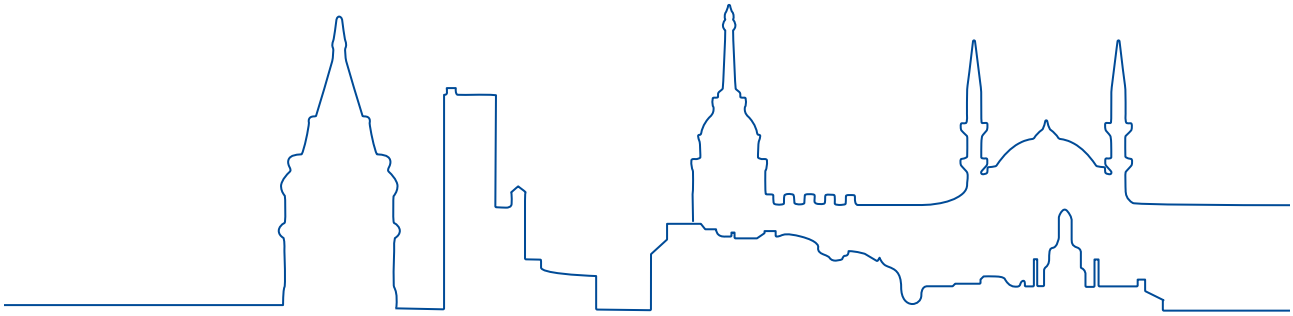


IPC-MERCATOR COMMENTARY April 2026

THE PROMISE AND LIMITS OF GERMANY'S *ISLAMKOLLEG*

Burcu Karakaş, 2025/26 Mercator-IPC Fellow at IPC

When Germany set out to train imams domestically, it was intervening in one of the most sensitive fault lines of its integration debate: The relationship between state and religion.

Islamic theology departments were established at German universities following recommendations by the German Council of Science and Humanities in 2010. The establishment of the *Islamkolleg* was, therefore, no coincidence. Based in Osnabrück and set up as a registered association to train imams, the *Islamkolleg* is funded by the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Science and Culture of Lower Saxony.

Its foundation reflects both an institutional effort and a broader policy objective: to foster forms of Islamic education in Germany that are locally grounded and less dependent on external influence. "The Federal Government has set itself the goal of promoting, under the auspices of the German Islam Conference, training for imams and other religious staff in Muslim congregations in Germany that is autonomous and independent of foreign influence," said Dr. Markus Kerber, former State Secretary at the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, at the *Islamkolleg*'s opening ceremony. According to Kerber, the training program marked a key milestone in achieving this goal and is "self-confidently German and Islamic in the spirit of an Islam rooted in German society."[1]

The *Islamkolleg*'s two-year training program is conducted entirely in German. Applicants are required to hold a bachelor's degree in Islamic theology or an equivalent qualification. Students engage not only with Islamic jurisprudence across different schools of thought but also with German history, constitutional law, and anti-Semitism. While the program initially had many Turkish-origin students, the majority are now non-Turkish Muslims from various backgrounds, such as Afghan, Syrian, and Moroccan.

At its core, the *Islamkolleg* is designed to solve a long-standing structural problem. For decades, Germany relied heavily on foreign-trained imams, particularly from the Turkish Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği*, DITIB), while lacking a comprehensive domestic system of religious training. Yet its significance lies less in its curriculum than in its institutional logic.

Turkey has historically invested heavily in maintaining ties with its diaspora. Larger organizations such as DITIB or Islamic Community Millî Görüş (*Islamischen Gemeinschaft Millî Görüş*, IGMG) have long maintained their own training pipelines. However,

IPC | ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER
SABANCI UNIVERSITY
STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE

The interpretations and conclusions made in this paper belong solely to the author and do not reflect IPC's official position.

ISBN: 978-625-92001-6-3

other countries, such as Morocco, Tunisia, or Bosnia, have provided far less structured support to their communities in Germany. The *Islamkolleg* is mostly conceived as a support structure for smaller Muslim communities that lack the financial and organizational capacity to train their own religious personnel. For these groups, the *Islamkolleg* offers not only training but also a form of institutional recognition.

An official I spoke with at the *Islamkolleg* emphasized that the federal state does not intervene in the content of the training, with modules designed independently by instructors. Yet it can be argued that the broader framework—including funding, institutional design, and political expectations—is shaped by the German state. This reflects a paradox in Germany's governance of religion. While the constitution prohibits direct state control over religious affairs, it allows indirect forms of support and steering.

The *Islamkolleg* training programs have faced significant criticism for being a "top-down state initiative" rather than a "community-led" one. Some argue that the state's approach was fundamentally flawed: Rather than supporting specific communities in training their own imams based on their unique needs, the federal state unilaterally decided on a model and then sought out "players" to include, which led to a confusing and fragmented process.

Critics told me that the state's role in initiating and funding the *Islamkolleg* reverses the natural order of religious institutionalization. Rather than emerging organically from community demand, the initiative was designed from above, with the state effectively "seeking actors" to populate it. This top-down approach risks creating a structure that is formally inclusive but not fully embedded within the lived realities of Muslim communities.

Beyond specific groups, the *Islamkolleg* aims to educate a general pool of imams, preachers, and social caretakers that any mosque association can hire. However, there is one point that is overlooked: Employment outcomes for graduates are uneven, partly because smaller mosque associations often lack the resources to hire professionally trained staff, while larger organizations such as DITIB or IGMG tend to prioritize employing individuals trained within their own systems.

The *Islamkolleg* is best understood as a transitional experiment. It accelerates a process that has been unfolding since the mid-2000s, particularly through the German Islam Conference and subsequent efforts to institutionalize Islam within the state framework. But it also exposes the limits of this approach. Religious authority cannot simply be designed and implemented. It must be recognized and internalized by the communities it seeks to serve. Between diversity and standardization, the training of imams becomes a lens through which the unfinished story of Islam in Germany continues to unfold.

Notes

1 "Islamkolleg in Osnabrück celebrates start of training," German Islam Conference, June 18, 2021, https://www.deutsche-islam-konferenz.de/SharedDocs/Meldungen/EN/ImDialog/ikd-festakt.html?nn=598848.