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Muslims in Germany

Life in a Parallel Society

By Norbert F. Pötzl

In Germany, Islam is often equated with fundamentalism and fanaticism, a perception that imposes a heavy burden on the country's 3 million Muslims. Their relationship to Western society is divided between integration and sometimes self-imposed exclusion.

The name of the salon is German -- Goldene Finger (Golden Fingers) -- but the services it offers are listed in the window in Arabic and Turkish. In the front of the shop, 40-year-old Palestinian Toufic al-Rifae gives men haircuts and trims their beards. Veiled women disappear into a back section behind a curtain, where female hairdressers do their hair and, using thick lines of the traditional Middle Eastern cosmetic preparation known as kohl, apply their makeup in the Arab style.

Diagonally across the street, Ris A, a restaurant specializing in grilled meats, advertises its poultry as "halal," or slaughtered according to Islamic religious rules. The place is reminiscent of a McDonald's fast-food restaurant, with its colorful plastic tables and chairs and tiled floor. In an open kitchen in the corner, 72 chickens are being roasted over coals on a large rotating grate. The name of the restaurant, explains the owner, a 35-year-old Lebanese man, "means in Islam: 'What Allah has bestowed upon me'."

Al Sundus is a shop specializing in "Arab lingerie," Arab water pipes, known as shishas, are bubbling away in the El Salam café and neighborhood bakeries sell rectangular cakes coated in white cream or decorated with bright green pistachios. One Middle Eastern business after another lines the northern end of Sonnenallee, a prominent street in Berlin's Neukölln neighborhood.

For some, Sonnenallee is a colorful, quirky shopping street. Others refer to it derisively as the Gaza Strip.

Most businesses that are not in the hands of Arabs are Turkish-owned: Mehmet Özgelik's bakery, which sells sweet baklava; a Turkish Airlines travel agency; the supermarket run by Nazik Balabanoglu and her husband Ergin; the funeral home owned by Mustafa Mutlu, whose employee Islam Cenaze Servisi makes arrangements to send the bodies of deceased Muslims to their native countries or organizes their funerals in an **Islamic cemetery** next to the grand Sehlik Mosque on Berlin's Columbiadamm Street. The unemployed Turks killing time at the Taxi Café call the neighborhood "Little Istanbul."

Being able to speak German is not a requirement for daily life in this immigrant neighborhood, where the street scene is one of bearded men wearing knit caps and women in headscarves. Not all businesses are Turkish or Arabic, however. German senior citizens congregate on Tuesdays for dance evenings at Zum Ambrosius, one of Berlin's traditional corner pubs, which seems exotic in this environment. But even this traditional German establishment was recently purchased by a man of Lebanese descent.

Some would call the souk in downtown Berlin picturesque. The Neukölln Museum, an institution run by the district administration, now offers guided tours through the Muslim "kiez" or "hood." Abeer Arif, an Iraqi-born German citizen, is in charge of the "Oriental Tour of Discovery."

But there is also something oppressive and ghetto-like about this Middle Eastern business district in the middle of Germany's most densely populated Muslim neighborhood.

The Neukölln district is home to 300,000 people, and half of them live in the northern part that Sonnenallee runs through. One-third of Neukölln's population are immigrants -- including about 60,000 Muslims, who

are concentrated almost exclusively in the northern section.

There are 20 mosques in Neukölln alone, out of about 80 in all of Berlin. Few of these houses of worship are recognizable as such from the outside. Most are reached through gates or rear courtyards, where former workshops and factory buildings have been converted to prayer rooms with colorful patterned carpets laid out on the floor. Sweets, tea and soft drinks are sold in adjacent shops.

Neukölln, like a specimen under a microscope, is proof positive of something that is slowly dawning on the rest of the country: Islam, this mysterious religion, both fascinating and alarming, has gained a foothold in Germany, which is now home to more than 3 million Muslims. But the close proximity between long-established Germans and outlandish Muslims is also a potential source of conflict, triggering resentment and fear on both sides.

Since the religiously motivated terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, many Germans perceive the faith in Allah principally as a threat. There are growing fears that jihadists will begin launching attacks and suicide bombings in Germany, fears fueled in part by repeated **warnings coming from German security agencies**. Amid such fears, suspicion is easily extended to include the entirety of the Muslim faithful, despite the fact that there are likely no more than a few hundred Muslims promoting terror in Germany.

These suspicions, in turn, prompt many Muslims to feel excluded and rejected by the German majority. Federal Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble sees this as one of the central challenges of integration policy. "Muslims are part of society and our common future," Schäuble, a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), stressed at a February conference on the image of Islam in Germany. The difficulty, Schäuble pointed out, lies in the public's growing tendency to equate Islam with fundamentalism and fanaticism.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan hasn't exactly helped the cause of integration with his recent rhetoric. Speaking to a cheering crowd of close to 20,000 Turks, some of them already naturalized German citizens, at the Cologne Arena two weeks before the February conference, Erdogan warned his fellow Turks against going too far in their efforts to integrate. "No one can expect you to subject yourselves to assimilation," he said. "Because assimilation is a crime against humanity."

No one had asked the Turks to submit to assimilation, the total removal of cultural and religious identity. But the consequences of a refusal to be integrated into majority German society are all too apparent in the neighborhoods surrounding Sonnenallee in Neukölln.

The area is the epitome of a troubled neighborhood. One in two residents are unemployed. The number of robberies and assaults has more than tripled since 1990.

Neukölln is a good place to experience the "parallel society" firsthand. It was the district's mayor, Heinz Buschkowsky, 59, a committed Social Democrat, who first voiced this taboo term -- and who was promptly criticized for his supposed violation of political correctness. Irritated Berlin sociology professor Hartmut Häussermann was quick to inform the local politician that it would be preferable to refer to the Muslim immigrants as an "ethnic colony." "Now would you call that a more pleasant term?" Buschkowsky asked in response.

The term "parallel society" is part of a "semantics of panic" that generalizes conspicuous exceptions, says Klaus J. Bade, a historian and expert on immigration from Osnabrück in northwestern Germany. At best, says Bade, German immigration policy, which was "long opposed to integration," drives immigrants into enclaves. "A reluctant immigration country shouldn't be too surprised to find that its immigrants are sometimes reluctant themselves."

There is some truth to that. For decades, few in Germany grappled with the issue of the country's new Muslim residents and citizens. "Neither the majority society nor the immigrants themselves saw any need to be interested in one another and develop rules of behavior for living together," writes Middle East expert

Michael Lüders in his book "The Long Shadow of Allah." "Both sides assumed that their interaction would only be temporary."

When it began recruiting "guest workers" in the early 1960s, Germany expected them to remain in the country for a limited period of time and then return home. Back in Turkey, the "*gurbetci*," as overseas Turks willing to return home are called in Turkish, became accustomed to a system in which other Turks were expected to go to Germany in their place.

But the first-generation workers decided to stay in Germany, establishing new families and bringing their Turkish relatives to live with them. There are about 2.7 million people of Turkish origin living in Germany today, and about 800,000 of them are German citizens.

For years, Germany has also attracted Muslim immigrants from other countries, especially from Bosnia, Iran, Morocco, Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. It is hard to know exactly how many Muslims now live in Germany, though, because immigration authorities do not ask immigrants to state their religious affiliation and because Islam lacks a system of registered membership. For this same reason, Muslim congregations are unable to specify how many members they have.

According to the German Islam Conference (DIK), there are about 3.4 million Muslims in Germany today, making Islam the country's second-largest religion after Christianity and Muslims part of everyday German life. They have brought Allah, their god, to *Almanya*, the word for their new home in Germany in both Turkish and Arabic.

The diversity of the various persuasions within Islam is as unclear as the number of Muslims. Political scientist Stefan Luft, of the northern German port city of Bremen, stresses that the immigrants are "no homogeneous group, neither in a religious, ethnic, political or cultural sense." The spectrum, says Luft, ranges from relatively cosmopolitan Bosnians and Westernized academics from cities like Istanbul and Tehran, to conservative Anatolian farmers and militant Islamists from Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan.

The vast majority of Muslim immigrants live largely inconspicuous lives among their long-established German neighbors. Nevertheless, many Germans have trouble accepting the gradual changes in their society and being in physical contact with a culture shaped by the rules of the Koran. This is because Islam, says author Lüders, "is both a religion and a way of life for devout Muslims."

More and more Germans equate Islam with fundamentalism, a tendency toward violence and oppression of women. "Perceptions were already negative in past years," a 2006 study by the Allensbach opinion research organization concluded, "but they have recently become noticeably more ominous." According to the Allensbach study, 98 percent of Germans associate Islam with violence and terrorism, while only six percent express sympathy with Islam. Sixty-one percent do not believe that Islam can peacefully coexist with Christianity, while 83 percent consider Muslims to be religious fanatics.

Ironically, many Muslims in Germany "tend to be lax when it comes to religion," says Katajun Amirpur, a Berlin expert on Islamic studies. According to Amirpur, religion "doesn't play a very dominant role" in their daily life, and yet they would characterize themselves as devout Muslims -- even if they "occasionally drink a glass of Arrak or Raki" and "sometimes forget one prayer or another." They are easily their Christian fellow citizens' equals when it comes to disobeying the commandments of their faith.

Nevertheless, a new religious zeal appears to be taking shape among Muslims. The Center for Turkish Studies, based in the western German city of Essen, has studied the religious attachments of immigrants of Turkish descent for many years. In 2000, only eight percent of respondents described themselves as "strictly religious." Within five years, that number had increased to 28 percent.

"Our anti-Islamic reflex," wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in an editorial, overlooks the fact "that the factors that are truly of concern are mainly secular and not religious factors: the establishment of a parallel society that lives according to insular rules; the above-average birth rate of immigrants; finally, the authoritarian, male-dominated structure in their families."

The district mayor of Neukölln knows a thing or two about that. "I'm not qualified to talk about whether Islam belongs in Europe. That's for others to discuss," he says. Instead, he prefers to talk about ordinary, day-to-day problems: about fathers who forbid their daughters from taking part in swimming lessons and class trips; and about 18-year-old women who are flown in from Turkey as "imported brides, because the patriarch doesn't like the enlightened female Turkish bank employee from Neukölln."

Muslim immigrants' traditional values are reinforced by media outlets controlled by their countries of origin. Driving from Neukölln to neighboring Kreuzberg, Berlin's legendary multicultural district, one passes through the Kottbusser Tor neighborhood. The area's large square is surrounded by multistory apartment blocks inhabited almost exclusively by Turkish families. There is a satellite dish on almost every balcony.

More than 40 Turkish-language stations are now available in Germany. The Arab-language selection, watched in private households, cafés and cultural institutions, is only slightly less diverse.

Popular and relatively harmless options include Turkish entertainment channels like Kanal D, ATV and Show TV, with their soaps and music videos. More problematic is the religious content of channels like the Saudi-based Iqra and of some programs broadcast by Al-Manar, a television station operated by Hezbollah in Lebanon. TV5, a channel closely aligned with Milli Görüs, an influential Islamist organization in Germany, recently aired a Turkish version of the anti-Semitic Iranian series "Zarah's Blue Eyes."

Television preachers like 81-year-old Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi have found an attentive ear, especially among young Muslims. Al-Jazeera, the TV network based in Qatar, broadcasts his sermons on legal questions and Islamic morality during prime time every Sunday, as part of its program "Sharia and Life."

Qaradawi is considered the leader of a modern Islamism. He clings to the traditional concept of marriage, and even to the right to cane "insubordinate" wives, and yet he encourages women to enter politics. He recommends an Islamic but open life, one that includes computers, films and music, but he also provides advice on the correct way to wear the veil.

His ambivalent teachings are also well received in Germany. In her book "Between Pop and Jihad," journalist Julia Gerlach writes that among Muslims in Germany, "a new youth culture has developed in which it is not seen as a contradiction to be a devout Muslim and a good German citizen. Pop Muslims may seem cool in terms of their behavior, but they are rarely liberal."

Their music idols express themselves just as ambivalently. Muhabbet (his real name is Murat Ersen), a 23-year-old German-Turkish pop star who specializes in Middle Eastern soul ("R 'n' Besk"), was celebrated as a poster child of successful integration -- until he sparked controversy with his ambiguous comments on the murder of Dutch film director Theo van Gogh.

Last November, Muhabbet recorded a song in a Kreuzberg studio with German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his French counterpart, Bernard Kouchner, with the provocative refrain: "Germany, why do you close yourself off? Germany, put your cards on the table. Do you think I will give in, do you think I won't resist, and do you think that I will calmly and silently lay myself down on your floor?"

The most well known rapper in Islamic pop culture in Germany calls himself "Ammar 114." The number is a reference to a sura in the Koran about recourse to Allah in times of danger and strife. The 28-year-old artist was born in Ethiopia, comes from a Christian family and converted to Islam.

Ammar's lyrics are often very religious, but they also reflect what the Frankfurt newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* calls "a sizzling blend of hostile emotions." His song "Wir sind Deutschland!" ("We are Germany!") can be interpreted as a furious comment on the public debate over the integration of Muslims: "We are Germany, sure, we're part of it. And it's time we finally got our rights."

As morally indignant young Muslims turn away from what they view as decadent German culture, some are

cultivating feelings of superiority. While their immigrant parents and grandparents tried to assimilate, at least on the surface, some young Muslims deliberately flaunt the fact that they are different by wearing strict Islamic clothing in public.

The young, criminal Muslims whose acts of violence are so often in the news are rebelling against the majority society in their own way. They berate the victims of their brutal attacks as "shit Germans" and "pig-eaters," even to the point of occasionally abusing a police officer of Turkish descent as a "shit Christian." Günter Piening, the integration commissioner for the state government in Berlin, believes that "processes of identity development" are behind the insults, and that Muslim thugs are simply acting out the rappers' violent lyrics.

Over in trendier Kreuzberg, "where they discuss the global situation over a glass of Veuve Cliquot" and where "the intellectual leftist bourgeoisie has created its very own enclave," as Neukölln district mayor Buschkowsky says derisively, many still believe in an "ideal multicultural world," even though, as he claims, that world doesn't even exist in diverse Kreuzberg.

Buschkowsky prefers to embrace the "fundamental principle" of Ferdinand Lassalle, one of the original founders of the party that became today's center-left German Social Democrats (SPD): "Every political action begins with articulating the way things are now." In keeping with this doctrine, Buschkowsky, in addition to establishing language centers and hiring immigrant trainees to work in his administration, has helped launch a unique nationwide project sponsored by the Diakonisches Werk, the charity organization of the German Protestant Church, which won the Prevention Award of the Berlin State Commission against Violence last autumn.

Under the program, "neighborhood mothers" -- youthful mothers of Turkish or Arabic descent -- visit young immigrant families to offer them advice on issues of health and raising children. The program's organizers hope that the neighborhood mothers, who have experienced the feeling of being an outsider and the difficult process of integration firsthand, will be able to get through to those who would normally be difficult to reach.

There are currently 80 neighborhood mothers in Neukölln, and the program includes plans for 200. The women spend six months being trained for their task. Each neighborhood mother visits two families each month. Each family gets 10 home visits, and each visit lasts between one-and-a-half and two hours.

Güler Savran, 34, a beautician by trade, is one of the neighborhood mothers. She lives in Neukölln's Rollberg neighborhood and is familiar with the area's problems: that violence plays a major role in many families, that only one in two children attends daycare and that women are not permitted to make any decisions without their husbands.

Many families are afraid of government agencies and institutions. Many fear that the youth welfare office is trying to spy on them or even take away their children. To allay such fears, Savran makes it clear in her first meeting with a family that she doesn't work for the youth welfare office.

"Most of the questions are about food," says neighborhood mother Djamila Boumekik, a 31-year-old Algerian native. Many Muslims fear that their children are being forced to eat pork in daycare centers, or they believe that the only purpose of daycare is to provide their children with food and a place to sleep. "When I hear that, I tell them that the kids go on little outings, and that they do handicrafts, paint and play games," says Boumekik. Besides, she adds, daycare helps children learn German.

This last selling point usually strikes a chord with the often-skeptical fathers.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan.

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