

The history and the present of the IGMG

Interview with the IGMG Chairman
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Content

Since 2011, you have been the chairman of the Islamic Association of Millî Görüş. Can you tell us something about the IGMG's beginnings?	04
So, what you are trying to say is that the IGMG was founded by a small group of university students?	06
Why did you decide to keep the name "Millî Görüş"?	09
In which countries is the IGMG active and how many mosques are represented by it?	11
Are you active in Turkey, too?	12
Which are the IGMG's fields of activity and which goals do you pursue?	13
While the IGMG is active mostly in Western countries, some related parties often use anti-Western rhetoric. How is that compatible?	15
What do you say about the accusations of anti-semitism against the IGMG?	17

What is your opinion about Israel's policy?	18
In the European media there is currently a vibrant discourse on what is called "Political Islam" Do you see yourself as part of it?	19
It is often claimed that the IGMG is in fact an extension of some states, notably Turkey. Is this correct?	21
Do you receive financial aid from certain countries?	22
How do you tackle the rise in anti-Muslim racism? Which measures should be put in place?	24
What can Muslims in Europe do to counter verbal abuse and physical attacks?	26
In a turkish TV-show, Ahmet Mahmut Ünlü, better known as Cübbeli, claimed that mosques in Germany receive financial aid by the state. Is that true? And if not, what makes him think so?	28

Since 2011, you have been the chairman of the Islamic Association of Millî Görüş. Can you tell us something about the IGMG's beginnings?

The history of the IGMG dates back until 1967, when eight Muslim students at Braunschweig University made the first steps to set up a prayer room, where they could perform the Friday Prayers and learn their religion.

As most national and international migrant organizations, the IGMG underwent a gradual process of change both sociologically and institutionally. This process is still ongoing.

Its development from modest prayer room to a transnational community owes largely to the influx of Turkish labourers after the German-Turkish Agreement on work migration in 1961. Since most of them lived in the inner cities, the students decided to move their prayer room there to make it easier for the Turkish labourers to access religious services. Since 1969,

most of these services have been expanded and became institutionalized.

Back in the 1960's most religious needs could not be met. There were no mosques, no imams, no shops to purchase a copy of the Holy Qur'an from, no one to organize the pilgrimage. The labourers did not even find a spot to spread their prayer rugs. In 1965, the festival prayer took place in the Cologne cathedral, due to a lack of

Whether the Turkish nor the German authorities concerned with deployment of workers had their religious and spiritual needs in mind. This posed a huge challenge for the workers. Not only did they wish to perform their religion in a foreign country but impart it on their children as well. The founding of the IGMG can be seen as an answer to those needs.



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So, what you are trying to say is that the IGMG was founded by a small group of university students?

Yes, indeed. As I have already mentioned, the IGMG's history begins in Braunschweig in 1967. First, the Turkish Union was founded followed by the Turkish Labourer's Union and then the Islamic Union from which the different Millî Görüş organizations in Europe emerged.

In the late 1960's, the Millî Selamet party was founded in Turkey. Its leaders stressed the importance of good morals and spirituality while at the time they advocated to strengthen the heavy industry to modernize the country.

This two-tiered approach resonated with migrant workers many of which considered returning to Turkey, which until then had been plagued with poverty and maladministration.

Necmettin Erbakan, the president of the Millî Selamet, quickly won their favour. The combination of industrial development, economic growth and spirituality resonated

with those parts of the population who had found themselves marginalized for their religion. To the Turkish workers living abroad, Erbakan's political promise offered a great opportunity: returning to their home country to enjoy religious freedom and economic prosperity.

In 1973, many migrant workers drove to Turkey in more than 100 cars to support the party in the upcoming parliamentary elections. This was the first time, Erbakan learned about the roughly 50 chapters the Turkish Labourer's Union already had in Germany back then. He quickly entered into dialogue with them. So, while claims that Necmettin Erbakan is the IGMG's founder are clearly false, he still played a vital role in the association's development and institutionalization. Especially after his party became a coalition partner in the Turkish government in 1974, Erbakan made the problems of migrant workers one of his priorities, which was highly acclaimed among the marginalized workers.

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IGMG's history begins in Braunschweig in 1967.



In the 1990's, however, the ideological differences between the IGMG and the political movement in Turkey became apparent. While we clearly focused on providing religious services in accordance with people's needs and their reality of life, the political movement in Turkey favoured political activism. To this day we maintain a di-

alogue based on mutual respect. However, the IGMG's self-image drastically changed when its members began to see themselves as active, vital parts of the European societies they lived in rather than mere "guests". That change in perspective caused a rift between the IGMG and the Millî Görüş movement in Turkey.



Why did you decide to keep the name “Millî Görüş”?

During the initial stage, the IGMG bore the names “Turkish Labourer’s Union” and “Islamic Union”. The former vice-chairman of Diyanet, Cemal-ettin Kaplan, who retired in 1980, was then in charge of the Imams of the 110 Millî Görüş communities. Under the influence of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Kaplan aimed at establishing a “Caliphate” and overthrowing the constitutional order of the Federal Republic.

While Kaplan had only little influence on most of our members, he still managed to win over the Imams by using the IGMG’s name to market his ideas. Overall, he rallied 90 of our mosques to his side.

Neither the board nor the IGMG’s foundation supported the idea of a “parallel state” at any given time. Then and now we are clearly and unambiguously committed to the rule of law, the Basic Law, and the equality of citizens. We strongly oppose every attempt to undermine the cohesion of society and to cause upheaval. This is, what set us apart from Cemalettin Kaplan.

In order to take a stance against Kaplan’s utopia of a “Caliphate”, we chose the name “Organizations of Millî Görüş in Europe”. It should become clear who was behind the real Millî Görüş, its mosques, its schools, and its institutions. With the change of our community’s name in 1982, we also wished to highlight our commitment to make Europe the permanent home of Muslims.

In time, many had come to realize that they were going to stay in Europe on a permanent basis. With the renaming as “Islamic Association of Millî Görüş” in 1995, we wished to substantiate this approach.

Since the establishment of the first prayer room in Braunschweig, the IGMG prioritizes the needs of European Muslims. We as Muslims belong in Europe, we are part of her. However, that does not mean that we are indifferent towards the welfare and freedom of the people in Turkey. On the contrary: Since we have roots in both countries, both are equally important to us.

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We derive our understanding of the term from Sura Hajj, verse 78, “the faith of your father Ibrahîm”.

The IGMG is in no way a political movement. The name IGMG stand for religious services provided to Muslims in Europe. Accordingly, we don't define the term “Millî Görüş” as a political or national affiliation, but in a religious sense. We derive our understanding of the term from Sura Hajj, verse 78, “the faith

of your father Ibrahîm”. The IGMG sees itself as a religious community and a civil organization. Muslims in Germany think of the IGMG as the mosque next door as well a community which commits itself to religious services and strives to make available reliable answers to all questions concerning religion.



In which countries is the IGMG active and how many mosques are represented by it?

Based in the German city of Cologne, our association currently runs more than 600 mosques, 2000 local community centers, educational centers, Hafiz schools, private schools, dormitories, and many more facilities in Western Europe, Scandinavia, on the Balkans, in Australia, Canada, the United States, and Japan. The IGMG is divided into 39 regional branches, 15 of which are situated in Germany. We have more than 2000 functionaries and about 200,000 members worldwide, while our activities and services reach more than half a million people.



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Are you active in Turkey, too?

The IGMG is active worldwide. We offer humanitarian aid, support Muslims who wish to organize and offer religious services. That applies to Turkey as well. After all, more than half of our members are Turkish citizens and for that reason alone, Turkey is important to us. In times of crises,

we always support needy people in Turkey, for example within the framework of our food campaigns.

From 2010 onwards, we began to build dormitories and opened branches of our relief organization and Hajj agency in different Turkish cities.



Which are the IGMG's fields of activity and which goals do you pursue?

We commit ourselves to offer a broad range of different religious services to Muslims of all ages. Those include nursery schools, youth work, Qur'an classes and Hafiz courses, courses in the Islamic sciences, private schools, and even funeral services. We take care of elderly people or people with health issues. And we reach out to needy people worldwide providing humanitarian aid an emergency relief.

We do our best to ensure that Muslims can be buried according to Islamic funeral rites. We have been organizing Hajj and Umra pilgrimages for more than half a century. We advise prospective foster parents and give counselling to victims of discrimination and racism. Our students' organization helps university students find accommodation and offers supplementary courses. We publish books and magazines focusing on culture, arts, philosophy, and science.

Our youth workers support and give counselling to youths. We aim at making them educated people with a firm grounding in their faith.

Men and women of all age groups are represented within our executive committees and actively participate in all our activities. Whether it is a single street event or long-term educational work, our staff is always actively engaged showing an amazing team spirit.

The IGMG makes humanitarian aid for all people regardless of their individual faith or ethic background one of its priorities. Thus, we provided emergency relief after the massive Haiti earthquake and the landslide in Italy. In 2018, we held an international conference to call attention to the appalling situation of the Rohingya people. Throughout the trials against the perpetrators of the Srebrenica genocide, we stood by the side of the victims. Faced with the crimes committed against the Uyghur people, many countries remain silent because they fear political or economic repercussions. We, however, speak out against the abhorrent situation and engage in moral support for the victims. We organized demonstrations in 26 capitals to call the public's attention to the persecution of Ugyhurs.

Under the slogan “Stand up for Aleppo” we again rallied in many capitals against the bombardment of the city. We engage in active dialogue with Muslim communities in Latin America and have already held conferences on their situation. Our goal as a

religious community is to tackle the problems Muslims are facing right now and to find solutions. Moreover, we want to reach our helping hand to all people in need, no matter their faith, their ethnic background, or their skin color.

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While the IGMG is active mostly in Western countries, some related parties often use anti-Western rhetoric. How is that compatible?

The IGMG is by no means affiliated with any political party. We advise our members to exert their democratic right to participate in elections which are a prerequisite to solve a society's problems. However, we do not support a specific political party. Our members are well able to form their own political opinions and convictions.

Concerning anti-Western discourses, we are convinced that an ideological between East and West does no longer reflect the realities of our times. If, by all means, you have to draw a dividing line, it should run between those countries that respect human rights and those that do not, between those who adhere to the rule of law and those who do not.

This approach is based on Islamic principles and not limited to geographical regions. According to Islam, it does not matter whether

good examples and best practices originate in the East or in the West. After all, the prophet said: "Search for knowledge everywhere, even if you have to travel as far as China." This Hadith makes it a necessity to adopt the good for the sake of humanity. So, instead of constantly talking about differences between East and West, I ask for dialogue.

We do not interpret the conflicts happening right now on an international level as the result of a rift between East and West. This is an outdated worldview. There are currently more than 4 Million Muslims living in "Western" Germany, and more than 2000 mosques all over the country. When you think of Germany, you automatically have the Muslims in mind who are part of society. The question is then, of which "West" do we speak? Its not possible to speak of a monolithic, "evil" West.

However, it is likewise not possible to speak from a eurocentric perspective of an “evil” East. Even if you wanted to distinguish politically between the two entities, it would not be possible. The global reality just differs from such a narrow perspective. The rule of law, freedom of expression, the free press, religious freedom, these values are all deeply embedded within Western societies. The fact that these values are sometimes violated, that racism is on the rise and racists even have seats in parliament does not change that.



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What do you say about the accusations of anti-semitism against the IGMG?

Islam rejects any hostility against other religions or communities. To make it crystal clear: No Muslim is allowed to declare the adherents of another religion or the members of a society as enemies.

For years, we have been actively participating in the “International Weeks against Racism”. Our communities are committed to fight racism, including racism that comes from Muslims. Anyone who has read the Qur’an and follows its teachings cannot be a racist.

As I said earlier, hundreds of thousands of Muslims from different so-

cial levels benefit from our religious services, attend our mosques to perform the daily prayers or the Friday Prayers. Among them are certainly some who harbor prejudice against people of different faiths or atheists, even if that goes against the teachings of the Qur’an and the prophetic tradition. Since we do not accept racist or anti-semitic ideas in our ranks, we take respective measures to tackle those cases. Our relationship with Jews and Christians, the “People of the Book”, does not depend on a zeitgeist or political developments. Our community stands for togetherness based on mutual respect and understanding.

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What is your opinion about Israel's policy?

Despite international resolutions, the Israeli government unfortunately continues the construction of illegal settlements. Independent NGOs, that are operating on the ground, report clear human rights abuses. As a civic organization, it is our duty to condemn illegal acts, no matter who commits them. However, our critical stance towards Israel's policy – and I want to stress that – must not lead to general suspicion and even hatred against Jews! If a Jew feels unwelcome in a predominantly Muslim borough, this is shameful for the Muslims.

Many people in Turkey do not understand why we take an equal

stance against both anti-Muslim racism and anti-semitism. It has something to do with our position as a minority in European countries. As such, we have a different outlook, a special sensitivity for racism. Our senses are sharpened. We know from our own experience what it means to be subjected to hatred and ostracism. Each day, we sorrowfully watch our mosques being vandalized. Women and girls who don the headscarf must be very cautious when outside. For the Muslim community, racism is omnipresent. That is why we see it as our responsibility to take a stance against any form of racism, including bigotry against Jews, Christians, or Atheists.



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In the European media there is currently a vibrant discourse on what is called “Political Islam” Do you see yourself as part of it?

I do not think it's right put on any labels on Islam. It cannot be reduced to a certain ideology or ethnic group. Islam is Islam. There is no “Islam of the East”, no “European Islam”, no Arabic or Turkish Islam, and no German or French Islam. It is likewise unacceptable to speak of a “Political Islam”. The IGMG rejects such ascriptions since we do not define ourselves along those categories.

If, however, the term “Political Islam” implies the attempt to undermine the constitutional order, our organization strongly rejects such agendas. We oppose any attempt to exploit Islam for political purposes and it is clearly wrong to impose certain opinions on others. On the other hand, it should be a matter of

course for Muslims to be guided by Islamic-ethnic ideas in their actions just like European politicians invoke their religious values. The IGMG is not and never was a threat to the constitutional order. On the contrary, we have a strong connection to the constitution, and we profess to the rule of law. The IGMG is an organization that focuses on religious life and we want to fulfill this role on an individual and on the societal level. Imparting proper Islamic knowledge is a vital part of it.

The term “Political Islam” should not be used to label practicing Muslims. We oppose all attempts to restrict religion to the private sphere and to ban Muslims from the public, thus making Islam invisible and irrelevant in society.

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It is often claimed that the IGMG is in fact an extension of some states, notably Turkey. Is this correct?

The IGMG's organizational structures are transparent. We have a board, regional branches and local communities with proper chairpersons who come together regularly to make decisions. During the general assembly, the IGMG regularly answers questions from its members and the public.

This civic character is our strength. It is ridiculous to claim that the IGMG is the extension of any state. Neither Turkey nor other countries need us as an agent. They have their embassies, consulates, and other means of diplomacy. Turkey, like any other state, is well able to represent her own interests.

As I said before, the IGMG is represented in many countries. As a civic

organization, it is in close contact with representatives of those states. The interests of Muslims in general and more specifically our members create a framework for dialogue with their parties. We highly value discourse and are open to meeting with politicians. However, even if we are happy to enter in talks and are open to exchange of opinions, as a civic organization, we have boundaries. We set our limit where we notice an attempt to exert an external influence on us.

Our partners in Turkey and in other countries we live in know that we are vocal about what we deem right or wrong. That is no new development. It has been like that from the very beginning. The IGMG's critical stance is widely known.

Do you receive financial aid from certain countries?

The IGMG is a civic organization. As we have stated in earlier comments, our association is independent, both structurally and financially. We draw our strength from our member base. The first generation, who worked hard to earn a living, helped building the first community. No matter where you go in Europe or worldwide, the people know the history of their respective community well. To finance the construction of mosques, or youth organizations worked for weeks to collect money through charity bazaars. Our members made huge sacrifices and

turned up right after night shift to lend a hand in the construction process before returning home to rest. For half a century, the foundation of our growing community has been the continuous and sincere commitment of those Muslims.

Our community owes her current position solely to the prayers and commitment of our members. The allegations of financial dependence and outside control is a slap in their face. It is our responsibility to live up to the heritage of those people and to appreciate their work.



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How do you tackle the rise in anti-Muslim racism? Which measures should be put in place?

Anti-Muslim racism and hostility towards Islam are no new phenomena. It's an indisputable fact that there remains to this day a relatively small group of people in Europe, who see Muslims as "the Other". Through our counselling services, we support people who have become victims of anti-Muslim racism. Our aim is to support youths to remain self-confident in their identity despite experiences of racism. The best answer to anti-Muslim racism is that we as Muslims participate in society even more.

Racism is not just a set of prejudice but roots deep in history. To tackle racism, we must create awareness and sensitivity among school teachers, inform the public and political actors. For years we had been demanding a separate registration of anti-Muslim hate crime by the German law-enforcement agencies. In 2017, the authorities responded positively to this demand.

We need a broad set of measures to raise awareness within society and public institutions for the benefits of diversity. Politicians have a huge responsibility in that. In the past, we again and again were witnesses of derogatory statements about Muslims which put them under suspicion. The vocabulary of the public sector also needs an overhaul to get rid of terms which label Muslims as "the Other" or criminalize them.

Apart from that, it is important for us to take a stance together with other religious communities against attacks on our shared values. Racism and extremism do not only concern Muslims but society in general. After the abhorrent attacks in New Zealand, representatives of various religious communities expressed their solidarity with Muslims and prayed for them. We again expressed our solidarity in the wake of the attacks on churches in Sri Lanka and the synagogue in Halle.

During the first Friday Prayer after the New Zealand attack, human chains were formed outside mosques to symbolically protect them just as Abu Talib, the uncle of the Prophet, protected the Muslims. The number of those conscious people should not be underestimated. It is important to meet with them to work to-

gether for law and order, justice, and the protection of human rights, since global problems like racism, terrorism, anarchy, anti-Muslim racism, and anti-semitism can only be fought when we work together.

Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen that dialogue.



What can Muslims in Europe do to counter verbal abuse and physical attacks?

We strongly condemn verbal abuse of any kind against Islamic and other religious values. Insulting comments and caricatures depicting the Prophet are hurtful and damage the social cohesion. In that situation, our Prophet is our role model: When he was driven out the city of Taif by the inhabitants who threw stones at him, he reacted with mercy to this rough treatment saying: "They do not know better,

otherwise they would not behave like that." We follow his example by not acting like those who attack us.

Freedom of expression is a great good in functional societies, where violence and arbitrariness have no place. Only the state can prosecute crimes. We will exert our right to speak out against statements that hurt our feelings, even if they are covered by freedom of expression.



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In a turkish TV-show, Ahmet Mahmut Ünlü, better known as Cübbeli, claimed that mosques in Germany receive financial aid by the state. Is that true? And if not, what makes him think so?

I have already answered a part of this questions. I personally reacted to Cübbeli's claims in said TV show via telephone. It is therefore unnecessary to continue that debate here. But what I can say is, that such claims lack information. The framework of religious institutional law, the law itself and the existence of religious communities in Europe differ fundamentally from the relationship between state and religion in Turkey.

Additionally, every European country has a different relationship towards that has evolved historically. France, for example, is strictly secular, while the wages

of Imams of "Executif", the official agency of Muslims in Belgium, have been paid by the ministry for years. In Germany, the relationship between state and religion is marked by cooperation while the Islamic community of Austria looks back at a centennial history of "Acknowledgement".

It is better to inform oneself than to embrace claims such as "mosques in Europe are subsidized by the state", which are normally popular among right-wing populist movements.

We vehemently object to such claims to protect the painstaking work of our membership base.



