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German politicians propose a ‘religion tax’ for Muslims to counter extremism

By [Rick Noack](#)

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BERLIN — When Germans file their annual tax returns, religion matters a great deal. If you’re Catholic, tax authorities will likely collect an income tax surcharge of about 10 percent on behalf of your local church. The same applies to most Protestants.

The tax applies to almost all baptized Christians, and church representatives say that the state-enforced payments are crucial in financing cemeteries and community work.

So far, practicing Muslims have been excluded from that rule, but some leading members of the German government’s coalition parties appear determined to change that. Despite criticism from some Muslim communities, they maintain that a state-collected tax for all Muslims would help to boost moderate interpretations of Islam and counter the appeal of wealthy foreign donors who promote more radical interpretations.

“Besides Qatar and the [United Arab Emirates], what we’re mostly concerned about in the [Persian] Gulf region is Saudi Arabia,”

Thorsten Frei, deputy head of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union party and the Christian Social Union in parliament, told The Washington Post. Frei cited federal statistics showing that the vast majority of German Islamic State members are considered to be part of the Salafi movement, which is being promoted by Saudi Arabia. "We need to make sure that Islam in Germany emancipates itself from foreign influences," said Frei.

Such deliberate government-mandated interference would be unheard of in countries where religion and state are more clearly separated. "When you explain this to Americans, they think you're crazy," said Aiman Mazyek, chairman of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany, which serves as an umbrella organization for some communities. But in Germany, where the leading party carries the word "Christian" in its name, state and religion have always been more closely intertwined than in many other Western nations.

Top officials have made no secret of their recent plans to actively promote moderate interpretations of Islam. Germany's Interior Minister, Horst Seehofer, vowed last month to stop "foreign interference" in German Muslim communities.

The German government is now planning to force foreign state donors to make their financial contributions to German Muslim communities transparent, according to a report by the Süddeutsche Zeitung newspaper and German public television. The report indicated that the measures were designed to target Kuwait and Qatar, among countries known to make large contributions to foreign Muslim communities.

The primary focus, however, appears to be on Saudi Arabia. Germany and Saudi Arabia have clashed on numerous fronts in recent months, and Merkel was the first world leader who eventually halted arms sales to Riyadh after the killing of Washington Post contributing columnist Jamal Khashoggi. The [CIA has concluded](#) that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered the Oct. 2 killing of Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul.

But Saudi practices had drawn the scrutiny of German politicians and intelligence services far earlier. The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen has cost thousands of lives. In Germany, intelligence services reportedly warned as early as 2015 that money from Arab states of the Persian Gulf was being used to radicalize some of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who entered Germany that year.

A representative of the Saudi Embassy in Berlin said Friday he was unable to comment on the reports, but Saudi Arabia has rejected similar accusations in the past.

Some representatives for Muslim communities similarly argue that the vast majority of their funding comes from domestic donations, rather than from foreign contributions. “But it really depends on the community we’re talking about,” said Islamic scholar Lamya Kaddor.

Turkey’s payments to Imams who work with the so-called Dittib community, for instance, constitute a notable foreign influence. Kaddor said she believes that forcing foreign donors to reveal their contributions would be a good move, but she thinks that a tax would hamper more promising efforts.

“Muslim communities are quite dispersed, which is natural given that, unlike in the Catholic Church, there is no leader in Islam,” Kaddor said. That would make the implementation of a mosque tax far more difficult than the distribution of money collected on behalf of the Catholic Church, for instance. So far, most Muslim communities lack the necessary legal status to receive taxpayers’ money, and politicians who back the proposal say that it is up to those communities to fulfill the criteria.

There is also disagreement over whether any such system would have to be mandatory, as proposed by conservative lawmaker Frei and others. Many Muslims already donate 2.5 percent of their income that is not spent on living costs to people in need, although those contributions are not being monitored by their communities.

Aiman Mazyek of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany said the government “should not help out financially, but in terms of providing the administrative means.” For some, however, even that goes too far.

“As a Muslim, I’m opposed to the idea of the government determining how I spend my money,” said Kaddor. “It’s none of the government’s business.”