, for the first time not limited by borders, has consequences for people throughout the world, of which they were often not aware, and for which they

had and have no values or standards. Here in Germany, we are also in the process of realizing that the wave of globalization over the past 15 years, which is rooted above all in economic laws and which follows economic goals, has created what can be described as an “emotional vacuum” affecting the way we live together. The German Conference on Islam therefore also aims to address the hypothesis put forward by many Islamic intellectuals, that the West is “a type of society based on an excess of economic rationality and value relativism, without value as a model”. We can certainly see, also in Germany, a trend towards the search for collective identities beyond material values, a yearning for a slower pace of change, and a demand for binding commitment and reliability. We can by all means be grateful that these issues are being raised, also from the point of view of German Muslims.

As well as ensuring internal security, the effort to further improve relations between all people living in this country is perhaps the most important task of our domestic policy, and an appropriate approach to religion is a core element in successful integration. During the German Conference on Islam, the Federal Ministry of the Interior will focus in cooperation with the appropriate federal and Länder ministries on our specific responsibility, namely the relationship between the state and the religious communities. Just as we have a relationship with the Catholic and Protestant churches, we must attempt to develop a relationship between the state and the Muslim community in Germany.

Here, the internal organization of German Muslims already poses a great difficulty. Some people occasionally advise us simply to do what governments in Austria, France or the UK have done. However, with the Conference on Islam, I wish to take the approach of talking to Muslims and all others involved to enable us to find a real German path towards better relations and towards shared responsibility for upholding the basic values in our constitution, for freedom, the rule of law, security and tolerance, and to create the legal framework needed to achieve this.

I have selected the participants in the plenum and in the working groups, including representatives of the largest Muslim umbrella organizations, following serious consideration and many intensive discussions. If one makes a generous estimate of the number of members, these organizations represent between 15 and 20 percent of Muslims living in Germany. As a result, the large majority of religious and secular Muslims is not adequately represented by these organizations, and no individual can claim that he alone represents the Muslim population. For this reason, I have also made the conscious decision to invite representatives from outside the organized Muslim community, who reflect many aspects of everyday life for Muslims in our country. This is an important step within the dialogue process, and within the Muslim community in Germany.

The spectrum of specific issues which we will be addressing during the conference is as broad as Islam in Germany is diverse. Should Islam become an officially recognized religion in Germany, should Islam be taught in schools and should

there be Islamic theological faculties, should quotas be introduced for Muslims in the public service, and can or should tests be used in order to ascertain language competence and willingness to integrate? These are all controversial questions which have to date hardly ever been discussed in context, and I expect to hear different opinions and answers in response to them. Here, mutual respect demands that we also clearly identify those differences which separate us.

The first core theme of the conference will be the compatibility between different aspects of Islam and the German social order. Starting with the key elements of our pluralistic society, we shall discuss central values and their significance for integration in the first working group, “The German Social Order and Value Consensus”. Our shared goal is to enable Muslims in Germany to develop better than they have so far, and above all, to allow them greater access to education and the labor market.

The second important focus is the issue of how Islam as a religion can be compatible with the structures and elements of German ecclesiastical law. To a great extent, we interpret our ecclesiastical law according to Article 4 of the Basic Law in the light of our experience of applying state law to the Christian churches, which leads to problems with the religious order of Islam. For this reason, we will require a partner if we wish to start teaching Islam in state schools, for example, since it would not be appropriate for the state to act on its own in this matter. A further aim of the Conference on Islam is to find such a partner.

Economics and the media comprise the third focus of the conference. Here, we shall deal with the issue of how to tackle shortcomings in the economic and social status of many Muslims, how the media can play a greater role than they have done to date in promoting language skills and thus communication and integration, and many other topics, including what Muslims expect of the German-language print and electronic media.

We shall also discuss the threat to our liberal democracy posed by the efforts of Islamists. A discussion forum already exists in which many organizations are working together with the security authorities in this matter. In the “Security and Islamism” discussion forum, we wish to improve cooperation in the fight against both violent and legalistic Islamism. We cannot accept a situation where extremists use the religion of Islam as the basis for their activities, particularly since the majority of peace-loving Muslims also lives in fear of violent extremists.

By initiating this dialogue with Muslims, I hope that everyone will understand that Muslims are welcome in Germany. In order to enable them to develop their potential, we must recognize the problems which have arisen in our relations with each other, together with their causes, and to take appropriate measures as a result. Only in this way will we be able to create prospects for a shared future.

I hope that as a result of the German Conference on Islam, we will succeed not only in finding practical solutions, but also in creating greater understanding,

support, peacefulness and tolerance, and above all, greater communication and diversity, and in so doing, make a valuable contribution to our country.

I fully hope and trust that the German Conference on Islam will be a success, since the modern society in which we all live is the product of the history of many peoples and cultures, including the Islamic culture, which has played a particularly important role. During the course of its history, Islam has consistently shown a high degree of cultural versatility and flexibility, and we must always keep this in mind when discussing the crisis of Islam in modern society.