

## PAPER DETAILS

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Theology

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PAGES: 199-205

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/333563>



ARAŞTIRMA NOTU

**Being Muslim-Turks in Germany and Almanı (Turks  
living in Germany) in Turkey: Candidates for Religious  
Leaders (Imam) in Germany Training at Marmara  
University Faculty of Theology\***

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In an unprecedented manner, Western countries are becoming diverse with multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious populations immigrating from different geographies. Former colonizer countries in Europe, like France, Netherlands and Britain, covered the need for labor from their former colonies in the second half of the twentieth century; people migrated from these countries in seek of better life and economic prosperity.<sup>1</sup> Countries like Germany, on the other hand, signed treaties with a number of states beginning in the 1950s to recruit foreign workers.<sup>2</sup> Germany received the largest number of guest workers from Turkey.

These workers were defined as guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*); this was because Germany promoted this policy as a short-term solution to meet labor shortages. Nevertheless, the reunification process for families in the 1970s provided evidence that their settlement had become a permanent condition. Thus, the growing Turkish population became residents rather than guests; as such they had cultural, socio-economic and religious needs. However, the German state did very little to meet the Muslim population's needs, due to its "guest worker" mentality.<sup>3</sup> This approach has had consequences in many areas, for instance, religious services were provided by imams who were sent and funded by Turkish governments. However, these appointed imams, who did not speak German and were ignorant (uninformed) of the social realities in Germany, were not sufficient enough to meet the needs of the communities.

\* This paper was presented in ESA (European Sociological Association) Conference in Prague, 27 August 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> David Gowland, Richard Dunphy and Charlotte Lythe, *The European Mosaic*, London: Pearson Longman, Part 4, 2008, p. 448.

<sup>2</sup> Joel s. Fetzer and J. Christopher Soper, *Muslims and the State in Britain, France, and Germany*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 100; Ayhan Kaya and Ferhat Kentel, "Euro-Turks: A Bridge or a Breach between Turkey and the European Union", *Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)*, Brussels: Belgium, 2005, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Fetzer And Soper, p. 101.

Today, Turkish immigrant population- represented by a number of 2.9 million- stands as the largest religious minority group in Germany.<sup>4</sup> However, after more than 50 years, Muslim migrants, in general, and the Turkish diaspora, in particular, still have social, economic, religious and organizational problems. These problems are interpreted differently, being seen as exclusivism and systematic discrimination by Muslim minorities and as the problem of cultural integration by German authorities.

Academic research on the Turkish community in Germany illustrates that political and economic integration is no longer a prominent issue. However, integration is still a matter of public debate on cultural grounds. There seems to be a strong perception among the Muslim community that what the state calls integration actually implies assimilation rather than cultural pluralism.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the change in the political climate after the 1990s and discussions on the radicalization of Muslim youth perpetuated the heated debates on the integration of immigrants. Imams from the country of origin were blamed for acting as deterrents for integration; as a result, the idea to educate them in European countries arose.<sup>6</sup> Training imams in Europe is considered a necessary step to create a European Islam, an Islam that will be able to maintain its own religious identity but expressing itself through the cultural categories already existent in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

In response to the needs of European Turkish communities and the concerns of European authorities, in 2006 Turkish authorities launched a project called “the program for international theology students” (UIP). The aim of the program was to educate and train future religious leaders of Euro-Turk communities. The project offers young Euro-Turk males and females who are already accustomed to Western life and values, and who also speak a European language in addition to Turkish, to pursue 5 years of religious education at several theology faculties of 6 Turkish universities. Holding the citizenship of host country is the basic requirement for participation in the project. Upon graduation from the program, these students are expected to return to their European communities and serve as imams, religious instructors, preachers and chaplains. In 2015, 750 selected-students from 15 Western countries are part of this program.

<sup>4</sup> Naika Faroutan, *Identity and Muslim Integration in Germany*, Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2013, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> Gökçe Yurdakul, *From Guest Workers into Muslims: Transformation of Turkish Immigrant Associations in Germany*, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2009, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Imams are usually criticized to be uninformed about the language and the basic values of Europe. They are also criticized for being ignorant of the real problems of the Muslim communities. Moreover, it is claimed that Imams discourage Muslim community to participate in wider social life and that they are incapable of establishing good relations with native community in general and representatives of other faiths for interreligious dialogue in particular.

<sup>7</sup> Silvio Ferrari, “The Training of Imams”, *Islam and Political Cultural Europe*, Ashgate Burlington, 2012. Austrian parliament passed a bill in February 2015-just after the terrorist attacks in France and Denmark- that bans foreign funding to Muslim organizations and required Imams to be able to speak German. “Austria passes law requiring imams to speak German”, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/2/25/austria-passes-law-on-islam-requiring-imams-speak-german.html> (access date: 10.06.2017).

In this paper, I seek to examine these international theology students who are currently studying at Turkish universities upon their completion of secondary schooling in their host European country. Some of the questions I will discuss are: Who are these new religious leaders? How do they adjust to living in Turkey as international students? How do they define themselves? What are the factors that affect their identity building processes? What are the dilemmas they face in Europe and in Turkey?

## Method

I conducted a series of 5 focus groups consisting of students from the program at Marmara University, Faculty of Theology, in May 2015. The focus group study allowed me to meet more students and collect sufficient information about the participants while at the same time providing me with a synchronous comparative advantage whereby I could immediately see the differences among the participants in interpreting their actions.

3 focus group discussions were held for groups composed of 8 to 11 participants, who are German-Turk students from different years of study (from prep. class to 4). To enable comparison, I organized two other groups, which included Euro-Turk students coming from countries other than Germany, like Denmark, Belgium, France, Holland...etc.

The total number of participants was 46 and the number of German-Turk participants was 25.

The participants were asked questions on how they perceive themselves (identity); how they perceive the country of their origin (Turkey) and how they perceive the host country. They were also asked about their future plans for career and accommodation, whether they will stay in Turkey or the country they lived in before, and whether they will work as religious official or not.<sup>8</sup>

## Findings

**Results:** Qualitative data analysis produced 5 prominent themes for German Turk students:

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<sup>8</sup> **The questions are as follows:** 1. Introductions; names, background information (father's occupation, education of parents, number of siblings, relation with religious organizations) 2. Do you have an engagement with a specific religious group? 3. How did you learn the project? 4. What are the advantages and disadvantages to live in a country which people have different ethnicity and religion? 5. Why did you choose to come to Turkey for religious education although there are a couple of university options for Islamic education in Germany? 6. What are your future plans after graduation? 7. Did you face any problem when you came to Turkey and if you faced what are they? 8. How do you identify yourself with the terms: German, Turk, European, (you can combine)? 9. Final thoughts.

**Theme 1: Negative Experience in German Community:**

In all focus groups, respondents reported a number of negative experiences and stereotypical attitudes they faced in German society. Most of them declared that they felt stereotyped and were not respected.

Based on these discussions, it is possible to state that the exclusivism of German society can be categorized in two ways: spontaneous and systematic. Spontaneous exclusivism indicates disrespectful attitudes of German people toward Turkish individuals in daily life. As one of the participants stated: "One day, a woman who I had never seen before hit me with her umbrella and said 'Be thankful that we do not hang you here, you have your mafia team, right?'"

By systematic exclusivism on the other hand, what is being referred to here is the educational system; many of the participants reported similar experiences of unfair evaluation by teachers and a discouraging attitude toward German Turk students. One of the most common statements of the participants was "Although I had good grades, my teacher directed me to a lower level of school, claiming that I may not make it." Another student stated: "One of my classmates and I had the same scores. Even though teachers encouraged him to go to the gymnasium, the same teachers told my parents that I might find it exhausting so I should not go to the same kind of school."

**Theme 2: Positive View toward German People**

Although students had negative experience in German society, they have a positive view toward German people. Even though this was not a question that was asked during conversations, many of the students talked about the "good habits" of Germans referring their work ethic, honesty and courtesy in public life.

One of them said: "they are not bad people, but they do not know us." The other said: "they are bound to the Kant ethic, although it is not sacred; but they are better than us." Another one said: "if they were to become Muslim they will be better Muslims than me."

**Theme 3: Gender as a Factor**

During discussions of the exclusivism of the German public and their identity building process, gender emerged as an important factor. When a male participant reported that he had not had any negative experience based on his ethnicity or religion, one of the female participants interjected, saying: "I am surprised to hear that you did not have any bad experience while I have had many." Female students reported their negative experiences not only in German society but also in their own community when they decided to cover their heads. While the most common questions they are asked by German people are "Are you getting

married?” or “Is this your father’s decision?”, Turkish people with a secular understanding opposed the headscarf saying “You look ugly with that.”

In addition, some of the male participants indicated that being a Muslim woman with a headscarf is more difficult than being a Muslim man in German society. One of them said: “German people think that they have the right to despise covered women because they have an image in their minds that these women’s fathers and husbands always hurt them.” Moreover, two male participants from different groups shared similar observations about gender difference toward identity, saying: “It is easier for a male German-Turk to define himself as a German, but it is not that easy for a covered German-Turk woman, because of the prejudice they face in society.”

It is ironic how in a gender egalitarian society prejudgements about a religious ritual (headscarf in this case) can turn around to unequally treat women and men in a group that otherwise hold similar values.

#### **Theme 4: Not only Foreign in Germany but also Foreign in Turkey**

The participants are not only concerned about what they face in Germany; they are also concerned about what they encounter in Turkey. Most of them referred to their sense of loneliness and the feeling of being foreign in Turkey.

They say that their style of dressing, their reactions to incidents and language use are perceived as strange by Turkish people. Many female students reported that they changed the way they dressed due to people’s verbal and nonverbal reactions. One of them said: “Professors asked me if I had come from abroad. They understand it via our dressing style and speech and they perceive us as foreign.”

Language use is an important factor in this perception. Participants discussed the difficulty they have during conversations with Turks at university, in particular, and in Istanbul in general. One of them said: “While I am speaking, people look at me as I cannot speak properly. Then my mind gets confused and I cannot remember any words”. Another participant says “When I need to call somebody I give the phone to one of my friends because I think I cannot speak properly.”

All the differences in style, understanding and interpretation directed students to label those who were born and grew up in Turkey as “native”, while they call themselves “Almancı-German Turk”. However, the differences between natives and Almancıs are not only on the surface, such as clothing, but go deeper to a mindset. One of the participants stated and others agreed that the sense of humor among natives is very different from that of the Almancıs: “They laugh at things that we do not find funny, but they do not laugh what we find funny.” Another participant says: “I do not feel foreign here but I also cannot become friends with

natives because their mindset does not fit me in general. For instance they are very curious people...”

### **Theme 5: Sense of belonging**

In all focus groups, participants were asked to talk about their sense of belonging to the country of origin and the country they live in. I asked them what they thought about the identity terms as “Turk”, “German”, “European”.

Interesting results were obtained revealing the loyalty of the students to German social life and organizational system when they face problems at university or everyday life in Turkey. They find the Turkish type of educational or organizational system, and the problem solving process unfamiliar; this was true to such an extent that some of them thought of returning to Germany.

During the group discussions, it became obvious that the students had reinvented and affirmed their Germanness due to what they had encountered in Turkey. Many of the students shared similar statements like “I had a thought that I was a Turk in Germany but when I came to Turkey, I found out that I am a German.” Another one stated: “We could not feel German due to our black hair and dark eyes which people identify as foreign, but when I came here I felt German.”

On the other hand, some of the participants reported a type of identity crisis from which they have not recovered in Turkey. A male participant said: “I served as a German soldier in the German military and my commander called me a “good Turk”. This showed me that they did not see me as one of them. I am asking to myself for years... I am a Turk at home but a German outside.” Another female student explained. “My father was born in Turkey and he speaks Turkish. Thus he can easily call himself a Turk, but I was not born in Turkey. I speak Turkish only at home and I have an identity problem outside. Because of that, I talked to my parents and tried to find my own way...”

### **Conclusion:**

The findings discussed in this paper highlight the complex and dynamic nature of the identity of German Turk students in the program (UIP) for the international theology students. As discussed before, the experiences of German Turk students in the motherland force them think about their identity again and often lead them to confirm their loyalty to German society.

Based on the findings discussed in this paper, I suggest that the program is not only educating future imams or religious leaders; this project is also helpful for the integration process of German Turks. The program had especially positive impact on female students

empowering them both at public sphere and in family life. In spite of the conservative view of their families, girls gained experience to travel and live somewhat independently and got prepared to becoming religious leaders in Germany. The raising of women religious leaders by itself clearly contradicts the widely held views of Muslim women especially in European societies as weak, oppressed and usually passive

As a recommendation, I suggest that the program discussed in this presentation and similar imam-training programs could be supportive not only for integration policies for European governments but also for Muslim communities themselves.



