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MUSLIMS IN GERMANY AND THE GERMAN ISLAM CONFERENCE AS AN INSTRUMENT TO FOSTER SOCIAL COHESION

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MUSLIMS IN GERMANY AND THE GERMAN ISLAM CONFERENCE AS AN INSTRUMENT TO FOSTER SOCIAL COHESION

Mr. Keles,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I would like to thank you, Mr. Keles, very warmly for the invitation by the Dialogue Society to speak to such a distinguished audience about Islam in Germany.

I would like to congratulate the Dialogue Society on the valuable work it has now been doing for exactly ten years. What makes this work especially interesting from a German perspective is that the Society was founded by Muslims of mainly Turkish origin. Because most Muslims living in Germany also have a Turkish background.

I would like to devote the first part of my talk to the relationship between the state and religion, and in particular the situation of Islam and Muslims in Germany.

I would then like to talk briefly about the work of the German Islam Conference, its structures and its experiences to date.

Finally, I will offer some concluding thoughts, and we can proceed to a discussion.

I. Religion, Islam and Muslims in Germany

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The horrors of the Nazi regime and the terrible war caused by Nazi Germany have taught us Germans that every free and democratic order requires a moral foundation, a fundamental set of values.

This includes an idea of man which in Germany is strongly influenced by the Christian religion.

For this reason, there is in Germany today – in contrast, say, to France – no absolute separation of state and religion. The relationship between state and religion is more similar to Britain: a positive neutrality. The secular German state protects the different religions and confessions in their autonomy and freedom of operation and also supports them in this – for example through church tax and religious education in schools.

Against this background, Islam is a relatively new topic for Germany. It's true that there has been Muslim immigration to Germany since the early 1960s – mainly from Turkey. Clearly these immigrants had a different

cultural background, but the religious difference was at first not at all prominent.

That changed over time, as it became clear that these immigrants had not just come to us temporarily as "guest workers", but were in Germany permanently and also wanted to bring their dependants.

With regard to the current situation, we have quite up-to-date information thanks to a survey, "Muslim Life in Germany", of June 2009. I will just mention the key data.

[We have brought with us an English-language summary of this survey for anyone interested]

There are about 4 million Muslims in Germany, about 5 per cent of the total population, and the third-largest religious community.

65% of Muslims in Germany – 2.6 million – are of Turkish origin.

The second-largest group – 15%, or 600,000 people – are from south-east European countries (Bosnia, Bulgaria and Albania).

Then come migrants from the Middle East (8%), from North Africa (7%), from Central Asia, Iran and many other countries.

Only rather under half of Muslims in Germany – 45% – have German citizenship. Compared with Britain, that is a low figure. The main reason is that to become a German citizen it is necessary (except for EU citizens) to give up citizenship of the country of origin, which many migrants are not willing to do.

It is interesting that almost all Muslims in Germany – 98% – live in western Germany including Berlin. Only a very few live in what used to be East Germany.

Among the Muslims, Sunnites form much the largest group (74%), followed by Alevites (13%) and Shiites (7%).

The great majority of Muslims in Germany – 86% – describe themselves as believers. However, only 20% are members of religious associations or communities – whereas over 50% are members of other associations.

The religious life of Muslims in Germany is – as you can imagine – very diverse, so I can't describe this in detail.

But I'd just like to mention some familiar topics: headscarves, swimming lessons, religious education and educational qualifications.

- 70% of all Muslim women in Germany never wear a headscarf, and its use is diminishing in the second immigrant generation.

- Only 7% of Muslim schoolgirls do not take part in swimming lessons.

- On the other hand, three-quarters of German Muslims are in favour of introducing Islamic religious education in schools.

- In Germany there is no mainstream Muslim demand for Sharia Law – as is used here in Britain in specialist arbitration courts. An important reason for this is that Muslims from secular Turkey – unlike Muslims from South Asia – have no tradition of a religious civil law.

- The educational level of migrants from Muslim countries of origin is relatively low, especially in the case of Turkish women of the first immigrant generation. However, this is not related to Islam, but because the first generation were working migrants who usually had little education. The second generation born in Germany are considerably more likely to leave the German school system with a qualification than their parents – and here Muslim girls, interestingly, are doing better than boys. Even so, there is still a relatively high number leaving school without a qualification and still too few taking university entrance. A key factor in this is a lack of German language skills.

All in all, however, the survey shows that the Muslim community is better integrated into German society than is often thought.

This is also confirmed by a Gallup survey of May 2009 with which you are probably familiar:

This showed that Muslims in Germany – as in the UK – identify much more closely with the state than the population as a whole.

Furthermore, half of German Muslims declared themselves satisfied with their circumstances – considerably more than for the population as a whole.

All the same, there are problems of integration and understanding which need to be addressed. And this brings me to one of the instruments the German Government has specifically developed for this purpose.

II. The German Islam Conference

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I now come to the second part of my talk, in which I will describe the work of the German Islam Conference, set up by the then Interior Minister Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble in 2006.

I am glad that I can brief you on this, so to speak, from first hand, as before my posting to London I represented the Foreign Office at the Islam Conference for two years as State Secretary.

The German Islam Conference is an official discussion forum which meets in plenary about once a year and about every three months in four working groups.

Delegates to the plenary session are 15 representatives of Germany's three levels of government – federal, regional and local – and 15 representatives of the Muslim community: one representative from each of the five Islamic national umbrella organisations and 10 "independent" Muslims from a very diverse spectrum of public life (politics, academia, law, the arts). The greater number of independent representatives is because only about 15% of Muslims in Germany are affiliated to the five umbrella organisations.

The plenary session and working groups of the Islam Conference develop joint positions and recommendations for action and initiate concrete measures to improve integration and social cohesion.

At the heart of the discussion are these key questions: How can the different rules and customs of Islam be brought into harmony with German law? How can the economic circumstances of German Muslims be improved? And how can prejudices on both sides be broken down?

A priority of the Islam Conference is not just to bring together representatives of the State and the Muslim community in dialogue, but also to encourage dialogue among the different Islamic associations. My impression is that this has been successful.

Beyond this, however, a great many very practical results have been achieved by the four working groups of the Islam Conference, which I would like briefly to summarise:

1) Working Group 1: "The German social order and value consensus"

Working Group 1 discusses common values on the basis and within the framework of the German legal system. Subjects include basic rights, the participation of Muslims in the democratic process, education matters and equal opportunities for men and women.

In 2008, after long debate, the Islam Conference declared its commitment to the German legal and value system and agreed on a common understanding of integration (including the learning and use of the German language!).

In 2009, a further declaration emphasised – beyond mere obedience to the law – the importance of schools and families in promoting tolerance, highlighted the need for education, language learning and equal opportunities for men and woman and called for greater educational awareness on the part of Muslim parents.

This declaration was, however, signed by only four of the five Islamic associations. The "Islamic Council for the Federal Republic of Germany" (basically Milli Görüs) was not totally opposed to the contents of the declaration, but would have preferred greater emphasis on the positive role of the Islamic associations and was unhappy that the associations had been criticised by individual delegates as hostile to integration.

2) Working Group 2: "Religion and the German Constitution"

Working Group 2 is concerned with the relationship between religious practice and German law.

It agreed to recommend to the German Regions, or Länder (which are responsible for education) that they should introduce Islamic religious education by teachers trained in Germany. This has already begun in several of the Länder.

It also agreed that mosque communities should in future be led primarily by imams who have grown up and been trained in Germany, and that theological training courses at German universities should be provided accordingly.

Working Group 2 also drew up guidelines for practical religious issues in schools, including among others:

- Girls should be able to wear a headscarf at school, but not cover the whole face.

- All younger girls should take part in coeducational sport and swimming lessons. However, from puberty they should be allowed to withdraw from these on individual application.

- There is no right to exemption from sex education, but Muslim parents should be able to ask for restraint and respect for religious feelings in the way this is taught.

- On high Islamic festivals, such as the Feast of Sacrifice and the End of the Fast, Muslim pupils should be excused from school for at least one day.

Lastly, the basic right of religious freedom in Germany includes the right to build mosques, including minarettes . The Working Group examined the legal conditions for such buildings, for example under construction and neighbour law.

3) Working Group 3: “Business and the Media as a Bridge”

Working Group 3 is concerned with the contribution business and the media can make to integration, and examines areas such as vocational training, the labour market and perception of Islam in the media.

Recommendations have included employment of more Muslim staff by media organisations, promoting objective and fair reporting and improving the public relations work of mosques.

Working Group 3 has organised several specialist conferences on these subjects with participants from media, academia and politics.

4) The fourth of these panels is the discussion group “Security and Islamism”. This is concerned with security threats posed by islamist extremism.

Following its recommendations, to improve cooperation between Muslims and the security authorities a clearing-house has been set up to help develop a nationwide network of contact partners among security authorities and Muslim organisations. There has also been work on special training projects for security authorities and security advice for mosque associations.

After controversial discussion, the group agreed that extremist islamist activities should be seen as a cause for concern and that efforts should be made, including by the Islamic associations, to counter such tendencies.

However, some delegates have reservations about the Security Panel projects, as they fear that these could tend to reinforce general suspicion towards Muslims.

5) I would like to say clearly that the German Islam Conference has not been uncontroversial. More secular-minded Muslims criticise the role in it of the Islamic associations on the grounds that promoting religious rights could encourage islamist activities. There are also doubts about how representative and legitimate the associations are, given that they only represent a small section of the Muslim community in Germany.

However, although these points need further discussion, I am firmly convinced that by providing a national forum for dialogue the German Islam Conference is making a vital contribution to mutual trust and integration. Germany would like to propose this successful institution as a model for other countries with immigrant Muslim populations.

In my view, the most important result of the German Islam Conference is the message it sends out: today Islam and Muslims are an integral part of Germany and of German society.

III. Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to conclude with two reflections on our dialogue with Muslim communities which seem to me very important. The first concerns a danger; the second, a problem.

1) The danger I see for our dialogue with Muslim communities is reducing our Muslim fellow-citizens to their religious identity.

In this way we could inadvertently find ourselves serving the ends of those who would like to turn political conflicts into a question of religious belief. Rather, cultural dialogue should make clear the way in which secular conflicts are sometimes given a religious interpretation, and in this way help ensure that people and fellow-citizens are not reduced to their religious identity. The integration problems of many immigrants derive from insufficient language skills, poor qualifications or a lack of job opportunities. These are certainly not Muslim problems, but affect all socially disadvantaged groups – irrespective of religious belief.

2) As for the problem I see for dialogue with Muslim communities, it is this. Often the state in which our new fellow-citizens live is still perceived by them as alien and not their own. Thus the legitimate security interests of the state in which they are living are often not seen as their own security interests. On the one hand, many state integration programmes and advancement projects are seen by Muslims as paternalistic; on the other hand, security measures are often misinterpreted as blanket suspicion. And in this way, these vital complementary efforts become discredited.

Conversely, I sometimes see a tendency in our Western society and politics to see any application of Muslim rules in social life as dangerous islamism. We fail to distinguish sufficiently between the many complex manifestations of Islam. On both sides, we know far too little about each other – about the beliefs and practices of different religions. In Germany we have found that xenophobia is often greatest where there are actually very few foreigners or immigrants, especially among people who have never even encountered one. Let us therefore encourage greater contact, greater communication and mutual respect.

On this note I would like to conclude and thank you for your attention. I am looking forward to an interesting discussion.