

Kick-off event of the German Islam Conference held on 7 December 2022

Speech by Nancy Faeser, Federal Minister of the Interior and Community

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Members of the Bundestag,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Representatives of Muslim life in Germany,

Welcome to the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community! I am very pleased that, after a long break due to the pandemic, the German Islam Conference has finally been able to come together in person for a larger event in a more ceremonial setting.

Because of the coronavirus restrictions, we cannot use the space to full capacity, but we have learned to deal with that. So I would also like to thank all those who are joining us virtually onscreen for being a part of this event, and I wish you a warm welcome too!

Ladies and gentlemen,

The German Islam Conference is not just beginning its journey. For 16 years now, it has been contributing to discussing the concerns of Muslims in Germany on an equal footing.

Talking to each other rather than about each other – that is one of its most important achievements. The Islam Conference has become the main forum for dialogue and cooperation between the government and the Muslim community in Germany. And it also facilitates and enlivens exchange and understanding within the Muslim community. This means that the Islam Conference also plays a major part in enabling Muslims and Muslim congregations in Germany to feel accepted and be able to shape their own community and home.

The German Islam Conference has become an important element of our social cohesion policy. That's why I decided when I took office that I would continue the conference, develop it further and strengthen it. Our country's policy on community, our *Heimatpolitik*, would be unimaginable without it.

We have a strong foundation to build on as we set the further course of the German Islam Conference.

The Islam Conference has made a truly vital contribution to Muslim participation in our society: there is no longer any question of whether to introduce Muslim religious instruction in our public schools, whether to establish Islamic theology departments at our universities, or whether Muslims will or should participate in societal debates, to name just a few examples.

Ladies and gentlemen, all of these things have met with broad acceptance from our society and our government.

It has always been clear that the Conference provides a framework for communication, that it brings different positions together, generates momentum, gives input on processes – but that in our federal

system in most cases, actual implementation lies in the hands of the federal states, not of the Islam Conference or the federal government.

For reasons of religious freedom and due to the right to self-determination that is anchored in our constitution, other important matters lie in the hands of the religious congregations themselves.

That is why it is important that the German Islam Conference regularly brings together decision-makers from Muslim umbrella organisations, Muslim initiatives, and federal states and municipalities; from ministries, agencies, Christian churches and the academic community; and that this advances the shared work on these topics.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope that in the current legislative period, the Islam Conference will inject new ideas and new energy into its important role.

It should provide fresh impetus on substantive matters, drive the discussion of policy issues related to Islam, and foster dialogue within the Muslim community. It should work to ensure that its ideas are taken up and that they advance the participation and integration of Muslims.

To support these goals, we carried out a broad-based participatory process before today's kick-off event. This was a personal priority of mine. Many of you were at the workshop discussion on 5 May, where we asked you what issues are especially important to you in the new phase of the Islam Conference.

It was important to us for the suggestions to be very concrete and for them to be directly tied to Muslim life and social harmony between Muslims and non-Muslims in Germany. Our task now is to make practical and quantifiable progress.

That is why we will continue to work flexibly in a variety of constellations and formats – and we will leave the fixed, inflexible bodies of earlier Islam Conferences behind us.

Another personal priority of mine for the new phase of the Islam Conference is for it to reflect the broad range of Muslim life. Muslim life in Germany has become more diverse in recent years: new initiatives and forums have emerged, and young people and Muslim women are organising and making their voices heard.

Muslim life is a part of ordinary daily life in Germany. It goes on in all kinds of contexts, for example in religious communities, social work, youth associations, the academic community, the media, and of course the Muslim umbrella organisations. It is this broad spectrum of activity that will characterise the Islam Conference in its current phase.

Germany's governing coalition has set some ambitious goals for the current legislative period:

1. We want to take decisive action to combat anti-Muslim intolerance and hate.
2. We want to help Muslims and Muslim congregations to participate in society.
3. We want to see progress in the training of imams.

All these objectives are set out in the government's coalition agreement. I take them very seriously: they are a personal priority of mine and will also be a core part of the Islam Conference's work programme.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many people in Germany face racism in their daily lives. For many Muslims, this experience is twofold: they experience hostility and rejection both because they are Muslims and also because of their immigrant background.

When I took office as Interior Minister, I made clear that I stand for the fight against every form of racism, extremism and group-focused enmity – and specifically also against anti-Muslim hostility. We have already initiated key projects here: the national action plan for tackling right-wing extremism and a new law to promote democracy are two key examples.

I believe, however, that the German Islam Conference also sends a clear signal to all those who do not want to hear it or accept it: a signal that Muslims in Germany and their religion are of course an integral part of our society and that the state addresses their concerns.

As a response to experiences of discrimination, threats and racist attacks, we have established at the Interior Ministry an independent expert group on anti-Muslim intolerance and hate. In the group, experts are analysing current expressions of anti-Muslim hostility – also including its overlaps with antisemitic attitudes and other forms of group-focused enmity.

Next summer, the independent expert group will present to us its report on anti-Muslim hate in Germany, which will include specific recommendations for action. I can already assure you that we will take these recommendations for action very seriously and ensure that they find broad public resonance, because we as a society cannot accept discrimination against Muslims in Germany on the basis of their religion or their background.

Ladies and gentlemen,

When I say that Muslims are an integral part of our country today, that doesn't mean we can be complacent. Rather, we need to keep working persistently on helping Muslims to participate in society.

We want to boost the visibility of Muslim engagement for the public good and help Muslim congregations become more strongly rooted in our society, because acting effectively and being recognised require independent, well-functioning and resilient structures. Creating, maintaining and strengthening these structures is above all a task for Muslims themselves and for their congregations. But the Islam Conference can flank this process, provide input and help those involved to learn from one another.

And it's clear to me that whether we achieve social cohesion is something that will be decided at the local level. That is why since 2019, through the Islam Conference's funding for "mosques for integration", we have been supporting Muslim congregations in professionalising their social services, for example in youth work, and strengthening their local networks.

The aim is for mosque congregations to become visible to their non-Muslim neighbours as an integral part of the neighbourhood and for them to be recognised as stakeholders in society.

In this process we are seeing a lot of interest among district and local authorities in more exchange and in sharing knowledge and strategies for training. That is why, within the Islam Conference, I would like to launch an experience-sharing process that will enable interested municipalities to learn from one another on matters related to Islam and to generate new ideas.

Beyond this, the Islam Conference will continue to support Muslim civil-society initiatives through its project funding – for example, projects focused on women or youth or devoted to civic education or societal dialogue.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I said at the outset of my speech, the German Islam Conference played a key role in bringing departments of Islamic theology to German universities. This has established the necessary conditions for the practical training of imams.

Of course, training clergy is a matter for the religious communities themselves. At the same time, I consider it to be an important part of integration policy for more imams who have been socialised in Germany and trained in the German language to work in Muslim congregations. This is also in the congregations' own interest.

To put it plainly, less dependence on those abroad and less foreign influence makes it easier for German Muslims to be at home in their faith in Germany.

Larger Islamic umbrella organisations are already training their own religious leaders in Germany. The Islamkolleg Deutschland was founded in 2019 in close cooperation with the Islam Conference in order to enable other associations and congregations to carry out training too. The Islamkolleg is now active throughout the country in the basic and advanced training of imams, chaplains and mosque staff, with funding from the Islam Conference.

The University of Münster's programme on Islam in social work ("Islam in der Sozialarbeit"), which is co-financed by the North Rhine-Westphalia state government and the Federal Ministry of the Interior, is another important model project. This shows that a lot of progress is being made. We want to harness this momentum in the Islam Conference and strengthen these processes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to steadily decrease the state-sponsored posting of foreign imams to Germany, with the goal of ultimately ending it – this is something we are working on intensively.

Sending imams to Germany is an issue that especially concerns Turkey. We are in dialogue about this with the relevant authorities in Turkey, specifically the Diyanet, the Turkish religious authority. Just last week, the state secretary responsible for this matter at my ministry, Ms Seifert, took part in talks on this issue in Ankara. Thank you very much for this, Juliane! I think we are on the right track here.

One important point in the work programme that I would like to address is Islamic chaplaincy in public institutions. The Islam Conference issued recommendations for this area in 2017. But implementation is not up to the Conference; rather the federal states are responsible for prison chaplaincy, and the Federal Ministry of Defence is responsible for military chaplaincy.

My aim is for us to continue on this path in the current legislative period and to make tangible progress in implementing the Islam Conference's recommendations. We are in contact with the Defence Ministry about this, and I am confident that the military will be able to offer chaplaincy services for Muslims soon. I would like for us to work together with the federal states on strengthening and expanding Islamic chaplaincy in prisons.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our work programme for this new phase of the German Islam Conference is ambitious. In addition to the projects that I have just outlined, the Islam Conference will also address many other issues through symposiums, workshops, cooperation partnerships and project funding.

In my view, the issue of antisemitism among Muslims, for example, should also be taken up and discussed critically – together with the Federal Government Commissioner for the fight against antisemitism. I would like to advocate for this. And the Islam Conference should also address forms

of intolerance in the Muslim community towards other societal groups – that is very important to me.

And to all those who are wondering why I have not spoken about Islamist extremism here, I would like to say that this issue is a high priority for the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the entire Federal Government, together with the security authorities and in cooperation and dialogue with Muslims and Muslim organisations. We are pursuing a comprehensive approach in the fight against Islamist extremism which involves an interplay of law enforcement and prevention measures, as well as a special focus on deradicalisation. The federal and state governments support many different distancing and deradicalisation services in the area of religious extremism. The Federal Ministry of the Interior, for example, provides support for the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees' Advice Centre on Radicalisation. Together with the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, the Terrorism / Extremism Research Unit of the Federal Criminal Police Office, and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, we are constantly developing our measures further and expanding our knowledge base through research that is tailored to practical needs.

But it is also clear that the Islam Conference is not a security conference. In 2011, the topic of preventing and combating Islamist extremism was deliberately separated from the Islam Conference and instead established as a stand-alone security dialogue within the public security directorate-general of the Federal Ministry of the Interior. I emphatically support the decision to keep security issues out of the Islam Conference, because Muslims must not be placed under general suspicion of extremism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You as Muslims and your representatives are a part of Germany and so too are your faith and your contributions to society. You rightfully expect that government and society will include you and that you can participate as integral and equal parts of our country.

Conversely, it also holds true that our country needs you and what you have to offer – to ensure a free, pluralist and participatory democracy and a society in which all feel included and respected. This is especially true at a time when polarisation is increasing and democracy needs to be acted on and defended anew every day.

And so I call on you to get involved and contribute to the debates of our time. Be a responsible part of an active civil society. And help shape, enliven and strengthen cohesion in Germany and Europe – also in the face of the dictatorships, autocracies and extremists that can be found around the world and at our own doorstep.

Thank you for your attention!