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To cite this article: Mario Peucker & Rauf Ceylan (2016): Muslim community organizations – sites of active citizenship or self-segregation?, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2016.1247975](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1247975)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1247975>



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Published online: 02 Nov 2016.



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## Muslim community organizations – sites of active citizenship or self-segregation?

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### ABSTRACT

Ethno-religious community organizations in Western countries have often been described as being disconnected from mainstream society, and Muslim community groups have been a special focus of such critique. This article offers a counter-narrative to these widespread allegations. It draws on a synthesis of emerging research on the citizenship-enhancing effects of mosque involvement and on an explorative study involving thirty in-depth interviews with civically active Muslims in Australia and Germany. The article examines the potential of Muslim community organizations to mobilize their member into performing their citizenship through civic and political participation. It offers empirical evidence that many Muslim community organizations, rather than promoting social segregation, act as accessible entry point for Muslims' civic participation, facilitate cross-community engagement and provide gateways to political involvement. These civic potentials of Muslim community organization have remained underestimated in the public and political discourse on cohesive societies and healthy democracies.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 1 March 2016; Accepted 4 October 2016

**KEYWORDS** Community organizations; citizenship; Muslims; participation; social capital; mosques

Although contemporary migrant and ethno-religious minority community organizations have become significant stakeholders in Western societies, the way in which minority communities are perceived, both politically and publicly, differ greatly between national settings. In countries that define themselves as nations built by immigrants (especially the US, Canada and Australia) migrant and minority associations have commonly been regarded as “ordinary” community agencies in diverse societies. In Canada and Australia, under the umbrella of national multicultural policies, such minority organizations have been actively supported by the government through “funding,

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technical assistance and normative encouragement” (Bloemraad 2005, 867) to play an active role as welfare providers, cultural agencies and political representation for their respective community (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014).

In other parts of the Western world migrant and minority community organizations have not enjoyed such levels of recognition and support. Notwithstanding recently intensifying endeavours to strengthen communication between governments and minority associations, these community organizations have often been viewed sceptically by policy-makers and the wider public as sitting on the margins, rather than being ordinary players in pluralistic civil society. Herman and Jacobs (2015, 117) contend that it is still a common view in Europe that “ethnic (minority) associations would be isolated islands, located at a dangerous distance from the mainland”.

Concerns about alleged separateness of migrant organizations have been described in terms of a seemingly problematic emergence and consolidation of parallel structures outside of what is considered the mainstream community (Vertovec 2010). These debates about minority organizations in Western societies have gained new urgency, as Muslim communities have come under heightened scrutiny since 9/11. Intertwined with the widespread backlash against multiculturalism, mosques and other Muslim community organizations have been criticized for promoting cultural segregation and undermining social integration. McAndrew and Sobolewska (2015, 53) capture these widespread insinuations in the British context: “Islam is perceived as a source of cultural threat ... and mosques in particular are perceived as sites where difference is fostered”. These claims of segregation and self-exclusion have been linked to the securitization discourse. Vertovec (2010, 85–86) found that “Policy-makers feared that such seeming separateness might provide a breeding ground for extremism; and the fact that the 2005 London bombers were home grown terrorists, born and raised in the UK, seemed to exemplify this”. As a result, Muslim community organizations have become particularly contested sites in the UK and many other western countries.

There is little doubt about the existence of exclusivist Muslim organizations at the fringes of the community (e.g. Hizb ut-Tahrir or certain Salafi groups), which do promote self-segregation and reject democratic participation. While these groups may receive disproportionate levels of media and political attention, they are far from being representative of the diverse landscape of Muslim community groups in Western societies. This article sheds empirical light on the effects of Muslims’ active involvement in Islamic community groups, arguing against the widespread mistrust towards Muslim community organizations. Synthesizing international research and combining these with qualitative insights from a recent study on Muslim active citizenship in Australia and Germany, this article offers a more nuanced and balanced assessment of how diverse (non-fringe) Muslim community organizations promote active citizenship.

## Active citizenship

Active citizenship refers to a notion of citizenship that emphasizes the performative dimensions of a person's membership of a society and political community. Instead of focusing on legal status, active citizenship is more concerned with participatory processes of, for example, enacting civic rights or claiming recognition. This procedural perspective on citizenship has gained prominence in academia since the late 1990s (Isin and Turner 2002, 4) and is now broadly recognized in critical scholarship and among policy-makers as a key element of citizenship in modern liberal democracies, in addition to membership and rights (Bellamy 2010, xix). "Democracy doesn't deserve its name without citizens' participation", as van Deth (2013, 9) puts it; and the political theorist Mouffe (1992, 4; emphasis in original) has argued for many years that a "radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who *acts* as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking". As such, active citizenship contrasts with (neo)liberal "non-participatory, interest-based politics of *homo economicus*, which traditionally served both as an empirical generalization and as an implicit norm of citizenship" (Crowley 1998, 167).

Despite its common use, a clear definition of active citizenship is often lacking. One of the few exceptions is proposed by Hoskins and Mascherini (2009, 462), conceptualizing active citizenship as "participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterised by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy". This understanding dovetails with Adler and Goggin's (2005, 241) understanding of civic engagement as a way in which "an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future". This includes both formal and informal civic actions, "between involvement in community activities ... and involvement in political activities" (240).

In the late 2000s, Isin and Nielsen (2008) proposed a new paradigm of performed citizenship with their influential elaborations on "acts of citizenship". They advocate a more fluid understanding of citizenship, enacted by "activist citizens" who constantly create new "scenes" and "scripts" for the performance of their citizenship (Isin 2008, 38). Critiquing the previously narrow emphasis on status and habitus in citizenship studies, Isin and Nielsen (2008) call for an open approach to the investigation of active citizenship, without pre-defined concepts of how this might be enacted. This aligns with other academic debates around broadening the scope of citizenship to include a range of newly emerging and constantly shifting manifestations of civic performance. Such a conceptualization of active citizenship as the "product of individual agency" (Vromen 2003, 95) has opened up unlimited avenues to perform one's citizenship. Isin and Nielsen's "acts of citizenship"

has offered a conceptual basis for many scholars to examine a broad range of social interactions in everyday life under the banner of citizenship. Harris and Roose (2014, 801), for example, in their work on “Do-it-yourself” citizenship among young Muslims in Australia, classify “informal civic network-building in everyday space”, including interactions at the workplace and in the neighbourhood, as manifestations of citizenship.

While such a broad conceptualization of citizenship might be useful for some studies, it proved too unspecific for the research presented in this article. Bellamy (2010, xi), while advocating a broad understanding of citizenship, warns against casting the net too wide, arguing that “citizenship is different ... to other kinds of social relationship, such as being a parent, a friend, a partner, a neighbour, a colleague or a customer”. Following Bellamy’s stance and in line with Hoskins and Mascherini (2009), this article deploys a more narrow understanding of active citizenship, exploring how Muslim community organizations may facilitate or promote Muslims’ civic and political participation. This is linked to old sociological questions about the roles of migrant and minority organizations in the diaspora.

### **An old sociological debate: the roles of ethno-religious minority organizations**

Migrant and minority enclaves and their distinct ethnic community structures first began to receive academic attention in the early decades of the twentieth century in the US. Many American cities, including and most prominently, Chicago, were experiencing fundamental changes as a result of major migration movements within the US (mainly from the Southern States) as well as from overseas. Sociologists like Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, key figures of the Chicago School of Sociology, observed how ethnically segregated neighbourhoods (“natural areas”) were emerging rapidly throughout Chicago. Given the rising problems of social deprivation and criminality in these neighbourhoods, minority communities were seen to play crucial roles as informal agents of social control within these localities. Moreover, the development of these “natural areas” was deemed to minimize interethnic conflicts by keeping competing groups separate, thus contributing to positive long-term effects on social integration.

These classical theoretical accounts have set the stage for extensive research and theoretical debates on the functions of ethnic enclaves and minorities’ attachment to their communities and institutional affiliations. There is generally little doubt that minority community organizations are important agencies for new immigrants, as they offer orientation in a culturally and linguistically unfamiliar environment, provide psychological support, solidarity and opportunities for cultural maintenance, and generally assist in coping with the crisis of settling in a new country. It has been more controversially

debated, however, as to whether these community organizations have a role to play beyond this settlement phase. Proponents of the “ethnic mobility entrapment” (Li 2004, 178) hypothesis, following Wiley’s (1967) “mobility trap” theory, argue that minorities have little to gain from continuous attachment to their minority communities, for they would miss out on the greater socio-economic opportunities society at large has to offer. According to these views, “the marginal status of minority communities affects the resourcefulness, which in turn constrains the effectiveness of social relations developed in such contexts” (Li 2004, 178).

This theoretical position is contrasted by sociological arguments that minorities’ and migrants’ connectedness with their community, rather than depriving them of socio-economic opportunities, contribute to their inclusion into broader society. Scholars have argued that minorities gain a general sense of trust, solidarity and security through their ties to minority communities, enabling and encouraging greater involvement in society. Hence, minorities’ integration into their respective community structures facilitates their social inclusion beyond immigrants’ settlement phases (Kortmann 2015). Research on the functions of *religious* organizations of migrant communities generally confirms such positive potentials. These religious community organizations have continuously catered for the needs of ethno-religious minorities searching “for refuge, respectability and resources” (Hirschman 2004, 1228), providing a site of cultural continuity and stability, which ultimately contributes to their social integration (Foner and Alba 2008, 362).

While these debates are mainly concerned with socio-economic integration, scholars have also emphasized the role of minority community organizations as agents of political integration and mobilization – key facets of active citizenship: “To ignore the ethnic community blinds us to a key mechanism facilitating immigrants’ incorporation into the political system”, Bloemraad (2007, 323) asserts, speculating that “‘groupedness’... may be a prerequisite for political incorporation” (328). This resonates with Modood’s (2012, 46) observations in the UK that second- and third-generation migrants “may continue to mobilise around identities of cultural difference and demand equality of respect, especially when those identities are the basis of discrimination and structural inequalities”.

Research has also shown that ethno-religious minority community groups tend to serve as “a training ground for entry into the wider society: building civic skills and encouraging active civic involvement” (Foner and Alba 2008, 364), and thus have positive effects on their civic and political participation – similar to other voluntary organizations. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995) US-study *Voice and Equality* supports this. Their Civic Voluntarism Model argues that, in addition to the “training ground” effects, voluntary organizations’ mobilizing effects are due to internal processes of political encouragement and “political stimuli”, like discussions about politics, which then

increase people's interest and propensity to become active (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 369). The social capital theorists Newton (1999, 10–11) elaborates on the general spill-over mechanisms by pointing to internal and external effects voluntary organizations have on their active members:

Internally, organisations ... socialise them into a democratic culture and teach them the subtleties of trust and cooperation. Externally, organisations link citizens with the political system and its institutions, aggregate and articulate interests and provide the range and variety of competing and cooperating groups which constitute the pluralistic polity.

### **Muslim community organizations: promoting civic and political participation?**

It has been an underexplored research area to apply this complex array of historical, theoretical and empirical accounts on the roles of migrant and minority organizations specifically to *Muslim* community organizations. Muslim community groups in Western societies can often be described in ethno-religious terms. Many of them, including local mosques, have traditionally served manifold functions of migrant community organizations (e.g. providing settlement support), which complemented their primary focus on religious services. Many of them have also started to offer integration-related activities, like language courses, capacity building and leadership programmes, and outreach and inter-faith dialogue initiatives (Halm and Sauer 2012; Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014).

Several studies have found evidence for the mobilizing effects of Muslim community groups, facilitating Muslims' involvement in civic and political participation within and beyond their community boundaries. Jamal (2005, 537), for example, discovered in her New York based research that Arab Muslims' participation in mosques is positively "linked to political activity, civic participation and group consciousness". Ayers and Hofstetter (2008) concluded in their statistical analysis of a survey among 1,846 American Muslims that Muslims' religious commitment, operationalized as mosque attendance, prayer and volunteering, is positively associated with their political participation. This sits well with the results of a US mosque survey, which showed that the vast majority of mosque leaders (91 per cent) stated that "Muslims should participate in the American political process" (Bagby 2012, 20). In addition to political mobilization, Read's (2015) representative study revealed that American Muslim men of Arabic background who regularly attend and are actively involved in mosques are significantly more likely to be also engaged in non-Muslim civil society contexts.

These US findings resonate with emerging research in Europe. McAndrew and Voas (2014) found that British Muslims with higher levels of subjective religiosity and communal religious practice were more likely to participate in a (mainstream) civil society organization and to become involved in politics

or community affairs. In the Netherlands, Fleischmann, Martinovic, and Böhm (2016) demonstrate in their empirical study among Turkish and Moroccan Muslims that their participation in ethnic or ethno-religious community organizations correlates positively and significantly with their political trust, which, in turn, has significantly positive effects on political participation.

Despite the slowly growing evidence-base, the mobilizing effects of Muslims' active involvement in Islamic community groups have remained under-researched, especially outside the US. The study presented in the following makes an explorative contribution to narrowing this research gap. It focuses on two national contexts, Australia and Germany, where these issues have not been systematically examined, and provides in-depth insights into the qualitative nature of these civic and political mobilization effects.

## The study

The empirical data used in this article were collected in 2013. Within this research, in-depth interviews were conducted, by one of the authors of this article, with thirty self-declared Muslims who have been actively involved in different forms of civil and political participation in Australia (Sydney and Melbourne) and Germany. The interview guidelines were designed to explore how and why these Muslims have become civically engaged, and how their civic careers have evolved over time. The data also allow valuable insights into the role of Muslim community organizations as promoters of active citizenship; these findings will be at the heart of the analysis in this article.

Australia and Germany were chosen as case studies for several reasons. On a pragmatic level, one of the authors had previously undertaken empirical fieldwork on Muslim communities in both countries, established positive connections with Muslim communities and is familiar with both national settings. The second set of reasons revolves around fundamental differences between both countries in terms of (1) the collective recognition of Muslim communities and (2) the legal citizenship framework. These differences are deemed as potentially influential for the way in which interviewed Muslims enact their citizenship. While Muslim communities in both countries face similar challenges of public stigmatization, exclusionary discourses, and political scrutiny, they differ with regards to their recognition as "ordinary" civil society stakeholders and agents. This has implications for their "linking" social capital (Woolcock 2001), with Muslim community organizations in Australia holding closer and more sustainable ties with government and other mainstream society stakeholders (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014). Moreover, the national citizenship regimes in Australia and Germany sit on opposite sides of the spectrum, with Australia praising itself for an inclusive "citizenship-centred multiculturalism" (Bowen, quoted in Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014, 55), while Germany has a much more restrictive policy framework around legal citizenship.



The selection of interview partners sought to reflect the diversity of Muslims in terms of their demographic markers and the specific forms of active citizenship they may be involved in. With this in mind, the sample in both countries included first- and second-generation Muslims, across all adult age brackets and various ethnic-national backgrounds. A systematic typology of manifestations of active citizenship was used as a guide for the selection of participants. This typology encompasses three dimensions, based on the above outlined conceptualization of active citizenship:

- Political and civic participation (within Muslim community or mainstream organizations)
- Participation within an organizational context and independent engagement without institutional affiliations (e.g. blogging)
- Engagement pursuing Muslim-specific goals (e.g. advancing Muslim communities), goals related to a particular non-Muslim community or group (e.g. workers' rights), and republican "greater good" focused civic agendas.

Potential participants were identified through personal networks and a systematic internet search, generating a sample that covers these diverse manifestations of active citizenship. Most participants were selected based on their involvement in one or two forms of civic and/or political participation, but in most cases the interview revealed a much broader spectrum of civic engagement, which almost always included involvement in an organizational Muslim community context (see Table A1 in Appendix).

What is particularly relevant for this article is the range of organizational settings represented in the sample. While none of the participants has been involved in exclusivist Islamic fringe groups, such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* or certain Salafi organizations, interviewees have been active in various, both religiously conservative and more liberal-progressive, Muslim community contexts, including mosques, Muslim umbrella organizations, women's and student associations, and youth groups. The sample encompasses not only Muslim groups known for their integrationist outreach agenda (e.g. groups associated with the *Hizmet* movement), but also a number of organizations with a strong intra-community focus on catering for other Muslims. These include, for example, in Australia, a Muslim student association, and, in Germany, Muslim community organizations that have partially been under surveillance by the intelligence agencies due to suspected anti-constitutional tendencies (e.g. *Islamische Gemeinschaft in Deutschland*, IGD).

The analysis of the interview data offers novel insights into the manifold civic trajectories of Muslim active citizens. The specific data analysis focusing on the role of Muslim community organizations, as discussed in the following, illustrates how many of these community groups have functioned not only as

sites for Muslims' community-based civic engagement, but also as a gateway for more mainstream-oriented forms of active citizenship.

### ***Muslim community volunteering and the shift towards cross-community engagement***

The Muslim community context is of paramount significance for Muslims' enactment of citizenship. This was a key finding of this research. Almost all interviewees in both national samples had been, in the course of their career as active citizens, involved in some capacity in Muslim community-based civic participation. This was not merely an outcome of the interview sampling itself: a significant number of participants in both samples were chosen specifically due to their engagement in *non-Muslim* contexts (e.g. amnesty international, trade union, mainstream political work), but it turned out during the interviews that even most of these mainstream activists have also been engaged – previously or continuously – within Muslim community organizations (Table A1 in Appendix).

These findings point to the importance of the traditional community context as a site of active citizenship, which is captured by Hoskins and Mascherini's (2009) definition of active citizenship. This confirms previous research. A 2009 study based on a survey of 500 Muslims in Melbourne, asking respondents about their belonging to, and active participation in, an organization revealed that religious organizations, Muslim sports, leisure or cultural groups and other types of Muslim voluntary groups were particularly popular (Monash University 2009, 46). In Germany, a survey among people of Turkish background, most of them assumedly Muslim, also found that respondents most commonly volunteered within a religious (i.e. Islamic) organizational context as their preferred site of active citizenship (Halm and Sauer 2005, 7).

For many interviewees civic engagement within Muslim community organizations was the entry point to a subsequently unfolding and intensifying career as active citizens. This applies equally to both the Australian and the German sample. Access barriers seem to be seen as lower than in mainstream organizations, and existing community-internal networks often facilitate the recruitment into Muslim community work. Community-based participation usually begins informally and often by chance. The Australian interviewee Abdul, for example, became active within the Muslim community soon after his arrival in Australia as an international PhD student, working as a volunteer with Muslim youth at a local mosque in Melbourne's west. He stated that his now multi-faceted commitment has expanded rather coincidentally since these early days:

It just happened actually ... I started at the mosque giving lectures and talks. People say: "oh that's good" ... and you go to meetings and see you can do some work. But I did not look for it, it has just happened. And when I saw that I can do something, I jumped.

*Serap*<sup>1</sup> volunteered as a public relations officer at a young Muslim women's organization, initiated by a local mosque in Melbourne. Similar to Abdul, she emphasized that her activism within the Muslim community has unfolded informally and always "by invitation". *Serap* was asked by the elders of a local mosque to set up, together with a few other Muslim women, a group for young women at the mosque – an offer *Serap* accepted. She explained: "I was led into these things. I was never actively looking for it. It was always by invitation that I got into it".

The German interview data analysis revealed similar patterns of the informal beginnings of Muslims' civic engagement. Hülya's activism (selected as interview partner because of her role as elected city councillor) began "by chance", as she emphasized, within a Muslim community context when she was invited to represent the local mosque in a Christian–Muslim dialogue forum. Such a coincidental trigger also characterizes *Asim's* community engagement: at the local mosque, a friend "invited me to join him at one of the meetings of the local network of the *Muslimische Jugend* ... I had just finished high school, so I started to go there". This led to *Asim's* first encounter with the Muslim youth organization, within which he then became very active and eventually assumed a leadership role. These explorative findings suggest that most interviewees entered the stage of civic engagement in a rather traditional domain of active citizenship – as community-based volunteers, without creating new "scripts" and "scenes", as Isin (2008, 38) argues in his elaborations on "acts of citizenship". They decided to become actively involved within their community, performing typical volunteering tasks with the general goal to "improve conditions for others" (Adler and Goggin 2005, 240).

The data analysis also revealed how community-based involvement tends to shift over time from intra-community activities towards more cross-community collaborations. Every single interviewee across both samples who was active within the Muslim community stated more or less extensive cross-community cooperation experiences, which have commonly expanded during their civic careers. These findings challenge public perceptions of Muslim organizations as being socially isolated sites of allegedly self-segregating communities. The community organizations covered in this research, even those religiously conservative and rather inward-looking groups, are more accurately described as *bridges* into the mainstream community and facilitators of cross-community contacts.

This prevalent shift of Muslim community work towards more intercommunity contacts and engagement has been caused either by the changing profile of the respective Muslim organization (e.g. establishing an interfaith dialogue initiative within a mosque) or by the individual's eagerness to reach beyond Muslim community boundaries and get more involved in intercommunity activities. Often both reasons coincided. Regarding the former, surveys among mosques in Germany (Halm and Sauer 2012) and New South Wales

in Australia (Underabi 2015) have demonstrated that cross-community outreach and dialogue initiatives have become common elements of many mosques' activity profiles.

In the Australian sample, Saara's civic pathway illustrates how organizational changes as well as personal ambitions have led Muslims from primarily intra-community engagement to cross-community dialogue and collaboration. Saara's initial activity focus was on young Muslims. In the 1980s, she co-founded the organization Young Muslims of Australia (YMA) with the aim of bringing together Muslim youth and offering them a "support structure ... to practice their faith *and* be part of Australian culture". While YMA has sought to empower young Muslims and to "guide Australian Muslim Youth towards positive Islamic values" (website), the organization – and Saara as a key figure at YMA – soon got involved also in cross-community collaborations with, among others, schools, governments and the police. In the early 2000s, Saara decided to follow "a slightly different calling", leaving YMA to pursue her own projects independently, including her own fashion show, titled *My Dress, My Image, My Choice*, which aimed at engaging people from all walks of life in discussions about the hijab and Islam more broadly. A key driver behind this shift was her eagerness to enhance her cross-community work: "I wanted to work with the wider community, so YMA is particularly [for] young Muslims, and I broke away". Saara eventually set up the Muslim community organization *Benevolence*, and her interfaith and cross-community engagement, especially with other women, continued and expanded her networks of trust.

Even those Muslim community activists whose prime interest revolves around advancing the well-being of the Muslim community mentioned that cross-community collaborations have intensified during their engagement. The Australian interviewee Mohamad, for example, volunteered for a mosque teaching Arabic to young Muslims, he was president of the Islamic student society at a university in Melbourne, and sat on the board of the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV). "I see the priority for me is Muslims", he emphasized. Notwithstanding this focus, his active leadership roles within Muslim community groups have also led him into cross-community activities. As president of the Islamic student association, which primary focused on catering for the religious needs of Muslim students on campus, he contributed to outreach initiatives – "we'd give pamphlets, talks, dialogues ... with the general public" – and as ICV board member he got involved in cross-community communication, for example, "dealing with multicultural groups [and] multi-faith groups".

The analysis of the German interview data paints a similar picture of increasing cross-community collaborations as a result of Muslims' community-based participation. For example, Nadia's engagement at the Muslim women's organization *Begegnungs- und Fortbildungszentrum muslimischer Frauen* (BFmF) in Cologne was initially only about assisting other Muslim and migrant women. Her activity profile, however, soon broadened to

include more cross-community civic engagement (e.g. interfaith dialogue initiatives, giving talks at schools, participating in public discussion rounds), which she performed either as a representative of the women's organization or independently.

A similar story was told by *Asim*, volunteer at the Muslim youth organization *Muslimische Jugend in Deutschland* (MJD). Initially, his participation at MJD was solely intra-community focused. But subsequently, he became increasingly involved in interfaith projects, giving talks at schools on Islam and Muslims and cooperating with government representatives within state-funded community projects. It was the MJD's activity agenda that has drawn *Asim* into cross-community engagement and helped him build personal networks with policy-makers and civil society stakeholders.

The German interviewee Houaida has pursued her long-standing civic agenda exclusively within various Muslim community organizations. She has volunteered, for example, for the Islamic Community Germany (IGD) and for the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD). Referring to the IGD, Houaida explained that she "grew into this Muslim community life" and soon began to take a more active role. While the Muslim community has been the sole location of her civic participation, cross-community elements eventually complemented her intra-community engagement. She elaborated that these more recent facets of her activism unfolded as a result of structural development within IGD.

We at IGD, for example, ran the Nachbarschaft [Neighbourhood] campaign last year. Opening up and introducing yourself to your neighbours. Well, there have been several [such] projects ... It is not enough to stick together, to live in a parallel society, but we really want to enrich society and thus we need to open up.

These biographical accounts on the shifts of Muslims' engagement towards cross-community collaborations and relationship-building demonstrate the dynamic facets of Muslims' active citizenship that previous research failed to capture. The findings suggest that intra-community networks – what Tillie (2004) described as "collective social capital" – is as important for Muslims' citizenship as "linking" social capital (Woolcock 2001), which institutionally connecting Muslim community groups with mainstream (non-Muslim) institutions. While the former helps facilitate Muslims' access to civic engagement in a community context, the latter subsequently fosters cross-community relationships and strengthens "bridging" social capital (Putnam 2000, 22).

Muslim community organizations are often crucial in providing low-threshold access to civic engagement contributing to the well-being of the community. Isin and Nielsen's (2008) "acts of citizenship" appear to underestimate the continuous importance of these traditional manifestations of active citizenship. However, many study participants feel empowered by these community-based volunteering experiences to subsequently enter into other spheres of

active citizenship, where they pursue their civic agendas much more flexibly – as “activist citizens” – creating new “scenes” and “scripts” of performed citizenship (Isin 2008, 38). Saara’s endeavour to break down misconceptions through her fashion show is an illustrative example for this.

Muslim communities in both countries seem generally well positioned to play the role as facilitator of cross-community civic activities. Although some Muslim community organizations (not present in this study’s sample) continue to shy away from liaising with other civil society groups or actively discourage civic engagement (at least beyond their own narrow community boundaries), this explorative study reverberate with previous research findings that many Islamic organizations have left behind their self-occupied and inward-looking past and have increasingly sought to strengthen their intercommunity engagement agenda (Halm and Sauer 2012; Underabi 2015). This has had positive implications for the cross-community networks of those who volunteer within these Muslim community organizations, as many of the interviewee emphasized.

### ***Community activism as a gateway to political participation***

Most Muslims in both national samples have embarked on their careers as active citizens predominantly in the area of *civic* participation, often in a Muslim community context. From there, many have moved towards political participation, usually in addition to their Muslim community-based commitment. The shift from civic to political participation echoes previous findings on political participation of ethno-religious minorities. Al-Momami et al.’s (2010, 38) study on Muslims’ political participation in Australia, for example, concludes that for some politically active Muslims “the first step to political engagement is engaging in civil society”. Similarly, a German study on local councillors of migrant background found that many of the surveyed councillors had previously been involved in civil society groups, grassroots and neighbourhood initiatives or the trade unions (Schönwälder, Sinanoglu, and Volkert 2011, 4).

The present study on active Muslims in Australia and Germany generated more detailed insights into the nature of these citizenship pathways. It reveals that the shift from community-based engagement to political participation often follows similar patterns, highlighting the gateway potential of Muslim organizations, particularly prevalent in the Australian sample: active Muslims first engage in a Muslim community group where they eventually move into leadership positions; subsequently, their public profile and recognition grows and leads to their invitation to political advisory boards and committees.

The civic trajectory of Maha from the United Muslim Women Association (UMWA) in Sydney is an illustrative example. For decades her civic engagement has been concerned with settlement and empowerment programmes for

Muslim women. During this time she moved up within UMWA from being a “normal” volunteer to president. Her civic activism then increasingly gained political dimensions as she got invited to various political advisory boards and committees on the local, state and national level. She emphasized that she was nominated for these political advisory roles in her capacity as UMWA president and due to the public profile as an active community figure, which she had acquired through her civic participation in the community.

Similarly, Riad, imam and interfaith activist in Melbourne, has shifted from civic to political participation. The board of a local mosque, where Riad temporarily served as imam, initially asked him to represent the mosque community in a council-initiated interfaith network, which pursues a largely non-political agenda. He accepted, and his participation in this interfaith initiative then “led to me representing them again in the [local councils’] Multicultural Advisory Committee”, effectively contributing to the local political discussion and decision-making process.

The pathway from Muslim community-based civic engagement to political participation was not entirely absent in the German sample, but it was less dominant, and civic commitment has often been rather loosely linked to subsequent political engagement. Only very few of the politically active Muslims in the German sample entered into political activism *because* of their participation within the local Muslim community. This was one of the few major differences in the cross-national comparative analysis between Muslims’ performance of citizenship in Australia and Germany.

The analysis of Muslims’ trajectories from civic to political participation sheds light on the role Muslim community organizations play as mobilizer and facilitator of political engagement, especially in Australia. This empirical finding supports the argument that Muslims’ engagement within migrant and ethno-religious minority community organizations does not lead into a civic dead-end, but rather opens up opportunities for broader political participation. Thus, there is no reason to assume that the widely accepted tenet that citizens’ involvement in non-political institutions and organizations can enhance political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 369) would not also apply to *Muslim* community organizations. This resonates with a number of studies that have found evidence for direct or indirect effects of Muslim community activism on political participation (Jamal 2005; McAndrew and Sobolewska 2015; Read 2015; Fleischmann, Martinovic, and Böhm 2016).

The country-specific differences discovered in this explorative study deserve further attention. Why does this trajectory from Muslim community-based civic engagement to participation in the mainstream political arena occur more commonly among Muslims in Australia? Bearing in mind that these data are only of explorative nature and, thus, cannot ultimately explain these differences, there are some tentative indicators, linked to the different national

political opportunity structures and the collective social capital of Muslim community groups (Tillie 2004), which may partially cause these divergences.

In Australia, ethno-religious minority community have since the 1970s enjoyed a generally higher level of recognition as ordinary stakeholders in a diverse civil society (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014, 148–149). This has been due to a range of reasons, some of them related to Australia's long-standing (though at times faltering) multicultural policy framework. One particularly noteworthy development that prepared the ground for this level of recognition was Australia's re-structuring of the welfare service system in the early 1970s – a time when Muslim communities had only just started to consolidate. In this period the government decided to provide funding to cultural and ethno-religious organizations, including some mosques, for setting up welfare and settlement services for their own community members. The community organizations who receive funding have been expected to provide culturally appropriate services but also to act as intermediaries representing their community vis-à-vis the government (Humphrey 1987; Jakubowicz 1989). This has strengthened Muslim community organizations' recognition and resulted in institutionalized lines of communications (*linking* social capital [Woolcock 2001]) and opportunities for personal contacts between Muslim community groups and mainstream stakeholders in the political sphere (*bridging* social capital [Putnam 2000]). The institutional relationships, which may weaken in times of political turbulences but do not entirely vanish, seem to serve as a foundation for the recruitment of civically active Muslims into more politically oriented forms of participation.

Linked to this arguably greater bridging and linking social capital of Muslim organizations in Australia is another possible reason for the more common transition from Muslim community activism into Muslims' political work. There seem to be a broader variety of political advisory committees and other institutions of political discourse and decision-making in Australia that are accessible to representatives of ethno-religious minority communities. This may be a reflection of the widely shared recognition of the pluralistic nature of Australian civil society, consisting of diverse communities – including Muslims – which all deserve equal opportunities to contribute to the public and political discourse. This contrasts with the situation in Germany. Although the communication channels between policy-makers and Muslim community groups have intensified over the past decade, these relationships are still less robust than in Australia (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014). There seems to be a more pronounced disconnect between Muslim community-based activism and the mainstream political landscape and its institutions and representatives. Muslim community organization have experienced a lower degree of recognition as “ordinary” voices in the political debates, and the opportunities to gain access to political advisory boards and other institutions of political discourse are more restricted for representatives of



ethno-religious, and especially Muslim minority communities, than this seems to be the case in Australia.

## Conclusion

While these findings cannot speak for all Muslim community organizations, they do draw attention to a crucial yet often overlooked nuance in the public debate around ethno-religious community organizations in Australia and Germany: many Muslim community organizations act as agents of citizenship. They often provide low-threshold entry points for Muslims' activism and community-based volunteering; they offer a platform for civic participation with generally increasing cross-community engagement and relationship-building; and they often function, at least in the Australian sample, as a gateway to mainstream-oriented political participation.

These civic potentials do not apply equally across all Muslim communities and national contexts, and more research is needed to further investigate the conditions under which these potentials thrive and become more effective in advancing community well-being and promoting active citizenship. One way forward is systematically and empirically analyse the specific national opportunity structures and policy frameworks as potentially influential factors as well as the effects of Muslim community organizations' social connectedness both within their community and with wider civil society and policy-makers.

This article discusses the role of Muslim community organizations for Muslims' active citizenship, focusing on thematically relevant data from the explorative study it draws on. Overall, the study underscores how most Muslim participants have become civically active in predominantly traditional ways through community organizations. The rather conservative understanding of "active citizenship" (Hoskins and Mascherini 2009) and "civic engagement" (Adler and Goggin 2005), focusing on, among others, participation in community life, captures most of their activism. Tying this back to the conceptual framework, they primarily enact their citizenship by performing the habitus of a "good" and active Muslim community member and through existing "scenes" and "scripts" – not through newly created ones, as Isin (2008, 38) suggest in his elaboration on "acts of citizenship", which seems to pay little attention to traditional forms of enacted citizenship, for example through community-based volunteering.

Notwithstanding the prevalence of Muslim community work, many study participants have also enacted their citizenship, at least at times, in very flexible and individualistic ways, trying out alternative avenues to pursue their civic goals. This occurred in particular in the context of countering misconceptions of Islam, which led some Muslims to new ways of enacting their citizenship, for example through online blogging, creating certain dialogue platforms (like Saara's fashion show), or deliberately acting as a "model

citizen” of Islamic faith in everyday live (e.g. volunteering as lay jury member in court). These forms of “individual agency” (Vromen 2003, 95) were not at the centre of this article, but they do play a role in the civic careers of several study participants – a role that deserve more empirical attention in the future. Can these alternative manifestations of active citizenship only be captured through the “acts of citizenship” lens (Isin and Nielsen 2008)? This study suggests otherwise, arguing that participation-focused definitions of active citizenship (Hoskins and Mascherini 2009; Bellamy 2010) appear well suited as conceptual frameworks to explore the constantly shifting forms of enacted citizenship – provided one applies a broad understanding of what civic and political participation may encompass.

While it is true that more empirical research is necessary to further investigate the conditions and nature of *Muslim* citizenship, there is already robust evidence to counter generalizing perceptions of Muslim community organizations as socially isolated “islands” that promote division and self-segregation. Their organizational civic potentials have not been sufficiently recognized, and targeted measures by policy-makers to harness these community-internal capacities have been the exception. To the contrary, in recent years, governance approaches of securitization and domestication (Humphrey 2009) towards Islam in Australia, Germany and other Western countries have further aggravated suspicion towards Muslim communities, urging them to constantly justify their place in a diverse civil society. Against this backdrop, the space for Muslim community organizations to act as agents of active citizenship has diminished, at least outside the government’s agenda and especially when this involves manifestations of angry and “dissenting citizenship” (O’Loughlin and Gillespie 2012). Instead of fuelling moral panic around the Muslim Other, governments seem well-advised to recognize and strengthen the capacity of Muslim community organizations to generate cross-community relationships and mobilize Muslims’ civic and political engagement by developing institutional networks of trust with Muslim community group.

## Note

1. Where interview partners’ names are in *italics*, pseudonyms were used instead of their real names.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Overview on interview participants: primary reasons for selection and involvement in Muslim community organization.

Australia			
Name	Primary reason(s) for selection	Other forms of involvement in Muslim community organizations	Any involvement in Muslim community organization
Omar	Trade union representative	–	No
Joumanah	Community worker at Muslim women's organization	–	Yes
Berhan	African community activist	–	No
Hass	Executive Director of Australian Multicultural Foundation	–	No
Saara	Muslim community worker, founder of Muslim organization <i>Benevolence</i>	Co-founder of Muslim organization (Young Muslims of Australia)	Yes
<i>Serap</i> anonymous	Volunteer at a young Muslim women's group	Previously informal activism in Muslim community context	Yes
Abdul	Candidate in council election	Active in several Muslim community organizations on local and national level, including Newport Mosque in Melbourne (youth work) and the <i>Australian Federation of Islamic Council</i>	Yes
Ferroz	Volunteer at <i>Mission of Hope</i>	Leadership role at <i>Mission of Hope</i>	Yes
Maha Abdo	Muslim community worker, director of Muslim organization <i>United Muslim Women Association</i>	Previously volunteer at <i>United Muslim Women Association</i>	Yes
Sara	Media/Public Affairs Coordinator at amnesty international	Project volunteer and committee member of Muslim community organization <i>Mission of Hope</i>	Yes
Riad	Representative of interfaith forum	Imam, previously involvement in local mosque and Muslim community groups	Yes
Mohamad	Board member of <i>Islamic Council of Victoria</i>	Involvement in mosque (teaching Arabic), Muslim university student association	Yes
Mehreen	Politician (state parliament)	–	No
<i>Ashtar</i> anonymous	Representative of government-led multicultural community initiative	Active role within a large Muslim community organization	Yes
Germany			
<i>Burak</i> anonymous	Local councillor	Previously active within Turkish-Muslim community group	Yes
Nadia	Community worker at Muslim women's organization (BFmF)	–	Yes

Erika	Community worker and director of Muslim women's organization (BFmF)	Previously volunteering for various Arabic and Turkish-Muslim organizations	Yes
Samir	Representative of Grüne Muslime (sub-group within political party The Greens)	Informal involvement in Bosnian Muslim community/mosques	Yes
Houaida Ekrem	Representative of Central Council of Muslims Media activist	Active involvement in several other Islamic organizations, mainly IGD	Yes
Esra anonymous	Representative of Muslim youth network and socialist youth organization	–	No
Hülya	Local councillor	–	Yes
Faith	Representative of Muslim youth network	Active involvement in local Muslim council, chairing a Muslim women's group	Yes
Erdin	Engagement in local cross-community network, representative of local Migration Council	Active in <i>Hizmet</i> associated Muslim organization	Yes
Alev anonymous	Representative and founder of Muslim organization ( <i>Hizmet</i> )	Active in several local mosque associations	Yes
Miran anonymous	Representative of Turkish-German sub-group of the Social Democratic Party	–	–
Leyla anonymous	Chair of Muslim student Association	–	No
Bayram	Chairman of mosque association	Previously active involvement in several mosque associations (youth work)	Yes
Asim anonymous	Representative of Muslim youth organization <i>Muslimische Jugend Deutschland</i>	–	Yes
Onur anonymous	Trade union activist	Intensive, informal activities across various local mosques and Muslim-Turkish groups	Yes