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Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière Calls for Improving Muslim Participation in German Society (May 17, 2010)

To decrease tensions between Muslim communities and the German government, the Ministry of the Interior organized a second German Islam Conference. At the opening of the conference, Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière called for active integration measures to improve the participation of Muslims in German society.

“Improving the Participation of Muslims in Germany!”: Speech by Federal Minister Dr. Thomas de Maizière, MdB [Member of the Bundestag], to the plenum of the German Islam Conference on May 17, 2010, in Berlin.

Germany has become more diverse in terms of religion. Nearly five percent of the German population is Muslim. Half of the Muslims living in Germany – we are talking about two million people – are already German citizens. Muslims have found a home in Germany. Our country is a homeland to them.

In view of this fact, my predecessor coined the phrase: “Islam is a part of Germany.” This description of the state of affairs was as accurate as it was overdue.

But where do we want to go? What do we want to achieve?

What does it actually mean, “a part of Germany”? The word “part,” on the one hand, points to membership in a larger whole – as is shown by words such as participation and partaking. At the same time, however, it also points to the opposite: partition, separation, parallelism. Our work lies in this ambivalence.

Strengthening the sense of belonging – that is our goal. Greater participation of Muslims as citizens of our country – that is what we want to achieve together.

Participation also means: assuming responsibility. Let us then shape the present and the future together – in shared responsibility for the society in which we live and in which our children will also live side by side.

It is precisely in times of economic crisis and social upheaval that one thing becomes clear: religions provide people with stability. For many, religions form the foundation of a value-bound life within the context of various social frameworks. Religious bonds are stronger.

Religions form the foundation of a life oriented toward criteria that do not establish material profit as absolute. Religions create bonds and coherence – also in modern, secular societies.

But religious diversity also represents a challenge to societal cohesion. Boundaries and marginalization can also trigger conflicts.

For me, promoting cohesion means – going beyond religious or cultural boundaries – engaging in discussion, seeking solutions together, solidifying bonds, and thus strengthening the shared sense of responsibility for our country.

However, promoting societal cohesion in Germany does not in any way mean making everything the same, leveling every difference. The goal of the German Islam Conference is not assimilation. Our goal is to prevent diversity from becoming a problem.

The goal is to promote the integration of Muslims in Germany by way of participation. To that end, the German Islam Conference provides an institutionalized, nation-wide framework for the dialogue between the state and Muslims in Germany.

In the context of the Islam Conference, I understand integration in a broad sense:

– It encompasses, on the one hand, the participation of Muslims and their organizations in forms of cooperation that stem from the German constitutional law on religion. It encompasses, for example, the introduction of Islamic theology or Islamic religious instruction – also against the backdrop of the institutional recognition of Islam as a religious community. I call this the institutional or structural integration of Islam.

– But integration also encompasses, on the other hand, the deepening of a common consensus on shared values based on our Basic Law. Here, joint action against extremism, radicalization, and social polarization are of crucial importance. Likewise, forced marriages cannot be tolerated in our country. In my mind, social integration is of essential importance in ensuring that structural integration succeeds as well and is borne by the people in our country. My expectation of our Muslim partners in the Islam Conference is that they also take an active interest in these issues.

But there is no sequence here in the sense of: “First we’ll occupy ourselves with institutional and then with social integration.” If there were, then I would view this as wrong. We must pursue both processes simultaneously.

Participation also means assuming responsibility – responsibility also to protect the basic value system of our constitution against extremisms that seek to eliminate it. Here, Muslims in Germany can play an especially important role in confronting that brand of extremism that invokes Islam for goals that are hostile to the constitution – the so-called Islamism. I say “so-called” because there is a debate about terminology, and some might prefer to speak of fundamentalism or extremism. Therefore, perhaps it would be a good idea to compile a kind of glossary of these divergent viewpoints, in order to illustrate the perspectives upon which they are based.

Muslims have a special power of persuasion when it comes to rejecting distorted images of Islam, both in their personal milieu and in public discussion. Therefore, they are also called on in a special way.

This is a justified expectation by society, but also of society, and I, too, call for such engagement. This involves not only the rejection of terrorist violence, but also of extremist ideology, including its images of the enemy. This sort of publicly visible and committed engagement with **and** clear separation from Islamism is, in my view, the necessary foundation for a greater acceptance of Islam within the majority society. Assuming responsibility for upholding our value system is the best contribution to integration.

During the first phase of the Islam Conference, the foundations of our dialogue were laid. Now we want to make the Islam Conference more practical and take it to the streets, schools, mosques, and kitchen tables.

At the outset, we want to make clear to ourselves what the Islam Conference is and what it can concretely achieve:

- The Islam Conference is, first of all, not a representative for all Muslims in Germany.
- Likewise, it is not a “religious seminar” that can make decisions about religious content.

The Islam Conference is a platform for *dialogue*:

- It is a forum in which the state and Muslims converse with each other.
- As such, it is not able to make universally binding decisions.
- It can, however, support the integration process through the exchange of experiences, conceptual clarifications, and recommendations.

But the implementation of findings and recommendations by the Islam Conference itself is possible only in the most limited instances.

Responsibility for the success of the Islam Conference lies in the hands of the constituent members of the Islam Conference: federal ministries, conferences of special state ministers, municipalities, Muslim associations, and individuals, but also in the hands of other actors, especially civil society as a whole.

It is my goal that the results of our deliberations find broad reception and provide the impetus for numerous projects, measures, and initiatives.

Only then will the Islam Conference have a significant practical impact. We are (at least according to the calendar) in the middle of spring. Therefore, I see the Islam Conference, to speak somewhat metaphorically, as a tree split into many branches upon each of which numerous buds are sprouting.

Before I open the discussion, allow me a few general remarks as well as some suggestions on how to proceed concretely.

The working program was drawn up *jointly* in the preparatory committee. The result is a balanced working program, in which broad consideration is given to various suggestions – but also to concerns on the side of Muslims and the state alike. Drafting a working program as part of a joint process was a new experience. If I look at the result today, I believe that the work was worth it:

In the working program, we explore central questions concerning the coexistence of the majority society and Muslims in Germany. The program outlines the fundamental goal, together with the first thematic focal points from which concrete working projects can be derived. I would like to use today's discussion to examine those projects that can be concretely derived from these themes and those with which we can begin our work.

Thematic Focal Point I: “Promoting Institutionalized Cooperation and Integration-related Project Work”

- With our first thematic focal point, I am thinking about developing a model concept for educating imams about our country and society. This model concept could then also be employed more broadly with the help of the members of the Islam Conference.

- As far as Islamic religious instruction is concerned, I accord great importance to cooperation between the federal states [*Länder*] on existing pilot projects. Of interest is also whether a nation-wide model can be developed, and whether the Islam Conference can contribute to this.

- The same applies to the recommendations of the Council of Sciences and Humanities on setting up programs in Islamic theology at universities.

Thematic Focal Point II: “Promoting Gender Equality”

- It is important to me to further encourage and promote the social participation of Muslim women.
- We should take a closer look at gender roles as they are lived and passed down – not only in the Muslim milieu. I am thinking about implementing a study that would examine men’s and women’s respective rights and scope for action, taking into account the role of religion as compared to other influences and factors specific to the milieu.
- It already seems important to bring the topic of forced marriage into the public debate. In classrooms, mosques, and at kitchen tables, it must be made clear that forced marriages are unacceptable.
- Let me add: as you surely know, I am also the “Sports Minister,” and therefore I know that there is already a wide range of sports activities geared specifically toward Muslim women. The German Islam Conference can help spread information about these activities even more broadly.

Thematic Focal Point III: “Prevention of Extremism, Radicalization, and Social Polarization”

- Here, it seems important – as already mentioned – to begin by clearly emphasizing the distinction between “Islam” as a religion and “Islamism/fundamentalism/extremism.” We want to help clarify this.
- It is essential that Muslims continue to make this distinction themselves – also to strengthen the acceptance of Islam as a religion within the majority society. At the same time, we want to promote tolerance toward Muslims in our society.
- In addition, we will have to examine how we can concretely improve the practical, preventive steps we are taking against radicalization and anti-Semitism among Muslims.
- We also want to deal very aggressively with xenophobic patterns of behavior toward Muslims.

One final comment on our working method: I recommend that the preparatory committee meet soon and draw up a list and a schedule for concrete projects and the implementation thereof. Whether separate project groups will be set up or studies will be commissioned to that end should be decided by the preparatory committee. The preparatory committee should also decide whether outside experts should be brought in – permanently or on a project-by-project basis.

My goal is for the Islam Conference to provide the impulse for numerous projects, measures, and initiatives. Incidentally, that is why I will offer a prize for exemplary Islam-related integration projects under the motto “Shaping the future together.”

I look forward to a good collaboration with you. The concrete measures that I believe can be derived from the working program are merely the first steps. I eagerly await your suggestions.

Source of original German speech: “Teilhabe der Muslime in Deutschland verbessern!” [Improving the Participation of Muslims in Germany], speech by Federal Minister Dr. Thomas de Maizière, MdB [Member of the Bundestag], to the plenum of the German Islam Conference on May 17, 2010, in Berlin, http://www.deutsche-islam-konferenz.de/cIn_117/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/DIK/Downloads/Sonstiges/20100517-Ministerrede,templateId=raw,property=publicationFile.pdf/20100517-Ministerrede.pdf

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