

## GMF Immigration Roundtables: A View From Berlin

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**Summary:** Almost five years after the the launch of the German Islam Conference, the country is caught up in a fierce debate about the role of Muslims in the country, with polls showing that Germans view Muslims more negative than any other European nation.

The popular approval of Thilo Sarrazin's anti-Muslim book *Germany Does Away With Itself* reveals that many Germans see Islam in their midst as a foreign element, if not an existential threat to their way of life.

Yet, the problems commonly associated with Muslim migrants have nothing to do with ordinary Islam and the day-to-day lives of the overwhelming majority of Germany's four million Muslims, but are rather rooted in the deprivation of a good education and a system that fosters inequalities and restricts social mobility.

The German Islam Conference has succeeded in initiating many useful steps to meet the demands and challenges of an increasingly diverse and multi-religious society. But more work remains to be done if Germany is to overcome its demographic hurdles and achieve long-term social cohesion among its citizens.

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## New Approaches to Muslim Engagement: A View from Germany

By *Ali Aslan*

Once upon a time in Germany, a courageous minister had the foresight and boldness to call the nation's Muslims an integral part of society: "Islam is part of Germany...it is part of our present and part of our future. Muslims are welcome in Germany." These words spoken in September 2006 by then Minister of the Interior, Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble, marked the beginning of the German Islam Conference, a high-profile initiative by the Federal Government, which aimed to restore mutual trust within the society and its Muslim communities in the aftermath of September 11.

The Conference, whose founding team I was a part of, was widely welcomed and hailed as a much needed forum for the dialogue and improved integration of Muslims into German society. It was recognized by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance as an important symbol of change.

Yet the spirit of 2006 now seems like a distant memory as Germany is caught up in a fierce debate about the role of Muslims in the country. Today, many Germans (still) see Islam in their midst as a foreign element and even as an existential threat to their way of life.

### The Perception of Muslim Integration Today: A Hostile Climate in Society

When President Christian Wulff used the occasion of the 20th anniversary of German unification on October 3, 2010, to affirm once more that Islam is part of Germany, his words were met with harsh and widespread criticism from members of his own party, media commentators, and, most importantly, the public at large.

A poll conducted by the *Bild* newspaper showed that almost 70 percent disagreed with President Wulff's statement. Several of his fellow Christian Democrats have challenged his view and insisted that Germany was based on a "Judeo-Christian heritage," which should also be considered as its "Leitkultur" or guiding culture, a politically charged term that had already sparked a raging debate in the past.

Almost five years after the launch of the German Islam Conference, the current debate about Islam shows that most people have yet to grasp the fact that Germany has long since become a country of immigrants, with a correspondingly complex diversity of values and viewpoints.

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The appointment of the first minister of Muslim heritage in the state of Lower Saxony, the naming of Cem Özdemir as the Green Party's co-chair, the rise of critically acclaimed filmmaker Fatih Akin, and the popularity of Turkish-born football player Mesut Özil all gave reason to believe that the country is coming to terms with and, in fact, is starting to embrace the notion of a diverse society. But the hostility with which the German debate about its Muslims has recently been led seems to suggest otherwise.

The person mainly responsible for triggering this debate is Thilo Sarrazin, a member of the Social Democrats and a former board member of the central bank, who in August 2010, published a controversial book in which he claims that the integration of Muslims in Germany has been a complete failure.

Sarrazin, whose book, *Germany Does Away With Itself*, is filled with highly controversial assumptions, assertions, and correlations, concludes that Muslims are genetically less intelligent, prefer to live off the state rather than work, and are having too many children, while well-educated native Germans are having too few.

The result, according to Sarrazin, is not only that Germany's population is shrinking, it is also getting dumber. "If the birth-rate of the migrants continues to remain higher than the indigenous population, within a few generations, the migrants will take over the state and society and create a nation of dunces," he writes. According to Berlin's former Finance Minister, the only useful function of Muslims in Germany has been to sell fruits and vegetables. "Culturally and morally, the Muslims represent a step backward for German society," Sarrazin declares in his book

Chancellor Merkel described Sarrazin's remarks as "absurd and unacceptable." Her words were echoed by the former vice president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Michel

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Friedman, who declared that there could be "no more tolerance for this intolerance."

But Sarrazin's book clearly has struck a chord with the German public, selling more than 1 million copies to date to become the bestselling book in 2010. In fact, it has become the biggest selling nonfiction book by any German author in the past ten years. Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, Sarrazin's catchy and seductive tunes have gained him a strong following among the majority society. An Emnid poll conducted shortly after the publication of the book revealed that no less than 18 percent of Germans would vote for a new party under his leadership.

Former chancellor Helmut Schmidt and presidential candidate Joachim Gauck, both highly respected public figures, called Sarrazin courageous and let it be known that they agree with his assertions about German Muslims. Schmidt, a fellow Social Democrat, criticized SPD-leader Sigmar Gabriel for attempting to expel Sarrazin from the party. The expulsion proceedings are still ongoing and, revealingly, were launched by his speculation over a "specific gene" that "all Jews share" – a statement that has already cost him his seat on the central bank's board - rather than by anything derogatory he had to say about Muslims.

The popular approval of the book and its sweeping condemnation of Islam show that many Germans seem to be worried because they see their way of life being called into question by the presence of Islam. The author's success seems to primarily reflect the struggle for a new German self-image and the difficulties connected with the fact that Germany has indeed become a country of immigration.

Interestingly, negative sentiments are highest in eastern Germany, where Muslims are only marginal in number. Even though the German constitution unequivocally guarantees freedom of faith and religion, a survey conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation last October showed that 75 percent of all eastern German respondents endorsed restricting the exercise of Islamic beliefs in Germany and one in three suggested that Muslims should "go back to where they came from."

The broad support for Sarrazin is also rooted in the widespread (yet erroneous) belief that he has broken a taboo by revealing what many perceive to be the suppressed ugly truth about Muslims in Germany (The German Islam Conference, which addressed many contentious and controversial issues vis-à-vis Muslim life in Germany, existed years before the book was even

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published). Sarrazin has, thus, become the trigger to get people to openly speak their minds about what they perceive to be the capitulation of their society to Islam.

There is a widespread belief in Germany that the nation has been systematically infiltrated by Islamists, that Germany is forsaking its own value system to please audacious Muslim demands, that Islam is incompatible with democracy, and that the constitution is going to be replaced by the Sharia before too long. Isolated legal cases, such as permitting Muslim parents to keep their daughters from attending class trips, sex education lessons, or sports instruction, are seized as proof of the alleged infiltration of the German judicial system by Islamist forces.

Yet, these thoughts are no longer limited to right-wing extremist circles and conspiracy theorists. Mainstream political parties, former liberals, or leftwing intellectuals have now joined in the chorus as well. Some parts of the media are also contributing to the anti-Muslim sentiments by reinforcing negative stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam. Continuously biased and unfavorable news about Islam and Muslims has led a large majority of Germans to associate Islam primarily with negative attributes such as backwardness, oppression of women, intolerance, and violence.

A certain degree of demagoguery is to be expected from tabloid newspapers like *Bild*. But magazine covers such as “Mecca Germany - The quiet Muslim takeover” by the renowned *Der Spiegel* (depicting the Islamic crescent moon and star looming threateningly over the Brandenburg Gate), “How dangerous is Islam” by *Stern* magazine, and “Spooky Guests – The alternative world of Muslims in Germany” by the conservative publication *Focus* reveal that prejudiced and sensational coverage of Islam-related stories can be observed across the board.

## Islamophobia is not only a German Phenomenon

Granted, Islamophobia is not an exclusively German phenomenon. One can find anti-Muslim sentiments and anti-Islamic rhetoric throughout Western societies. The current government in the Netherlands, for example, is forced to tolerate the right-wing populist politician Geert Wilders, who has even proposed banning the Koran. In Italy, Denmark, Sweden, and Austria, populist right-wing parties are competing for votes in local, regional, and national elections with anti-Islamic slogans. In Switzerland, a country with a very small Muslim population, voted for the ban of minarets, even though only four mosques fit the profile at the time the referendum was held. And in France,

the so-called *banlieues* are rising up against the French government due to the lack of prospects for most Muslim youth, only to be called “scum” by President Sarkozy.

And even in the United States, where Muslims are much better integrated into society and where their annual income is higher than the average, there are signs of growing hostility toward Muslims. The planned construction of an Islamic cultural center called Park 51 in New York City (incorrectly labeled as the “Ground Zero Mosque”) has triggered a heated controversy, prompting *Time* magazine to ask on its cover “Is America Islamophobic?”

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What gives reason for concern from a German perspective is a survey by the University of Münster, revealing that Germans view Muslims more negatively than any other European nation. Another public opinion survey by the German Marshall Fund shows that only Germany and Spain had majorities saying that Muslims were integrating poorly into their society. Even Dutch respondents said that children of Muslim migrants were well-integrated into their society, a sentiment echoed by majorities in France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

## Empirical Evidence Shows Muslim Integration is Lagging Behind

A study conducted by the Federal Office of Migration and Refugees puts the current number of Muslims living in Germany between 3.8 and 4.3 million (5 percent of the total population), most of whom are of Turkish descent (almost 3 million) and predominantly Sunni (approximately 80 percent). About half of those hold German citizenship.

Reports that forecast that the number of Muslims in Germany will grow excessively over the next years are highly exaggerated. With more Muslim women getting educations and jobs, people migrating to cities, and living standards improving, the birth-

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rate will level off in the coming years. Sarrazin's prediction that Europe will become a majority-Muslim "Eurabia" is unfounded, according to a recent report by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Sarrazin typically defends himself by insisting that his book only contains irrefutable facts and figures about the integration problems of Muslims. And even though many of his assertions have already been questioned and proven wrong, it is true that we are facing serious challenges in Germany. Conditions in certain neighborhoods give rise to justified concerns. There are school-rooms where three-quarters of the students are from immigrant families, students whose German is barely good enough to get by. The number of young people with no high school graduation or equivalent vocational qualification in Germany is twice as high among immigrant families as it is among children with at least one German parent. There are Arab family clans that control crime syndicates and, at the same time, receive welfare benefits from the state. There are ancient and inhumane patriarchal traditions like forced marriages and so-called honor killings. In some mosques, imams are inciting hatred against non-Muslims, leading to the radicalization among some young German Muslims.

All of this exists, and yet it has nothing to do with ordinary Islam and the day-to-day lives of the overwhelming majority of Germany's 4 million Muslims. In fact, most of these problems are not rooted in one's ethnic heritage or religious belief, but rather in the lack of a good education and the prevalence of a system that fosters inequalities and restricts social mobility.

The United Nations has criticized the German education system for excluding children from poor families and immigrant backgrounds from the chance of a good education. Selection in the German education system above all affects the underprivileged layers, people with a migration background, the disabled, or socially disadvantaged. The European Commission has come to the conclusion that there is no other country in Europe where educational opportunities are as dependent on one's ethnic and social origin as in Germany. And a study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that high school graduates from an immigrant background have significantly worse chances in the German job market, with nearly half of all pupils with a migration background not getting an apprenticeship place. The same study found that children born to German parents have much better chances of finding work, even with the same high school qualifications. Add to that

the humble background from which most Muslim immigrants originally had and one is getting a better idea why they are lagging behind, both in school and in the job market.

The earliest notable immigration of Muslims to Germany took place in the beginning of the 1960s, when low-skilled, mostly uneducated and illiterate migrants, mainly from poverty-stricken rural parts of Turkey, arrived to fill the shortage of labor caused by the devastating death toll of World War II. Cheap workers were needed for the country's steel mills and coal mines, prompting Germany to negotiate an agreement with Turkey under which the latter sent 1 million of its citizens to fill these jobs. Neither country anticipated that these workers would stay long. But they did, and today they and their descendants constitute the overwhelming majority of Germany's Muslim population.

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Meanwhile, the industrial jobs that had brought the first generation of Turks to Germany gradually disappeared. The second and third generations, settled mostly in poor neighborhoods with hardly any exposure to the majority society and with little culture of academic achievement, failed to move into the modern high-tech sector, where the new jobs emerged. The lack of a formal education on the part of the so-called "guest workers" was subsequently passed on to following generations. For that reason, Muslims in Germany continue to be associated with the working class. And while the number of Muslim students at universities

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is steadily increasing each year, an educational elite has yet to be developed.

This stands in stark contrast to the United States, for instance, where most Muslim migrants enter as students or academics. As a result, American Muslim organizations are active, well-organized, and sophisticated in their social and political dealings, and thus can help to overcome religious and social divisions and diffuse tension, as seen in the controversy surrounding “Park 51.”

## **The German Islam Conference: Trying a New Approach to Muslim Engagement**

The German Islam Conference was brought to life in September 2006 under the guidance of Minister Schäuble in an effort to enhance the religious and social integration of the Muslim population in Germany. This was the first national forum to institutionalize a nationwide framework for the dialogue between the state and selected representatives of Muslims in Germany.

Primarily, the conference aimed to strengthen common ground between Muslims and the majority society, overcome differences, and preserve social cohesion in order to counteract social polarization and segregation in a country that had become increasingly religiously and culturally diverse. Aside from seeking practical solutions, the conference intended to create mutual understanding, sympathy, and communication between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The German Islam Conference — whose plenary assembly convened annually and consisted of the five leading Muslim organizations in Germany and ten Muslim individuals from different walks of life — revealed to the German public that the Muslim community is not a monolithic bloc, but rather a religious group with a vast diversity of opinions and very different degrees of religiousness. It also quickly became obvious that there is a lack of Muslim organizations that can engage German authorities and German society intellectually and professionally at a high level.

The plenary approved suggestions and recommendations from the four working groups, which met every other month, and provided impetus for the process of the dialogue. Over 100 specialists lent their expertise to a wide variety of issues such as the German values system, religious matters in the context of the constitution, the role of the media, and cooperation between Muslims and German security authorities.

In the aftermath of the 4th plenary meeting, in 2009, a report with the conclusions from the working groups was adopted on issues as diverse as the social cohesion and integration of Muslims, the introduction of Islamic religious studies in public schools, the training of German imams, the establishment of Islamic theological university institutions, the coverage of Islam by the German media, and the prevention of Islamist tendencies in Germany.

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But there are critics who claim that the Islam Conference will only have achieved its objectives when German society associates Islam above all with the positive contribution that Muslims are making to the community, when religious diversity is no longer seen as a threat but as a factor enriching the society, when Muslims feel at home in Germany.

Based on those criteria (and in light of the current atmosphere), one might be inclined to argue that the conference has not succeeded in reaching its goals. But that would be a short-sighted view on a complex matter since the adopted measures in the 2009 report provide tangible results and a solid foundation on which the dialogue can move forward.

It is true, however, that the influence of the conference is somewhat limited, for most of its resolutions are not legally binding as the ultimate jurisdiction on many of the important issues (such as education) lies with the states, not the federal government. Therefore, the conference can act “merely” as a trigger. In the end, it is the states that have to adopt and implement the recommendations put forth by the plenary assembly of the German Islam Conference.

Perhaps more importantly, the high hopes and expectations that were raised with the launch of the conference were mostly unrealistic. One could not expect four years to be sufficient to make up for the negligence and lack of coherent immigration

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policies in the past 40 years. This is why the initiators of the conference kept repeatedly emphasizing the long-term aspect of the dialogue.

## Future Challenges for Muslim Engagement

There is no denying that the public debates and the general mood in Germany has turned against Muslims in the previous year and given rise to a whole new wave of Islam-bashing. Websites whose sole purpose is to spew venom against Muslims are increasing in numbers. And there are some publicly known individuals such as Necla Kelek and Henryk M. Broder who, through their relentless condemnation of all things Muslim, even managed to create an entirely new profession called “Critic of Islam.” The religion of Islam and the people who are culturally or religiously affiliated with it have become a scapegoat for social, economic, and political problems and a focal point for intolerance and hate.

It is no coincidence that arson attacks on mosques in Berlin and other parts of the country have increased in recent weeks. In fact, the murder of a pregnant Egyptian woman, Marwa El-Sherbiny, by a right-wing extremist in a courtroom in Dresden was the tragic culmination of the rising number in anti-Muslim hate crimes.

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The former Director of The Center for Research on Anti-Semitism, German Historian Wolfgang Benz, even draws parallels between current-day Islamophobia and the Berlin Anti-Semitism Dispute in the 19th century. To him, there are structural similarities in the stigmatization, exclusion, and discrimination of Muslims and Jews. “In the 19th century it was the Jews, now, supposedly, it is Islam that is threatening the West. We attribute an otherness to the respective minorities, something which must

not be taken away from them. They are the common attributes which prejudice can lock on to and build on,” Benz writes.

But despite the unfavorable circumstances, the German Islam Conference has succeeded in initiating many useful steps to meet the demands and challenges of an increasingly diverse and multi-religious society. The teaching of Islam in public schools as well as the establishment of Islamic theological study centers at selected universities to offer bachelor programs in Islamic studies are two of the most significant achievements of the conference. Islamic studies had already been available in Germany as an academic discipline, but training courses for Islamic teachers and Imams are a novelty.

Currently, the majority of imams in Germany are sent from abroad (mostly Turkey) for a limited time and lack German language skills or any academic training and thus are ill-prepared and unable to build bridges between their congregations and the German society. The formal training of “homegrown” German Imams, who are familiar with the environment and customs of the country, is intended to bridge that gap.

The second round of the German Islam Conference, presided over by the new Interior Minister, Thomas de Maizière, who took over the helm from Minister Schäuble in 2009, has dedicated itself to establishing institutionalized co-operation between state and Muslims, promoting gender equality, and preventing extremism, radicalization, and social polarization. But more work remains to be done, within and outside of the conference.

For one, Islam has so far not been officially recognized by the German state as a religious community, which would give Muslims the same legal rights as Christians and Jews. The Islamic religion does not have a hierarchy and structure like established churches, and is thus not well-suited to fulfill the legal criteria required by German law to obtain the official status. The community is too fragmented and there is no organized church or authority in Islam that could act as the sole partner of the government. In 2007, the four leading Muslim organizations in Germany joined forces to form an umbrella group, the Coordination Council of Muslims in Germany (KRM), with the hope of being recognized by the government as the single negotiating partner, however, to no avail. We may, however, see some movement and pragmatic approaches on the part of some German states before too long as the recognition of a religion lies ultimately under their jurisdiction.

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However, official status or not, Islam is becoming increasingly more visible in Germany. And with that realization comes challenges that need to be addressed both by German policy makers and society at large.

For now, a predominantly one-sided negative view of Islam and Muslims must be replaced by a different image reflecting the enriching diversity of Islam and Muslims and as a result contribute in the long term towards improving the social and public perceptions regarding Muslims in Germany.

This approach ought not be perceived by the German public as a generous concession, but rather as an indispensable contribution and a much-needed step, guided mainly by self-interest and, most importantly, values that are based on democracy and human rights. This change in attitude is essential if the country wants to achieve long-term social cohesion and a peaceful co-existence in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic society. The failure to do so would have extremely unfavorable consequences for Germany.

For one, a rapidly aging society can ill-afford to lose any more qualified migrants. The size of the German workforce is not just leveling off, but shrinking. The country's global competitiveness is at stake, in particular Germany's chances in the global competition for the best and brightest minds. Anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments are likely to deter potential candidates from coming.

The failure to integrate Muslims into the workforce could also have a devastating effect on the country's pension system. The number of German senior citizens will continue to soar for at least another 40 years, a result of rising life expectancies, while Germany's total population could shrink from 82 million today to just 65 million by 2060. A brain drain of young Muslim professionals cannot be afforded under these circumstances. Currently,

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highly qualified young Muslim professionals are leaving the country because they no longer feel welcome and at home in Germany. Regrettably, those who are leaving are precisely the type of skilled workers and academics that a rapidly aging German society is desperately in need of in order to meet the country's demographic challenges.

Germany must, therefore, pursue a proactive immigration policy internally and become more attractive for qualified immigrants while at the same time convince those potential emigrants, who are qualified and contribute to the welfare state, to remain in the country by eliminating all existing barriers, such as job discrimination, and ensuring equal participation to the furthest extent possible in key areas of social life. Diversity in the workplace, in each sector and on all levels, must become a normality rather than the exception.

Equally important is the removal of all disadvantages in the education system, which prevent the social mobility of Muslim migrants in the first place. Currently, educational success is largely dependent on one's ethnic and social origin, surrendering those who are economically underprivileged to a life with limited prospects at the tender age of ten. The frustration and eventual alienation of that segment in later years can only be avoided by granting them equal access to a good education, followed by full economic, political, cultural, and social participation in day-to-day life.

Putting the Muslim minority continuously outside mainstream society could, in the long run, also pose a threat to the quality of democracy. The overall proportion of Muslims in the population may not be that large, but they are concentrated in key urban areas. In Berlin, 22 percent of the population is Muslim; in Frankfurt, more than 30 percent. It is unrealistic to expect Muslims to become emotionally integrated into German society while citizenship and the possibility of full participation in public life are being withheld. Continuous political alienation and disfranchisement of its Muslim community has the potential to undermine Germany's social cohesion and, worse, enable extremists to recruit young and embittered individuals who lack a sense of belonging.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, a new tone and show of respect is needed if Germany is to overcome the current divisions within its own society. The "us versus them" rhetoric propagated by some politicians, public figures, and parts of the media is a recipe for further social tensions, if not societal disaster.

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Politicians must avoid the temptation to score domestic political points with hard-line rhetoric about Muslim immigrants and instead lead by example in creating a social environment where it is no longer acceptable to single out and label a minority group as genetically less intelligent and inferior. Equally, newsmakers must get rid of the hate-based and populist language and develop a rational debate concerning Muslim communities and Islam in the public discourse. To that effect, the “Media” working group of the German Islam Conference repeatedly advocated a more balanced and responsible reporting on Islam-related issues with a greater emphasis on positive Muslim contributions to German society. In this sense, the recruitment of journalists with a migration background could contribute to a wider perspective, and thus, better-informed and culturally sensitive news reports. Presently, Muslims are extremely underrepresented in journalism.

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The country needs more bridge-builders, and fewer people who are interested in creating a religious divide, preaching hate or blaming Muslims for dumbing down Germany and draining the nation’s welfare budget. Not only because such populist arguments and unfortunate rhetoric throws us back to a darker period in the nation’s history but also because Germany’s traditionally good standing and image in the Muslim-majority countries could suffer as well.

More people need to demonstrate civil courage and speak up against blatant cases of racism and intolerance if and when they occur. In that context, Sarrazin’s success must also be seen as a massive breakdown of the nation’s so-called intellectual elite, which kept mostly mum about the book (or, worse, spoke out in favor of it).

“We have a difficult path ahead of us and there is a lot of work to do,” predicted Dr Wolfgang Schäuble in his 2006 government statement “German Islam Conference – perspectives for a common future.” His predictions have undoubtedly turned out to be true. Even more reason for Germany to continue the course that he embarked on with the launch of the conference. There is no reasonable alternative to the dialogue on all levels of society, for the successful integration of Muslims into German society is, above all, essential to the future well-being and unity of the country.

## About the Author

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## About GMF

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