

Germany eyes mosque tax to fund Muslim groups

by [Tom Heneghan](#) in the [June 8, 2016](#) issue

In Germany, some politicians see taxing Muslims as a strategy to keep them from becoming radicalized. Some Muslim leaders think it might be a good idea, too.

The question is how to limit the influence of Muslim countries that finance mosques and provide foreign-born imams for their congregations. Many of those imams do not speak German, French, or other European languages, and their preaching can range from traditionally conservative to radically anti-Western.

The standard-bearer for this unexpected idea is a politician from the Christian Social Union, a party known for wanting to keep Muslim immigrants from pouring in to the traditionally Catholic southern state of Bavaria, where the party operates.

Alexander Radwan, a Catholic first-term member of the German parliament, is the son of an Egyptian Christian who moved to Germany and married a Bavarian. Radwan's contact with the Arab world is enough to make him one of the CSU's few politicians familiar with Islam.

On the German political spectrum, the CSU is just to the left of the Alternative for Germany party, which ended its first national convention on May 1, approving a party platform that says "Islam does not belong to Germany" and calling for a ban on minarets and full-face veils.

The CSU's no. 2 man, Andreas Scheuer, proposed that Berlin ban all foreign financing for mosques in Germany, as neighboring Austria did last year.

Yet while believers contribute to their mosques, many Muslims in Europe are not rich and many congregations are scraping by.

"If we stop all financing from abroad, we naturally have to make it possible for Islamic life to get sufficient finances here," Radwan told Munich's daily *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*.

Catholics and Protestants have a church tax to help finance their congregations, he argued, so why not a mosque tax for Muslims?

Germany taxes registered church members when they file their annual tax returns, charging a premium of 8 percent to 9 percent of what they owe the state. Tax authorities then redistribute the sums—usually somewhere around 2,000 euros (\$2,300) for a white-collar taxpayer—to the taxpayer's church.

Creating a mosque tax for Germany's 4 million Muslims, who make up about 5 percent of the population, would tap a broad base of contributions that could replace foreign funds.

It would require mosque associations to be registered as religious institutions. Currently only two small Muslim groups have official recognition.

This proposal would be a setback to Turkey's mosque network in Germany, called DITIB, which runs about 900 mosques and employs 970 imams. Their ultimate boss is the Religious Affairs Ministry in Ankara, which comes under the control of Turkey's increasingly autocratic president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He counts Turkish voters abroad as an important bloc and occasionally campaigns in Germany.

Cem Özdemir, a German-born ethnic Turk who is leader of Alliance '90/ The Greens party, calls the Turkish mosques in his country "the long arm of Erdogan" which increasingly works to maintain support for him in the Turkish diaspora.

Bekir Alboga, DITIB secretary-general, flatly rejected the mosque tax proposal.

Gulf financing for Arabic-speaking mosques and the tiny but growing hard-line Salafi movement would also be curtailed under the new tax.

Raed Saleh, the Palestinian-born Berlin state assembly whip for the Social Democrats, said a mosque tax was needed to minimize foreign influence.

The independent Turkish Congregation in Germany also welcomed Radwan's idea.

"It's an exciting new way to finance religious work," said Gökay Sofuoglu, TGD chairman. "But first we have to figure out who pays."

His comment points to a problem facing the project. Christians pay church tax if they are registered as baptized, but they can get out of paying by declaring to their local tax authority that they have left their church.

But there is no official way to leave Islam. There are many who stop practicing or are only occasional mosque-goers, but few declare themselves atheists or agnostics.

Muslims who publicly renounce the religion are considered in some Islamic countries to be apostates who deserve the death sentence. That fact creates a risk for some Germans who are not practicing Muslims should they wish to avoid a mosque tax.

It would also be difficult for Germany to ban all foreign funds coming into the country while its own churches send money to endangered Christian communities in the Middle East.

Still, Sofuoglu is ready to discuss the idea. Finding a way to have Islam recognized, even at the price of having to pay a tax to help finance mosques, he said, “would be pioneering work.” —Religion News Service

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