

BPB

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The Islamic Charter as a Tool for Integration

The Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (BPB), Projektgruppe Migration, organized an international conference on 'Muslime und Islam in Europa: Die Integration einer religiösen Minderheit' at the Ost-West-Kolleg, Brühl, Germany, from 10 to 13 July 2002. The conference compared the processes of integration of Muslims in Western Europe and discussed the Islamic Charter drawn up by the Central Council of Muslims in Germany.

Article headings of the Islamic Charter

- Islam is the religion of peace
- We believe in a compassionate God
- The Qur'an is the verbal revelation of God
- We believe in the prophets of the one God
- Humankind will be held accountable on Judgement Day
- Male and female Muslims have the same task in life
- The five pillars of Islam
- Islam is at once faith, morality, social order, and way of life
- Islam does not aim at abolishing wealth
- Islamic law obliges Muslims in the diaspora [in principle to observe local law]
- Muslims accept the constitutionally guaranteed separation of powers, and the juridical and democratic order
- We do not aim at establishing a clerical theocracy
- There is no conflict between Islamic teaching and the core human rights
- [European culture is] formed by the [classical Greco-Roman and] Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage, and the Enlightenment
- It is necessary to develop a specific Muslim identity in Europe
- Germany constitutes the centre of our interests and activity
- Reduction of prejudices through transparency, openness, and dialogue
- We are beholden to the whole of society
- Integration while maintaining Islamic identity
- An honourable way of life in the midst of society
- [We are] party-politically neutral

The conference brought together some 150 academics, teachers, politicians, activists, and journalists, including Mohammed Abdul Aziz (Forum Against Islamophobia & Racism, London), Soheib Bencheikh (Comité Régional des Affaires Islamiques, France), Coskun Çörüz (Member of Parliament, the Netherlands), Nadeem Elyas (Central Council of Muslims in Germany), Fatma-Zohra Messaoudi (Centre socio-culturel de la rue de Tanger, Paris), and Mohibur Rahman (Muslim Council of Britain).

The Islamic Charter is a document consisting of 21 articles developed by the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland e.V., ZMD) and adopted in its general meeting of 3 February 2002. With this document the ZMD aims to promote dialogue among Muslims and not to exclude divergent opinions, says ZMD chair Nadeem Elyas.

The Islamic Charter may be regarded as a further example in a series of documents drawn up by governmental or representational bodies in various European countries that seek to describe or to codify the position of Muslims in Western societies. Another example, though different in status and origin, is the report 'l'Islam dans la République', drawn up in 2000 by the High Council on Integration, an advisory body to the French prime minister. The report treats the history of the separation of church and state in France, describes Muslims and Islam in France, and ends with recommendations. Such documents are vulnerable to criticisms concerning their representativeness and au-

thority. This became clear in the discussions on the Islamic Charter at the Brühl conference.

Mohibur Rahman of the Muslim Council of Britain, for example, mentioned three concerns. According to him, emotional attachment to a country cannot be encouraged through a written document. Furthermore, he sees no reason for British Muslims to explain or justify nationality or religion, since they already feel that they belong. A Charter is in his view a defensive exercise and therefore undesirable. Lastly, he suggests that the Charter's aims could be better achieved by investing the time and effort in more practical ways.

Similarly, Nico Landman of Utrecht University regards increasing participation of Muslims in political processes and public debates as more important than the development of an Islamic Charter, which claims to speak on behalf of 'the Muslims'. He thereby alludes to the plurality of opinions among Muslims in the Netherlands.

Soheib Bencheikh, mufti of Marseille, was not sure if France needed an Islamic Charter. Taking an individualistic view of Islam, he believes that no one has the right to determine the theology of the future. He emphasized the importance of transparency, of avoiding provocation, of Muslim role models to display the beauty of Islam, and of imam-training institutions independent of the countries of origin and of the French government. He also argued that the idea behind the headscarf is the protection of the woman. Nowadays, this protection may

also take the form of education and other skills. On this basis he advises women to dress tastefully and to be modest in their attire if they must choose between wearing the headscarf and a job.

These statements aroused much controversy, particularly among the British participants. Mohammed Abdul Aziz, for example, felt that the ethnic minority discourse in France and Germany concentrates on first-generation issues such as the headscarf, while the United Kingdom has long passed this phase. Muslims in Britain, says Abdul Aziz, speak about respect and diversity, and not about minorities as a problem. Barbara John of Humboldt University argued that the fear of difference and wish for homogeneity is deep-rooted in German society, whereas Britain tolerates diversity to a greater extent.

Thomas Krüger, BPB president, said that controversy, the guiding principle of political education, must be used to further discussions on the integration of Muslims. The lively discussions during the two days of the conference suggest that this aim, at least, was fully met. He announced that the BPB, in cooperation with the Goethe Institute and Deutsche Welle, is developing an Islam portal with information on the Muslim world and Islam and Muslims in Germany.

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