



# (PREPRINT) Masks, Mosques, and Lockdowns: Islamic Organisations Navigating the Covid-19 Pandemic in Germany

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**ABSTRACT** Based on fieldwork in the German state of Lower Saxony, the article investigates Covid-19 related responses by Islamic associations and local mosques. The inquiry focuses on the time prior to the first lockdown, during mosque closures, and around the opening phase, covering the months between February 2020 and November 2020. Drawing on organisational sociology, Islamic studies, and research on pandemics, the article contributes to the debate on the contested nature of Islamic representation and the institutionalisation of Islam in Germany, by analysing internal and relational dynamics, different and converging strategies, external challenges and cooperation by Islamic authorities during the first Covid-19 wave in Germany.

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**KEYWORDS** pandemic related governance, organisational sociology, Islamic studies, muslims in Germany

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## IMPORTANT

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## Introduction

On 22 March 2020, a national lockdown was declared in Germany due to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19). The lockdown resulted in unprecedented contact and movement restrictions including a ban of social, cultural and religious events and congregations. Ten days earlier, on 13 March, the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), Germany's largest Islamic association, closes all its 900 mosques for the Friday prayer and subsequent congregations. It became the first macro-religious institution in the country to take such a drastic step. In the following days, local mosques, other Islamic associations and the Coordination Council for Muslims (*Koordinationsrat der Muslime*, KRM) followed until the lockdown

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became legally binding across Germany. Around 20 April 2020, after Easter and before Ramadan, lockdown measures were slowly lifted, including the opening of shops and schools. Religious communities, which were not immediately allowed to congregate, started to assert their wish to open through public statements and court cases in defence of religious freedom. Leaders of mainline churches in particular argued that Christians had sacrificed extensively during the Easter closure and expressed discontent of prioritising commerce over religion. Politicians, health experts, and Islamic leaders, however, expressed concerns that Muslim communities would be unable to organise the Ramadan festivities safely and that large festive gatherings can turn into superspreading events. Germany's largest newspaper, *Bild Zeitung*, published a front-page article with the title "Churches remain closed from fear of Ramadan Chaos," accusing Muslims for being unorganised, and, therefore, preventing other religious groups from opening up. At the same time, grassroots pressure from local Muslim communities grew, demanding mosques to be reopened. The increasing internal and external demands forced KRM and Islamic associations to develop an opening strategy. In response, they adopted a slow and gradual approach with only three daily mosque prayers from 9 May. Some independent mosques, however, did not follow KRM's guidelines, and started to fully reopen in early May with Friday prayers organised according to their own safety concepts. Overall, mosques largely stayed out of the headlines, due to pragmatic navigation, compliance, and adaptation during the crisis and remained opened during the second lockdown from November 2020 onwards.

This brief overview provides the background for the main objective of this article, namely, to analyse the navigation strategies of Islamic associations and local mosques, including different forms of compliance and involvement in pandemic related governance. Within the public discourse, mosque responses have been described as a united effort, collective restraint and sacrifice among German Muslims, and unilateral support of governmental orders regarding shutdowns and social distancing. Whilst it could be assumed that mosques complied with government regulations and mosque closures to be protected from the devastating consequences of Covid-19, results from this research illustrate a number of different rationales, plans, and degrees of adaptation. Drawing on organisational sociology, Islamic studies, and research on pandemics, the empirical analysis inquires about the changing nature of Islamic authorities during the first lockdown in the German state of Lower Saxony. Thereby, the article contributes to the debate on the contested nature of Islamic representation and the institutionalisation of Islam in Germany, by analysing internal and relational dynamics, external challenges and cooperation by Islamic authorities during the first Covid-19 wave in Germany. The study further inquires whether the centralised leadership and decision-making system by KRM and Islamic associations, which has been criticised in the past for hampering grassroots initiatives and being controlled from abroad, can be seen as a buffer against rumours and internal resistance during the Covid-19 pandemic. First, the theoretical framework and German Islamic field is scrutinised, before the fieldwork and case studies are introduced. The subsequent discussion uses empirical data from the negotiations within and between KRM members and their respective local mosques. Finally, fieldwork findings from within an independent mosque (IM) are analysed, which show different and converging strategies in responding to the pandemic and informs the debate around the ongoing pluralisation of the German Islamic field. [4]

## Compliance and Resistance of Religious Organisations during Crisis

To analyse internal interpretations and decision-making processes regarding the navigation of Islamic associations and local mosques during Covid-19, insights from organizational sociology (focusing on legitimacy, compliance, and resistance), medical anthropology of pandemics and research on Islamic authorities are discussed in this section. Earlier research on organisations focused on how structural environments and institutional expectations determine organisational behaviour, and how compliance with external demands may enhance the group's legitimacy and resources (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott 1995). More recent studies questioned this static understanding and developed an agency perspective by focusing on membership interests, internal diversity, and different strategies to deal with the varying internal and institutional demands and contradictions arising from them (Oliver 1991; Hirsch 1997; Rosenow-Williams 2012). For instance, compliance with and adaptation to external expectations may result in increased public legitimacy, while leading to internal resistance of members. In the Covid-19 context, I will analyse how leaders of Muslim communities in Germany complied with external expectations such as extensive mosque closures; how central decision-making by Islamic association was received, negotiated and resisted among different groups and local congregations; and how these internal and external expectations were managed by different actors in the German Islamic field. To deal with membership diversity, (voluntary) organisations often introduce formal and informal hierarchical structures, due to different characteristics and competencies of their members (Simon 1962; Bano 2012). However, organisational hierarchies and professionalised leadership structures may alienate supporters at the grassroots level. Within a crisis, we may assume that internal power struggles between an Imam and mosque committee, or a chairman and regional leader over organisational adaptation and appropriate responses intensify or that interests align, because of an existential threat (Chaves 1998). Whether Muslim leaders in Germany have side-lined local congregations during the pandemic, in order to comply with external expectations and increase public legitimacy, will be further investigated in this empirical study. By employing an agency perspective within organisational research, this study analyses different navigation strategies of Islamic association from passive rule adaptation, moderate resistance or active non-compliance in response to institutional demands and internal negotiations (Oliver 1991; Rosenow-Williams 2012). Since open resistance or outright dismissal of institutional expectations by Muslim leaders at the official organisational level were rarely observed during the first German lockdown, it may indicate that Islamic organisations successfully employed the strategy of de-coupling, displaying a united front to outsiders, while dealing with dissent and resistance in the backstage area (Meyer and Rowan 1991). This article is interested in these assumed backstage negotiations, suggesting a pragmatic desire for compromise and participation among Muslim leaders. [5]

During the Ebola pandemic in West Africa, medical anthropologist inquired why people refuse or comply with vaccination and other health initiatives and resist or support state-led interventions. Their results demonstrate a complex connection between community behaviour and histories of structural violence and institutional distrust (Richards 2016; Tengbeh et al. 2018). For Muslim minorities, who have an ambivalent relation to German state agencies (next section), motivations to comply may also differ at different organisational levels. However, public officials often associated religious authorities with resistance to health regulations [6]

and disease control (Chandler 2015). These accusations reflect the persistent assumption that local mosques and Islamic authorities induce auto-segregation through the use of heritage languages and illiberal teachings, which are incompatible with democratic policies (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992; Bayat 1996; Tibi 2001). However, recent studies from scholars of pandemic outbreaks have pointed to the constructive role of religious capital and faith leaders (Abramowitz 2015). For instance by using historical and religious examples, including how the Prophet Muhammad and leaders of the Ottoman Empire acted during epidemics, the Turkish state together with the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and other religious authorities legitimised the closing of mosques, quarantines, and lockdowns of public life during Ramadan, while holding less risk averse religious groups at bay. Diyanet could rely on its religious capital including thousands of imams and mosques to communicate its public health messages (Balci 2020). Similar messages by mosques and local clergies have been done during the 2006 bird flu pandemic in Turkey, while mosques in Germany invited health experts to inform congregations about the 2009 swine flu outbreak. The next section will introduce the role of Islamic associations within the German institutional context, which provides the background to analyse the ways Muslim communities navigated through the pandemic.

## Islamic Associations in Germany

Today, Germany has between 2350 and 2750 mosques, Alevi community centres (*cemevleri*), and prayer rooms (Halm et al. 2012). Turkish descendants represent over 60% of approximately five million Muslims in Germany (Haug, Müssig, and Stichs 2009). From the 1970s, mosque communities formed various Islamic associations (*Dachverbände*), which can be described as socio-religious lobbies with different and sometimes competing theological, cultural and political positions (Halm et al. 2012). While maintaining ties with heritage centres such as Turkey or in the Middle East, Islamic associations started to focus increasingly more on local resources of German Muslims and established themselves as political and administrative partners of the German government from the late 1990s (Schiffauer 2003). [7]

Since the early 2000s, increased efforts were made among leaders of Islamic associations to reduce competition between various Muslim groups and emerge with a united voice under a representational structure of Islam in Germany (*Einigungsprozess*). The unification and institutional negotiations culminated in the German Islam Conference (2006), resulting in the creation of the KRM, consisting of four major Islamic associations.<sup>1</sup> The (unaccomplished) aim for the KRM is to institutionalize Islam in Germany (Spielhaus 2014), by obtaining the status of a public corporation (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*) and become a recognized state partner to collect taxes, open Islamic schools, and operate social service facilities (Rosenow-Williams and Matthias 2011). The unification process of Islamic organisations was influenced [8]

1 DITIB (Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) is the biggest and increasingly controversial umbrella organisation in Germany. It was founded in Cologne in 1984, after the Germany state requested state-monitored Imams from Turkey to prevent the rise of political Islam in Germany (Ozkan 2019). Within KRM, DITIB is the most powerful member, and retains a veto right (Rosenow-Williams and Matthias 2011). IRD (Islamic Council for the Federal Republic of Germany) is part of KRM. Its largest constituent member is IGMG (the Islamic Community Millî Görüş), which was founded (under a different name) in 1976. In this study, I will mainly refer to IGMG, due to my interview sample. Because of IGMG links to the Turkish politician, Necmettin Erbakan, it is monitored by the German intelligence service (Schiffauer 2010). ZMD (Central Council of Muslims in Germany) was founded in 1994 and is characterised by its multi-ethnic membership, including Shia communities. The last KRM member is VIKZ (Association of Islamic Cultural Centres).

by various external and internal demands including Muslim communities' search for public legitimacy in the post-9/11 context, as well as the German government's expectation of a single negotiation partner to reduce divisions among Muslims and diminish the impact from Islamic authorities abroad (Laurence 2006).

Over the last two decades, German Muslims also started to participate in negotiations over religious governance within Germany's 16 federal states (*Länder*) via regional and local treaties. The resulting decentralisation of Islamic authority is reflected in the introduction of regional branches of Islamic associations and state level cooperation such as the Shura in Lower Saxony, Hessen, Bremen, and Hamburg (Spielhaus and Herzog 2015). Regional integration of and local partnerships with German Muslims challenged the influence of national and foreign-based Islamic authorities, which became increasingly concerned to lose influence on local mosques and regional leaders (Rosenow-Williams 2012). DITIB, for instance, blocked regional alliances and developed its own centralized dialogue program and Imam training to restrain grassroots initiatives (Rosenow-Williams and Matthias 2011; Klinkhammer 2019).

The ongoing debates over centralization and autonomy within Islamic associations are reflected in the contested role of the KRM as the main Islamic umbrella platform and state partner. KRM through its constituent members claims to represent more than 85% of German Muslims. However, its legitimacy claims are heavily contested, in particular in the light of intergenerational changes and religious individualization of German Muslims (Halm 2013). Haug et al. (2009) showed that only 40% of Muslims feel represented by KRM, which does not speak on behalf of many Muslim minority groups such as Alevites, Shias, and Ahmadiyyas and various independent mosques. Only around 13% of mosques in Germany (145) have no affiliation to a larger Islamic association. Most of these independent mosques are characterised by ethnically diverse congregations (Halm et al. 2012).

Internal tension and competition over the trajectory and actual decision-making power have been recorded among member associations in KRM, which challenges the unification process. In many instances, state governments in Germany tend to directly negotiate with individual associations, thereby diminishing the influence of KRM. This is further elaborated by Rosenow-Williams (2012), who illustrated the different strategies of public engagement of three KRM members, namely ZMD, DITIB and IGMG, ranging from mainly timid and compliant to confident demands and criticism of the German state. For instance, while IGMG has taken up court cases, published assertive press statements or approached schools when Muslim minority and religious rights are violated, DITIB and ZMD follow a less confrontational approach, abstaining from legal battles. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, KRM appeared to have regained relevance within the German public and among Islamic associations. KRM has been in direct contact with the German interior ministry, speaking on behalf of German Muslims and announced hygiene and opening concepts, to which other associations would refer to.

## Case Studies and Methods

Negotiations over a treaty between Muslim leaders and the state government of Lower Saxony began in the early 2000s under the State President Christian Wulff. Regional integration via Islamic education in schools (2012), prison chaplaincies (2012) and Islamic theology chairs at the University of Osnabruck (2013) was achieved in Lower Saxony. However, issues regarding the constitutional loyalty of Muslim associations and concerns over Islam's incompatibility

with gender equality rules, accompanied the negotiation process (Ceylan 2017). In January 2017, the state government of Lower Saxony stopped the negotiations with its Muslim partner associations (DITIB and Shura). Their failure was a result of the increasing political tension between Berlin and Ankara after the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016, the allegations against Turkish Imams to spy on political opponents in Germany, and an internal leadership contest within the Shura. The developments in Lower Saxony partially reflect the situation of Muslims in Germany, regarding regional integrations, and constitute a relevant case study for the inquiry into the crisis navigation of Islamic actors during Covid-19.

In October 2020, I conducted fieldwork in Lower Saxony to understand how Islamic associations and local mosques navigate through the Covid-19 pandemic during the closures and opening phases. Respondents and selected institutions in this study were members of the KRM, including the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), the Islamic Community Milli Görüş (IGMG), the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD) as well as one independent mosque (IM) in four cities. 12 interviews with local mosque committee members, state and national leaders of Islamic associations and government officials, including health and integration officers were carried out. Four respondents from DITIB, ZMD, and IGMG were directly involved in the national crisis management of KRM and their respective associations. In addition, a week-long participant observation in IM was conducted, including evening seminars, a Friday prayer, and a sport event. The analysis is complemented by the results of my previous fieldwork between 2018 and 2020 in the same Muslim communities, and through online research on social media platforms during the pandemic. As I conducted my research during the pandemic, it was crucial to be aware of local hygiene regulations and to inquire what respondents are comfortable with. In some cases, it was important to move interviews online or conduct them via telephone. Towards the end of October, the situation started to change with increasing infection rates, so that I decided to stop the physical data collection, following the public health advise. [13]

The inquiry focused on the time prior to the first lockdown, the mosque closures, and the opening phase, covering the months between February and November 2020. By including actors from different Islamic associations within the lower and upper leadership as well as an independent mosque, the comparative analysis focuses on internal and relational dynamics, different and converging strategies, external challenges and cooperation, but also on subjective experiences and emotions of my interviewees during the first Covid-19 wave in Germany. Due to the participant observation (recorded in a field diary), I could see how one mosque committee and congregation experienced and adapted to the changing situation with new rules and restrictions being introduced in October 2020. Although the data only covers a relatively small sample in one geographical region, this research reveals a variety of pragmatic responses to the pandemic that counter some monolithic displays of Muslims in Germany and invite further research. **In the empirical section, I switch between different organisational levels—from KRM to its constituent-members such as DITIB, to an independent mosque, which mirrors the decentralization of Islamic authority structures in Germany. To ensure anonymity of respondents and local communities, names and other identifiers have been changed or omitted.** [14]

## Muslim leaders' Response to Covid-19 in Lower Saxony

In the weeks before the national lockdown, DITIB mosques were instructed by the central lead- [15]



ership to decide autonomously in cooperation with local health authorities, whether to stay open or close. However, after a late-night emergency meeting on 12 March 2020, consisting of national DITIB leaders in Cologne and various state level representatives, the association instructed mosques across Germany to suspend the upcoming Friday prayer and subsequent congregations. The decision was communicated to local mosque and the other Islamic associations and state level platforms such as the Shura in Lower Saxony. DITIB's rationale for the early closure was two-fold according to a spokesperson in Lower Saxony. First, DITIB was not involved in the government's emergency planning, unlike church authorities, who have a "historical insider status." The DITIB leader recalled that "we could not afford to wait until the last minute, when the government decided what happens with the mosques. It would have led to chaos... So, we used our right of self-determination [*Selbstbestimmungsrecht*] as Islamic association, to close our mosques and argued that health is more important than religion." Secondly, DITIB used this historical moment to indicate "constitutional loyalty" ("*Verfassungsloyalität*"). "Although religious freedom is utmost important, we could prove that we do not cherry pick, but are loyal to all constitutional rights," as stated by the same respondent.

Before the closure, Islamic associations were concerned that members would go to the well-attended Friday prayers, which is compulsory for Muslims, before returning to their workplaces and families, potentially infecting others. By pre-emptively suspending the Friday prayer, DITIB leaders hoped to reduce the "ambivalent feeling" ("*mulmiges Gefühl*") many believers could have with regard to whether to attend the obligatory event or not. On 13 March, the day of the Friday prayer, local committees were instructed to symbolically lock the mosque gates and stand in front of them to explain the situation. At that time, the national leadership and local committees feared resistance from local congregations, as "every mosque has a different DNA," noted by a DITIB officer-bearer in Hanover. Authority disputes over who can forbid the Friday prayer, persistent cultural beliefs ("If you don't go three times to the *jumma* [Friday prayer], your heart will close"), and alleged over-reactions to the pandemic were mentioned as potential hurdles by my interviewees. A local mosque member described her distress on the day: "We are talking about religion, here. It is totally different, if you tell everyone to work remotely from home. But to say, we are closing the mosque for the Friday prayer is another level." However, the fear of resistance was unfounded. Instead, some interviewees described feelings of gratitude for the central decision, where local authorities felt relieved of their responsibility and burden to decide on this delicate matter. Studies on local mosque management illustrated that it is mainly done by volunteers from the first or second generation with limited resources and administrative knowledge, while members of the third generation may lack confidence to represent the mosque (Jonker 2005). Hence, (internal) rule compliance and the fast adaptation by local communities to the pandemic-related restrictions can be interpreted as an alignment of leadership interests with grassroots concerns.

[16]

### Concepts, Innovation, and Impatience

KRM and Islamic associations worked on central concepts to engage local constituencies during the lockdown. An IGMG leader, who drove 400 kilometres from Lower Saxony to the headquarters in Cologne the day after the mosque closure, recalled that "for eight hours" the entire IGMG leadership discussed how to come up with "online plans, zoom classrooms, and telephone helplines." During the meeting, concerns over circulating conspiracy theories were voiced. "We couldn't afford to do nothing for the next three months." Although it took some mosques until the beginning of Ramadan, Islamic associations eventually set up a vast online

[17]

programme. A local female committee member from a provincial mosque community noted that “right after closing [on 13 March], everyone felt a bit paralyzed and worried about what comes next. But the community life was reactivated during the lockdown with the beginning of Ramadan [on 23 April], when social media started to play a big role.” The lockdown led to technological innovation and digital knowledge transfers within local mosques with “many members of the first generation now being able to attend online conferences and virtual spaces,” according to her. The committee member further noted that social ties in the community were strengthened as members were reminded on “how precious the mosque community was. We longed for it. Even some youth, who rarely came to the mosque [prior lockdown], asked me when sohbehs [youth discussion groups] will start again.” More affluent mosques assisted smaller mosques with IT expertise and established online channels, while Islamic lectures from Turkey were streamed by small-semi urban communities. A recent study showed that KRM members such as IGMG and DITIB have successfully used the pandemic to expand their online portfolio for religious outreach and administrative tasks (Tabti 2020).

Moreover, KRM leaders were involved in daily crisis management, communicating to local mosque committees the latest announcement by the government and health departments regarding new rules on open-air congregations, funerals, or body returns to Turkey. In case of Lower Saxony, the headquarters of Islamic associations became emergency centres, in which requests, updates and strategies were bundled, evaluated and executed. One participant described this time as follows: “Every day we worked until late at night, while our phones were ringing 24/7.” Simultaneously, local communities were urged to contact the central leadership whenever “they didn’t know what to do, and if we can’t answer it, we can use our direct channels in the state chancellery [Staatskanzlei].” From an organisational perspective, KRM members could still rely on previous co-option such as institutional ties and coalitions within the incumbent government in Lower Saxony, which contributed to effective crisis management and communication with local communities. [18]

The plan on how to reopen mosques in early May was centrally decided within the KRM, in which members discussed such prevention measures as wearing masks, introduction of personal carpets, and a three-meter distance rule inside mosques. For the first few weeks, only the three less frequented early prayers were allowed, while Friday, evening and (the additional) *tarawih* prayers during Ramadan remained suspended. Although different rules and laws existed across Germany’s federal system, KRM announced a homogeneous rule catalogue for mosques. The rules and guidelines were restrictive and exceeded requirements by local health authorities. In contrast, churches followed a regional and less prescriptive opening strategy, where masks remained optional. Before mosques reopened, state level DITIB leaders in Lower Saxony hosted an online meeting with local mosque committees. As the DITIB respondent explained, “In March, we decided to close without grassroots consultation, but at the end of April, we wanted to open with more local participation.” Central leaders informed local constituencies about health risks, in case they held the daily *tarawih* recitations, and recommended to remain closed during Ramadan. The plan was to open before Eid al-Fitr (Islamic holiday, celebrating the end of Ramadan) in mid-May. Interestingly, in Lower Saxony, no chairperson voted against the gradual opening strategy, although it was legally permissible to fully reopen, according to the German government. The reason for a “minimalistic” opening strategy was to not overburden the local communities, given the constant changes and newly introduced regulations. [19]

The central approach by KRM leaders revealed a degree of paternalism towards local [20]



mosque committees, which was expressed during my research and reflected the tension within voluntary organisations regarding membership diversity. The DITIB leader explained that “we don’t have the professional know-how in all the mosques. Yes, some are very professional – but smaller ones with mainly first-generation committees and little German media exposure might be well-meaning but mix it up.” In some cases, local members were reigned in and reminded on their responsibility to the public. “It’s better to break one’s heart, than having 300 people infected. We told local members not to let people who show symptoms pray and to demand negative [Covid-19] tests from those who travelled.” \*\*KRM leaders also used examples of individual mosques, who tried to open on their own. One mosque within KRM went ahead and opened during Ramadan. According to a ZDM interviewee, the local committee tried to “enforce\*\* extra-strict hygiene rules, but quickly got cold feet, because of the fear of negative press.” A large number of believers, including refugees, showed up, when only 20 people were allowed inside. “Imagine the stress for these few brave pioneers,” the interviewee described with a degree of *schadenfreude*. KRM leaders expressed concerns over losing control and increasing internal tension, if more autonomy (being conditional on the individual mosque capacity) was allowed. The micro-management of Islamic associations during the crisis mirrors the wider debate over decentralisation of Islamic authority structures in the German Islamic field, which could be further eroded.

KRM members used theological explanations, as well as examples from different times and places, such as the limitation of the *hajj* (pilgrimage) in Saudi Arabia or the rigid mosque closures in Turkey, to manage internal expectations around Ramadan. A ZDM leader explained that “we said to our members: how can you justify to fully open in Germany, when religious life in Turkey has been banned by the health ministry and Diyanet? In Germany, we won’t be the guinea pig [Versuchskaninchen], but will follow the Robert Koch Institute<sup>2</sup> and local health departments.” Since Turkey was strongly affected by Covid-19, local mosques were “aware of the gravity [sensibilisiert],” according to a DITIB interviewee. “If the Turkish health minister would have said it is all fake – similar to what [President] Trump did, I suspect that we would have seen more resistance.” Locally, the central KRM guidelines were passed down and monitored by Imams, being described as supervisors by a local member: “They watch out that no one goes against it.”

The centralized and proactive pandemic response and largely top-down decision-making by KRM, as well as their professional leadership with linkages into German and Turkish politics has been effective, considering the low infection rate within mosques and external political validation. National, state, and regional leaders were proud that no mosque in Germany was associated with super-spreader gatherings or resistance against Covid-19 restrictions, whilst various Christian communities allowed such events and joined protests against Covid-19 measures. **In retrospect, the successful crisis management and overall, compliance by local congregations was** seen as a substantive improvement regarding Muslim relations with the wider German public. Interviewees mentioned grateful remarks and praises by the German President, the Health Minister, and the Chancellor. Local mosques benefitted from symbolic campaigns, reaching out to key workers and offering their services to city councils, including a knitting campaign of masks and gift donations to hospitals. As a result, the crisis allowed Muslim organisations to build a more positive public image of Islam in Germany.

2 Germany’s main government agency responsible for disease control and prevention.

## Critical Voices, Internal Resistance, and Different Organizational Cultures

This section provides a more complex picture of the response by KRM, Islamic associations and local mosques and inquires whether the emphasis on external legitimacy has increased internal resistance of members, due to considerably social costs. DITIB's decision on 12 March 2020 to suspend Friday prayers within less than 12 hours was swiftly communicated to partners within KRM and other state level actors. A DITIB officer-bearer recalled the message given to other associations that night. "Try to get it through or we can't have a united front this time." However, not all partner associations and mosques followed the unilateral decision, including the Shura in Lower Saxony, being largely controlled by IGMG members. Instead, IGMG mosques used the Friday prayer's *kutbha* (sermon) on 13 March to address "health and hygiene" ("*Gesundheit und Hygiene*") measures, including regular handwashing, sneezing in elbows, airing of rooms, and following the advice of local health departments. Without official state restriction, the *kutbha* concluded, *ibadas* (congregations) and Islamic education in mosques may continue until further notice. However, one day later on 14 March, IGMG also announced that all their mosques will shut down. An IGMG interviewee recalled the reason to allow the Friday prayer on 13 March: "We didn't close to avoid chaos. Many people came to the mosque." He laughed, when he described DITIB's ad hoc decision. "Our General Secretary in Cologne was informed at midnight that DITIB adjourns the Friday prayer, but you have to communicate such a massive step well in advance. We operate 600 mosques all over the world. There is a chain of command. So, we were overrun. In some mosques, they had to pray three to four times, since so many people showed up." Interestingly, both DITIB and IGMG used the phrase of "avoiding chaos" to justify their dissimilar strategies, which indicates organisational agency in navigating the crisis. [23]

As discussed in the previous section, DITIB and ZMD argued for a centrally coordinated and monitored opening strategy. *Islamrat* (IRD) and IGMG, on the contrary, prepared hygiene concepts for each federal state, which were "case and population sensitive," to account for the varying rules across Germany's federal system. Being equally concerned about internal resistance, IGMG allowed their mosques to open one week earlier compared to DITIB and ZMD and to individually obtain permissions from local health departments. The IGMG respondent stated that "larger mosques like ours with a long tradition, brain power, and political networks were ready after a few days, while smaller communities needed more time or remained closed." Through this flexible approach, the IGMG leadership imbued local mosques with more autonomy, but also intended to alleviate the growing grassroots pressure and internal tension. The national IGMG leader, who started his organisational career as an ordinary youth member in his hometown mosque, emphasised on local expertise: "The centre can prescribe a lot, but it has to be implemented by people on the ground, who have a better sense of the situation." While IGMG mosques were given more autonomy, leadership hierarchies at DITIB were centralised, partly due to the stronger organisational ties with Turkey and more professional staff. According to the IGMG respondent, "DITIB Imams have a lot of authority. This explains why DITIB was more comfortable to delay the opening, because mosques in Turkey were still closed. We [IGMG] decided not to follow Diyanet and opened according to the German law." [24]

Dissimilar views on appropriate opening strategies were also expressed within DITIB itself. Although some mosque committees expressed gratitude for the centralised system of decision- [25]

making, other local actors preferred a regional approach (“*vor Ort entscheiden*”). A local DITIB spokesperson voiced his discontent: “Why does [the DITIB headquarters in] Cologne decide over a small mosque in Schleswig Holstein with no Corona cases? It is the same top-down decision for a mosque with 50 members and with 800 members, regardless if some mosques want to opt for a different approach and have the capacities.” For him, the central leadership inadequately inquired about local needs during the crisis. “I didn’t see our leaders or the attaché to make an appointment to visit us on weekends. It is possible to meet, again. You can get a room with safe distant measures in place. Corona can’t be an excuse anymore.” The publicly praised and centrally designed hygiene rules also caused distress for local congregations for being too strict and intimidating. What came through in these conversations were not only concerns to practically implement the rules, but also the top-down instructions and warnings that mosques must not become spreaders and stay out of the limelight. Hence, the self-imposed regulations were at times followed out of fear of internal and external sanctions.

Consequently, mosques affiliated with KRM offered a minimum of social services after the lockdown in May 2020, as social rooms remained closed, community life was on hold, and youth groups were only recently re-starting under heavy regulations from the centre. A local member described the situation in his mosque: “It hurts that many people don’t come anymore. They think it is too exhausting to register, wear masks and bring carpets [for each prayer].” In this context, respondents expressed wider anxieties about inactive mosques which could lead to a reduction in KRM membership and religious practise. “People become complacent,” “lose their *din* [religion]” and “get used to be in front of the laptop in their pyjamas.” In an almost envious manner, the local DITIB committee member described his fear of losing Muslim youth to Salafi groups: “They are independent, they can decide locally, and they are super good with social media. So, they can offer more to teenagers, who will say ‘our mosque is closed, why not go to their meetings.’ To reinvigorate the membership, he argued that “we have to invest a lot of money in social programs.” Government and security experts already expressed concerns over increasing segregation and radicalisation of Muslim migrants, recommending more online initiatives. Hence mosque committees described the ongoing digitalisation as a first step for more transparent online spaces, which were so far dominated by religious hardliners (Tabti 2020). Some scholars were quick to announce that Covid-19 “has forever changed the way religious institutions function, with Zoom-mediated religious sermons and practices” (Sachedina 2021). However, smaller mosques were lagging behind, only recently introducing basic online programs and predominately offering such services in heritage languages, which have excluded other ethnic groups. [26]

### **Ramadan, Shopping Malls, and a Court Decision**

After Easter and prior to Ramadan 2020, associations within KRM in my research had to deal with internal tensions accompanying the question when to reopen mosques. A ZMD interviewee recalled that “it was a real achievement to keep the burgeoning dissent under control,” suggesting the difficulty to communicate restraint to congregations. A female committee member of a local mosque noted that “some members from the first generation became a bit pushy, insisting that they are coming to the mosque, saying ‘what shall we do at home?’ or ‘I don’t have Corona.’ It was the first time in 15 years that my own grandparents did not go to Turkey for Ramadan.” While some members were influenced by Turkey’s hesitancy to reopen, others criticised that shops were open again in Germany, but religious life was still restricted. The grassroots pressure stemmed partially from a desire to recreate normality in particular around [27]

Ramadan. The ZMD member described the sentiment, where “Ramadan without the mosque can’t happen.” He also linked it to the ongoing “realpolitik” from assertive local mosque chairmen and over-confident regional actors intending to prove that “they can do it,” thereby framing KRM leaders as “cowards,” who “boycott local congregations.” Among those who attempted to open was the conviction that through the implementation of hygiene concepts, normalcy could be re-established. The differencing standpoints between the headquarters and regional level within KRM created a “tense competitive environment.”

The internal tension was further intensified by a judgment of the Federal Constitutional Court on 28 April that mosques, synagogues, churches, and other places of worship can re-open, provided that they have a convincing hygiene policy. The court decision was the result of an emergency appeal by an independent Muslim organisation, the Federal Islamic Union (*Föderale Islamische Union*, FIU),<sup>3</sup> offering legal advocacy in Muslim minority affairs. It was one of the few examples of open resistance against external institutional expectation by German Muslims during the pandemic. KRM interviewees harshly discredited the Muslim group behind the court decision as “maniacs,” “idiots,” and “radicals.” The verdict was largely inconsequential, due to the ongoing opening promises and concessions by Islamic associations and state governments. Locally, however, there were some repercussions, especially when independent mosques acted upon the verdict and started to open up for Friday prayers in early May, ignoring the KRM guidelines. A KRM leader admitted that the verdict caused “some inner Muslim critique... Some people who didn’t know the FIU were happy about it and criticized us. These so-called Islam experts wanted to gain personally from it and show that they are the real custodians of Islam.” In the two weeks between Ramadan and Easter 2020, KRM came under increasing pressure, which accelerated the development of an opening concept for all KRM-affiliated mosques.

[28]

## An Independent Mosque’s Policy During the Pandemic

This section analyses how an independent mosque (IM) in an urban location of Lower Saxony navigated through the pandemic, by employing a more flexible strategy, which was manifested in swift adaptation of government regulations and religious practise, as well as a pragmatic attitude in dealing with risk.<sup>4</sup> Since its inauguration in 2005, IM uses German as language of instruction and is characterised by its multi-ethnic and convert-friendly membership (approximately 300 members). The mosque has also undergone profound changes in recent years, led by German-speaking and self-educated Imams, a younger committee and lay members with professional credentials and degrees. Following the judgment of the Federal Constitutional Court, it has been one of the first mosques in Lower Saxony, which developed a hygiene concept to re-open for the Friday prayer on 8 May 2020, so well before the KRM-affiliated mosques.

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Although DITIB announced the closure on 13 March, IGMG on 14 March and KRM on 15

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3 The Federal Islamic Union in Hanover was launched by two converts in 2017. The Union has undertaken legal action against the niqab ban when driving, defended the right for students to wear a veil on campuses, and started a petition to urge the government to create a “Federal Commissioner for the protection of Muslims and Muslim Life” in the wake of the anti-Islamic terror attack in Hanau, 2020. Critics perceived the court case as an attempt to erode democratic institutions and introduce components of Sharia law through the back door.

4 IM’s name, location and some other details are withheld to ensure anonymity, given the sensitive Covid-19 context and IM’s past experience with the media and state authorities.

March, IM stayed open until 17 March, when the official government lockdown commenced. Prior to that, the mosque consulted scholars at the University of Medina to theologically justify the continuation of mosque activities to its members. One day after the closure, on 18 March, the mosque encouraged supporters to donate money to pay rent and utilities for the following months. The chairman thanked the large “YouTube community” with more than six million viewers from 15 years of online activities. On 19 March, the congregation received instructions how to pray the Friday prayer at home as it became clear that mosques will remain closed in the near future. Within four days after the official closure, IM started to offer extensive online programmes with slogans such as “Netflix is out. Don’t waste your time and get your rewards for free”; information about how to behave as a Muslim during the pandemic; and motivational videos entitled “what do winners do during an enforced break.” During the lockdown, there was more time to “cut and edit video material... [and] clicks were naturally much higher, as people stayed at home,” according to a committee member.

Moreover, the lockdown offered IM an opportunity for new forms of *dawah* (proselytising through Islamic education). From early April, the mosque saw an unprecedented number of “Skype-conversions,” as noted by its leader: “Sometimes up to three per day... mostly teenagers between 17 and 19 years, but not exclusively.” He explained it by the fact that people were less distracted during the lockdown and had more time to think about the “purpose of life.” The chairman further explained that “we lost our pre-Corona hesitancy regarding intimate acts such as online *shadadas* [creeds] or virtual weddings and became more adventurous in that compartment.” Soon, IM offered online spaces for pre-wedding meetings that were supervised by Imams or committee members. [31]

### Swift Opening

While member associations within KRM debated about hygiene and safety concepts, eventually deciding for a gradual opening strategy initially excluding evening and Friday prayers, some smaller mosques, such as the discussed IM, opened for all prayers, including the Friday prayer, already in early May. On 6 May, IM published a hygiene concept, explaining the legal framework for its opening, limiting the number of people attending prayers, and implementing hygiene and distancing regulations. For instance, masks were recommended, but, similar to churches, not made compulsory. The committee prepared designated prayer spots for each attendee, pioneered an advanced online registration system with three different time slots for the Friday prayer, and provided an induction video, showing how to sign up online. Children and women (for whom the mosque visit is not compulsory) were not allowed to attend. After the first successful Friday prayer on 8 May, a relieved chairman noted that [32]

we are so happy that we could pull it off [...] DITIB and IGMG decided not to do it [...] Their mosques don’t have the same autonomy [*Handlungsspielraum*] as we do. They have voluntarily agreed to much stricter rules: No toilette use, no *wudu* [ritual washing], obligatory masks, and fewer prayers. But we didn’t prohibit ourselves from having this compulsory prayer, especially since it is legally allowed by the government. [33]

The chairman explained the rationale for reopening despite KRM’s decision: “When the state allows to fulfil our religious duty such as the Friday prayer, we can’t be more cautious as it is required from us by law. We have a responsibly in front of Allah to fulfil this duty.” There [34]



was a sense of pride to have managed the opening safely before everyone else. Within the congregation, there was a feeling of gratitude to the committee to reopen as soon as possible. As a young attendee summarised his emotions, “when the mosque was opened again, it was the best time of my life. It was like an awakening [*Erweckung*]. Being back in the mosque was incredible. Praying at home alone felt numb and depressing.”

After the initial opening phase, all members were encouraged to attend mosque events in person. One mosque message said in June 2020, “during your presence in the mosque, angels will pray for your forgiveness [...] Pure happiness is waiting in the sunnah mosque for you [...] The reward for coming to the mosque with pure intention is like going to *hajj*.” In addition to its regular congregation, the mosque attracted visitors from across Germany. Waiting for the third Friday prayer outside IM, one attendee from another city noted that “watching an online video is not the same as visiting a mosque.” **By June 2020, IM was fully operational, including weekend programmes, youth education, evening seminars, Islamic information stalls, and sport events with teenagers. The swift restart can partially be explained by the financial model of the mosque having a higher reliance on donations, compared to state supported associations like DITIB and a mosque committee led by confident converts and German born Muslims, asserting their constitutional rights. In addition, IM emphasised on *dawah*, as noted by a committee member, may explain the swift opening:** “We are happy about every day where we can do *dawah* [...] and if it ever comes to an end, we can say that we had a beautiful time. Fear is a bad consultant.”

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Although often seen as completely autonomous, IM relied on outside assistance by a Muslim advocacy group with “very good lawyers” to navigate through rule changes and updates in the pandemic. This legal assistance allowed IM to react and adjust to new regulations within—at times—a couple of hours, which I observed, when a new face mask rule was introduced in Lower Saxony during the beginning of the second wave of the pandemic. I was in the mosque for an evening talk with 25 attendees on 14 October, when government rules were tightened. Wearing masks indoors became compulsory including for Imams. Being informed of the new hygiene rule, IM installed a plastic window in front of the speaker to comply and ensure the safety of the mosque. Prior to the event, the chairman drove 60 kilometres to find a suitable manufacturer for the protective device. Imams with masks were regarded as “unattractive,” diminishing the quality and appeal of online streams and videos. For the Friday prayer on 16 October, the committee hung up the plastic window from the ceiling, so that the Imam could deliver the sermon, while standing on the *manabir* (pulpit). This way, due to their flexible approach, IM was able to locally respond to changing circumstances.

[36]

## Rumours and Compliance

Earlier, I demonstrated that KRM leaders were concerned about and monitored the dissemination of conspiracy theories and deviant online behaviour within local congregations, reminding local chairmen on their public responsibilities. On the contrary, IM followed a *laissez-faire* approach in dealing with critical voices and did not restrain their members to express their concerns online and in person. In early February 2020, Covid-19 was often described on Muslim internet forums as a divine punishment of China for the mistreatment of Muslims. Similar opinions circulated also in an IM online space: “China says Islam is a disease, now China became sick. First, they isolated the Uyghurs, now they are isolated.” In March, an online flyer appeared, which parodied the AFD, Germany’s far right party, saying “no handshakes; avoid parties and sex outside of marriage; wash hands, face and nose five times a day; follow Islamic

[37]

hygiene rules; maintain unity; *inshallah*, the AFD.” Furthermore, wider fears of militarisation and vaccine enforcement was discussed while the committee supported an online petition against vaccine laws, which was signed by more than half a million people at that time.

However, during my fieldwork, I also participated in nuanced and critical discussions among IM members with various standpoints. In a conversation over lunch, a student suddenly criticised another IM member for showing us a video, mocking the president of the Robert Koch Institute: “We should not trivialise them [scientists] and should take their work seriously.” Although IM would not restrict the dissemination of rumours in online spaces and discussions, the committee and members were compliant of health regulations, communicating the implementation and decision-making process to the congregation. Anthropologists have shown that rumours and denial are often not about the pandemic per se, but about notions of fairness and tense relations with state institutions (Enria 2016). This may lead to opposing views but does not change the overall compliance within a crisis situation, which was acknowledged within the local health department by approving IM’s concise hygiene concept in early May.

Although the IM aimed to open as soon as possible after the first lockdown, the committee invested substantive energy in reminding the congregation to follow the rules, mentioning government fines of 25000 Euros and permanent mosque closures. As an IM Imam put it, “Let’s not donate this money to the government, but invest it instead in our *dawah* work.” Before the sermons and prayers, office bearers went through the prayer hall, occasionally instructing people that “you can’t sit like that.” The chairman explained to the audience that it is his duty to keep the mosque running for which he will “answer during judgment day.” IM’s balanced approach was also apparent during Ramadan. Although legally permissible, the committee decided against the nightly *tarawih* recitations in the mosque. The chairman explained the decision: “It is not compulsory to carry it out in the mosque. We realized that it will be a huge challenge to organize, because of the combination of *iftar* [the evening meal to end the daily fast] and recitation [...] In Corona times, we can’t have collective food, so you have to eat at home, and rush to *tarawih*. Many would not make it in time to the [nightly] *Isha* prayer... There would be too much stress and uncertainty for our members.” These health concerns and ethical considerations indicate a pragmatic desire to compromise by IM, which goes against the dogmatic portrayal of autonomous mosque communities by KRM.

## Conclusion

This article used insights from the agency perspective within organisational sociology to study the interplay between external institutional expectations regarding Muslim minorities and internal discussions over the centralised and autonomous strategies within local mosques and Islamic associations. Pandemic related responses by the Coordination Council for Muslims and the independent mosque in Lower Saxony resulted in various strategies, internal tensions, and unexpected partnerships. Having investigated different responses of established Islamic authorities and an autonomous mosque, the empirical discussion revealed a variety of approaches pursued by Muslim leaders and local congregations, which goes against the dichotomy presenting mosques as either entirely compliant or fully opposing the integration.

In the pandemic, we did not see the kind of polarization that was witnessed in the post-9/11 context in Germany or the USA, as mosque communities were rarely accused for transgressions or unconstitutional behaviour. Some commentators already assumed a “shift in gover-

nance and modes of consensus-building,” where public perception of Muslims have become more accepting (GhaneaBassiri 2020). Early survey data from Germany shows that intolerance against minorities has not increased during the pandemic, partially due to proactive government responses (Drouhot et al. 2021) and, perhaps, the high rate of mosque compliance. An increase in attacks on Muslims and mosques in Germany, despite lockdown measures confirms, however, assumptions within older scholarship that crisis and uncertainty lead to lower acceptance of diversity and anti-minority assertions (Inglehart and Baker 2000).<sup>5</sup> The impact of Covid-19 on social cohesion may be too early to predict but it has brought out pragmatic responses and effective crisis management by mosques and associations. Without the internal control and compliance by the Coordination Council for Muslims, conservative politicians and segments within the media may have instrumentalised the situation, which was briefly seen during the beginning of Ramadan in 2020 and in the international context. This strategy also caused internal resistance by members and was dealt with in backstage negotiations, which reflects the concept decoupling within organisational sociology.

Moreover, whether financial hardships faced by mosque communities could lead to further institutionalisation of Islam in Germany, a reduction of organisational ties with Islamic authorities abroad, and decentralization through mosque fusions, and departures of local communities from Islamic associations remains to be seen. In particular, the often-criticized transnational ties of migrant communities have actually played a constructive role in pandemic-related governance, serving as buffer against rumours and internal resistance. Insights from organizational sociology and medical anthropology with its focus on complex histories, external policy demands, and internal membership interests can be beneficial for future research along those lines.

[42]

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