



PRESS RELEASE

Training Religious Clergy in Europe

A new generation of religious leaders on the rise?

(Munich – December, 22,2021) — Ensuring that religious leaders are familiar with their communities' needs and in tune with European values is vitally important. But how and where should they be trained? This question has caused controversy and concern, especially concerning minority communities. How can more local training be provided? And what can different minority communities learn from each other? These questions were discussed by the Institute for Freedom of Faith and Security (IFFSE) in Europe in a recent virtual meeting. The online debate kicked off with the presentation of the latest IFFSE-report, written by Dr Michael Privot of the Brussels based Institut Européen d'Etudes d'Islam focussing on European Muslim communities. The report contains a number of practical recommendations to establish a new generation of religious leaders and scholars based on European values.

In the online discussion of the Institute for Freedom of Faith & Security in Europe (IFFSE), initiated by the Conference of European Rabbis (CER) and moderated by the security expert and Director of IFFSE Peter Neumann, the advisor to the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Matthias Biesemans demanded that the political influence of Islamic countries on Muslims in Europe must be pushed back more strongly. In the past ten years, the influence of states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Morocco on religious life in mosque communities has increased significantly and is being expanded with large sums of money, he said.

He added that the states' aim in sending imams to Europe was not a spiritual instruction but to strengthen political loyalty to the country of origin. "Europe must not accept this," said Biesemans at the IFFSE-event on imam training in Europe.

However, more and more Muslims today perceive themselves as "European Muslims", he underlined. According to Biesemans, studies have shown that, for example, in mosques under the control of the Turkish religious authority Diyanet - in Germany this would be the congregations of the Turkish-Islamic association DITIB - only 10 to 15 per cent of Friday sermons deal with spiritual content. Otherwise, it is mainly about political loyalty to Turkey and the identity of the believers as Turkish Muslims.

The President of the Conference of European Rabbis and Chief Rabbi of Moscow, Pinchas Goldschmidt, said that European states should not interfere in the religious teachings of imams as a matter of principle. However, it must be ensured that their increasing training at teaching institutions within the EU is based on fundamental European values. "We must ensure that religion is not instrumentalised for political purposes," Goldschmidt stressed.

At the panel, Lamyia Kaddor, a Muslim religious educator and member of the Green Party in the German Bundestag, warned against the difficulties of an overly centralised imam training in the EU. Islam is too diverse for that. Rather, the task is to bring together different theological schools. Imams must also be trained in the socio-political debates about Muslims in Europe. These range from Islamophobia to Islamism, said the founding president of the Liberal-Islamic Federation.

Islamic scholar Michael Privot argued for a European curriculum for the training of imams. Universities and Muslim representatives should develop the curriculum with the aim of the highest academic standards, emphasized his study published on Monday by the Institute for Freedom of Faith and Security in Europe (IFFSE). It should be based on a secular or "European critical self-reflexive approach", he explained.

In order to support the development of a curriculum, the EU could set up a working group at the level of its Council of Ministers, Michael Privot suggests in his report. It should bring together the expertise of home affairs, justice and education experts. The EU's Erasmus+ programme should provide grants to facilitate the mobility of teachers and students in imam training. For Muslim associations and groups, Privot recommends supporting imam training initiatives without trying to "control" them. They should also give preference to imams trained under the new curriculum. On the other hand, according to the study, the curriculum should contribute to degrees that are of value in the labour market beyond working in mosques. In summary, the speakers were optimistic that a European-based new generation of Muslims would grow up in Europe on the basis of a European curriculum.

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About IFFSE

The newly founded Institute for Freedom of Faith and Security in Europe (IFFSE) is a joint initiative of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER) and brings together Europe's leading thinkers and policymakers to discuss ideas for combating religious extremism and terrorism over here. As an interdisciplinary think tank, IFFSE aims to strengthen social cohesion, security and tolerance in Europe. This will be achieved through the promotion of peaceful coexistence, integration and positive citizenship; fostering moderate religious practices and safeguarding religious freedoms; mobilising religious leaders to play an active role in improving the security of their communities and countering the abuse of religion; collaborating with governments, civil society and the private sector to combat hate crime, extremism, radicalisation and terrorism both on and off-line.

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