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ARTICLE

Arrival of legal Salafism and struggle for recognition in Germany—reflection and adaptation processes within the German da'wa movement between 2001 and 2022

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Abstract

The article investigates the transformation within a specific branch of German Salafism from a publicly-assertive *da'wa* (proselytizing) to a politically accommodating and legal advocacy movement. In doing so, a process analysis that focuses on internal and reflexive narrations among Salafi leaders and lay members, through a three year-long mosque-based ethnography (2018–2021) and textual analysis (2008–2022), is employed. Previous studies focused predominately on the "Salafi growth phase" (2005–2015) in Germany that is associated with the attraction of exclusive group boundaries, flat hierarchies and informal networks. Less research exists on the current "decline phase", which has commenced a re-orientation and critical reflection on past strategies and new ways of civic engagement and legal pragmatism. By exploring this new phase, the article integrates a longitudinal dimension into conventional research protocols on contemporary Salafism. The paper concludes with a discussion on the converging struggles for recognition among Muslim and other religious minorities in Europe, while linking these transformations to domestic opportunity structures rather than transnational reconfigurations of so-called "global Salafism".

Keywords: Salafism; legal pragmatism; political accommodation; Islam in Germany; longitudinal qualitative research

Introduction

In October 2020, Dawood, one of Germany's most recognized Salafi speakers, gave the Friday sermon (*khutba*) in the mosque of the "German Islamic Institute" *("Deutsche Islam Institut")* (DII).[1] The content reflected upon a period of the movement between 2005 and 2015, which is known as domestic growth phase of German Salafism—characterized by rapid expansion through assertive open-air events, publicly-staged mass conversions, Qur'an dissemination campaigns in city centers, and establishing Islamic education centers and mosques (Horst, 2013; Steinberg,

2013; Wiedl, 2017). Dawood recalled that "every week, we were giving talks in different mosques, hired event halls, and held huge public functions […] So many people participated in our street *da'wa*." His sense of hurt and nostalgia over the current decline of the publicly assertive *da'wa* movement was tangible in the mosque. Some DII attendees however saw the charismatic, person-centric and assertive approach without pan-Islamic and interreligious allies as detrimental, indicating a wish for sustained emphasis on internal educational activities and a certain degree of political and social accommodation. Around the same time, DII's chairman ask the congregation to support the recently founded, Salafi organization, *Föderale Islamische Union* (FIU, Federal Islamic Union). The FIU has undertaken legal action against the *niqab* ban while driving and defended the right to wear a veil on university campuses. It also initiated a petition (with more than 50,000 signatures) to urge the government to appoint a "Federal Commissioner for the Protection of Muslims and Muslim Life" in the wake of the 2020 anti-Muslim terror attack in the city of Hanau. In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the FIU gained nation-wide attention, due to a successful law suit, in which Germany's Federal Constitutional Court lifted the ban on Friday prayers and all other religious congregations (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2020). The FIU released an explanatory video on 30 April 2020, which spoke of a "momentous victory at the Federal Constitutional Court. A victory for the right of religious freedom and all religions in Germany" (Föderale Islamische Union, 2020*a*).

Through the case studies of DII and FIU, this article investigates the changing nature of German Salafism from a highly informal, network-based, and publicly assertive *da'wa* (proselytizing through Islamic education) movement to a more accommodating and professional manifestation. By inquiring how Salafi actors institutionalize and cooperate with others, the empirical discussion sheds light on the converging struggles for recognition among Muslim and other religious minorities in Europe, while linking these ongoing transformation to domestic opportunity structures and internal reflection processes. Researching the movement's adaptability in different national contexts, Bano (2021, 16–17) argues that new impulses within Salafism are coming from Europe or the US, due to "self-reflection by prominent Salafi scholars", "a great deal of [political] pragmatism" and new visions "beyond narrow group interests." Recent scholarship on Salafism in Germany stressed the lack of and the need for qualitative and processual research methods to study transformations, inner tensions and ambivalences over time and avoid re-producing monolithic portrayals of the movement (Hummel et al., 2016; Damir-Geilsdorf and Menzfeld, 2017, 2020).

Informed by these debates on local adaptation, the article employs a process analysis that focuses on internal changes and self-reflexive narrations among Salafi leaders and lay members, through a three year-long DII-based ethnography (between 2018 and 2021). DII provides extensive material of sermons and presentations on various social media channels. I obtained more than 120 transcriptions of audio and video material between 2008 and 2022. A textual analysis was applied to identify recurrent topics and discontinuations, emphasizing on reflection processes, regarding legal pragmatism, civic cooperation, and pan-Islamic unity. Since, its inauguration in the late 2000s, DII played a pioneering role in the development of Salafism in Germany with its educational initiatives, *da'wa* campaigns, and extensive networks

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across Germany. Some leaders were educated and follow the Islamic authorities at the University of Medina. Due to its ambitious educational plans and assertive sermon content, DII is monitored by security agencies. However, with its institutional history of adaptation and resilience and recent support of and cooperation with FIU, DII constitutes an ideal case to investigate the changing nature of German Salafism. DII invites different Salafi speakers and adherends across Germany on a regular basis, including weekend programs and runs Islamic information stalls. During events and gatherings, which I attended, several generations of Salafi activists came together and exchanged experiences. Currently, DII has 300 members and several million views on different social media platforms. Its committee has undergone profound changes in recent years with its prominent and charismatic founders partially replaced by younger activists with professional credentials such as economic consultants, engineers, teachers, and university students as well as an active mosque-based women group. Since 2018, I engaged 12 interlocutors among whom were long standing activists of the Salafi *da'wa* movement across Germany. In conversation with these pioneers, I stressed my objective in researching reflection processes and insider perspectives *("Binnenperspektiven")* on their *da'wa* work over the past 20 years. Negotiating access and building rapport within securitized (Salafi) communities are recurring challenges for field researchers (Damir-Geilsdorf and Menzfeld, 2020; Emmerich, 2020*a*). In 2017, I was introduced to Younes, a DII vice chairman in a Turkish Sufi mosque. Younes occasionally assisted the largely working class and second generation dominated mosque in his hometown with administrative tasks. Although mosque members expressed collective reservation towards Salafism and DII in particular, the long standing Salafi activist with local roots and family ties was held in high esteem. Younes, who became my initial gatekeeper, has been part of the Salafi *da'wa* for over 15 years. In the past, he fiercely argued with the local *hoca* (imam), often leaving the mosque in disbelieve. His current ability however to assist and pray in his hometown mosque, while managing a prominent Salafi community indicates a high degree of self-reflection, and accommodation, which this investigation sets out to explore.

The article continues with a discussion of Salafism as a transnational and domestic phenomenon and what I mean by "legal Salafism" in Germany, which is at the core of this study. What follows is a brief history of the growth and decline of the movement, before I discuss internal reflection processes and novel responses to the current crisis. This reflection phase, I argue in the final section, has set the stage for the arrival of legal Salafism, which I show through the case study of the FIU and its cooperation with DII. In the conclusion, I critically discuss that segments within one extremely visible Salafi trend in Germany have started to emulate other European Islamic organizations and new religious movements (NRMs) in their struggle for political accommodation and public recognition.

Understanding Salafism in transnational and domestic contexts

Salafism is frequently associated with the Islamic reformists (modernists) Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905) in the 19th century as well as contemporary Sunni reform movements—influenced by the religious

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establishment of Saudi Arabia and vocally opposed to other Islamic traditions (Lauzière, 2010; Griffel, 2016). Salafis, in the latter understanding as contemporary Sunni reformists, promote a return to the practice and reading of the Qur'an and Sunna (literature that prescribes Islamic customs and practices of the Islamic community) that follows a continuous chain of narrations and Islamic practice, which can be traced to the first three generations of the Prophet Muhammad's Companions (*sahaba*) (Roy, 1994; Haykel, 2009; Hegghammer, 2009). Because of their exclusive claim to authenticity, Salafis frequently stress that only the Salafi *aqida* (creed) offers exemption from divine punishment.

The spread of so-called "global Salafism" since the 1970s has been associated with the funding of mosques and religious education from Saudi Arabia (Meijer, 2009). Salafism in Germany—so the rationale—responds to transnational changes that are ongoing in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East (Dantschke, 2014*b*) such as political participation of Salafi actors during the Arab Spring (Said and Fouad, 2014; Lacroix, 2016; Francesco and Fabio, 2017) or the recent social and cultural liberalization in Saudi Arabia (Bano, 2021). However, recent scholarship has questioned this Wahhabi—Salafi nexus, including its unliteral genealogy as a sole outcome by Saudi Arabia's dissemination efforts. Instead, these studies stress the importance of parallel and entangled histories, polycentrism, regional variations and multiple theological, cultural and socio-economic factors that explain the heterodox manifestations across the world (Bruckmayr and Hartung, 2020). Salafism has indeed developed local roots with contextual understandings and pragmatic applications of the Salafi method (*manhaj*) to the everyday challenges of young Muslims in minority contexts (Inge, 2017; Bano, 2018; Emmerich, 2020*b*). The empirical discussion, which links the documented transformations in Germany to domestic opportunity structures rather than transnational reconfigurations of global Salafism and the influence of Saudi Arabia, thereby contributes to the "local turn" within the study of Salafism across the world.

Categories, numbers and legal Salafism in Germany

Contemporary Salafis have been characterized—most prominently by the academic and—at the time—chairman of the US Interagency Intelligence Committee on Terrorism, Wiktorowicz (2006),—as those, who focus on daily practice and *da'wa*, and accept secular governments; those, who advocate for political action to establish an Islamic state; and those, who excommunicate deviants and propagate political violence. Debates on the fluidity and validity of these categories and hybrid identities are ongoing. However, even after several interventions to the Salafi taxonomy (e.g. Wagemakers, 2017, "quietist"; Wiedl, 2017, "mainstream"), the static character of this categorical debate has been relatively persistent. Bruckmayr and Hartung (2020, 139), for instance, question the notion of coherent Salafi actors as "consistent representatives of clear-cut doctrinal camps" and instead focus on their changing, and often incoherent positions within regionally (rather than transnationally) embedded Salafi (and non-Salafi) networks and opportunity structures.

Trying to briefly locate my case study within these contested Salafi categories, DII would broadly fall somewhere between quietist and political Salafi labels. DII actors

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adhere to the Islamic authorities in Saudi Arabia, but also apply such guidance to the German context as a religious minority, supporting civil protests and an increasing engagement with Germany's judiciary. To better describe the changing nature within this segment of German Salafism, I use the notion of "legal pragmatism" in the sense used in my earlier work on the changing nature of Indian Islamists. (Emmerich, 2019, 462). These formally inward-looking actors started to demonstrate knowledge in legal and human rights discourses over the last 30 years, due to generational changes and shifting opportunity structures. In a similar vein, I argue that a segment of German Salafis started to advocate political and constitutional education via dense associational networks and a legal aid organization. Their aim is to develop a rights-based consciousness among supporters, which commenced "a dynamic process of constituting one's understanding of and relationship to the social world through the use of legal conventions and discourses" (McCann, 1994, 7). I call this emerging phenomenon, the arrival of "legal Salafism" in Germany. Legal Salafism should however not be conflated with terms such as "legalistic Salafism" or "legalistic Islamism", which were invented and derogatively employed by the Federal Agency for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (Verfassungsschutz), suggesting a subversive agenda of introducing Sharia components through the backdoor. In the following, I use the term legal Salafism as a counter-narrative to the employed terminology of the Verfassungsschutz and demonstrate that some Salafis accept and engage with the overall (legal) framework of Germany, and do not speak against secularism and liberal democracy. I will come back to this discussion in the conclusion, regarding the paradoxes of political accommodation of Islam in Europe.

With currently more than 11.000 political Salafis, including a small number of Islamic State (IS) supporters, according to the Verfassungsschutz, and a substantially larger yet unknown number of quietist Salafis, who are not officially counted by state authorities, Salafism has been seen as the most dynamic and fastest growing Islamic movement in Germany from 2010 onwards—with at times thirty percent annual growth. Looking at the latest government estimates in 2019 and 2020, the movement has lost its appeal with five to zero percent annual growth (Verfassungsschutz, 2021). However, these frequently cited numbers and estimates have to be treated with caution. Governmental attempts to measure Salafism numerically has severe limitations, because of its narrow focus on organizational affiliations and security-driven agendas, rather than a network-based milieu analysis that captures the fluidity and dynamism of this variegated phenomenon (Hummel and Logvinov, 2014; Hummel et al., 2016; Ceylan and Kiefer, 2018). In addition, given that the majority of Salafis in Germany are neither political nor involved in street- or online-*da'wa*, but tend to live privately, we may assume that the current decline is predominately experienced by the visible and assertive "street *da'wa*" segment such as DII and other political groups, rather than by all Salafi branches and milieus.

Salafism as an academic subject in Germany started in the late 2000s and—similar to the movement itself—experienced an exponential growth (Dantschke, 2007; Becker, 2009; Wiedl, 2012). The existing literature has mainly focused on the "Salafi growth phase" that has been associated with the attraction of exclusive group boundaries, flat hierarchies, and informal networks being conducive for recruitment and collective action. Less research has been conducted on the current "decline phase", which—as the

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subsequent empirical discussion illustrates—commenced a re-orientation and critical reflection of past strategies and new ways of civic engagement and legal pragmatism. By adding the new phase of legal Salafism shaped by "decline" and "reflection", the article integrates a longitudinal dimension into conventional research protocols on contemporary Salafism in Germany (Thomson et al., 2003).

Growth and decline of Salafism in Germany

German Salafism started slow compared to its European neighbors in Britain, France and the Netherlands already consolidated by the 1990s (Amghar, 2007). The literature divides the German movement in three phases namely inception, consolidation and domestic growth (Horst, 2013; Steinberg, 2013; Hummel, 2014; Wiedl, 2017). Although *da'wa* work has been practiced by branches of the Muslim brothers since the 1960s, the inception of the German Salafi movement is linked to established Salafi institutes in the Netherlands in the early 1990s, which had direct links with Saudi Arabia (Steinberg, 2013), and certain German-Moroccan mosques that disseminated Salafi ideas. Since 2002, the consolidation phase began being led by a small number of preachers, who came to Germany for higher education and employment from the Middle East as well as German converts. From 2005 onward, the domestic growth phase commenced, characterized by a dynamic expansion of networks, mosques, learning initiatives, publishing houses, and large-scale public events.

The growth phase was shaped by intergenerational changes and the emergence of a German-speaking generation of Muslims and converts, unleashing enormous energy. In doing so, these predominately young adults asserted their Islamic identity in the public domain in an unprecedented manner and criticized the mono-lingual and mono-ethnic habitus, which prevailed in many local mosques being set up by labor migrants as well as national mosque associations with transnational ties. German Salafis were extremely critical of the hierarchical structures of mosque associations, which they perceived as innovation (*bid'ah*) and interfering with the *da'wa* work of local mosques. Occasionally Salafi activists provided strategic advice on how to take over ethnic mosques through committee elections, boycotts of fees or stealing members. Due to their dualistic worldview and narrow understanding of *tawhid* (oneness of God), Salafis have often declared other Muslim groups and Islamic associations as inauthentic, deviant or outside the fold of Islam entirely (*takfir*). In the German context, this has made Salafis highly unpopular among other Muslim groups and state actors, who perceive them as a barrier to integration (Fouad, 2019). In fact, national mosque associations, which face increasing public scrutiny, have openly criticized Salafi actors, linking them to terrorism and youth radicalization. In addition, Turkish labor migrants in Germany see the emerging Salafi movement as arrogant and elitist, due to its literal understanding of Islam and historical tension with the Ottoman Empire (Frindte et al., 2011). Compared to the centrally-organized mosque associations, the informal network approach and non-hierarchical leadership by Salafis was more conducive to recruit, mobilize bystanders, organize events, set-up websites, and integrate new factions (Wiedl and Becker, 2014; Abou Taam et al., 2016). Such informality omitted bureaucratic hurdles, prosecution and proscription. However, the lack of centralized structures made the movement prone to

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fragmentation and feuds over what constitutes an authentic and righteous Islam (Meijer, 2009). Already from 2008 onwards, German Salafism was characterized by increasing diversity and factionalism with competing groups, mergers, subsequent schisms, and future reunions, due to disputes over the justification of mass *da'wa* campaigns, tension between quietist and politically-minded Salafis, and contested debates on how to respond to the Arab Spring, the war in Syria and the emergence of IS.

Although German authorities monitored the movement since the mid-2000s, intelligence services intensified surveillance and counter-measures from 2011, which had a polarizing effect on Salafi activism and increased its public visibility (Horst, 2013). With increasing media attention, Salafi actors, including DII, started to dominate the public sphere in Germany, despite their relatively small numbers. This was manifested though assertive public relation campaigns, street *da'wa*, staged conversions in city centers, and public prayers or sermons, which directly addressed and provoked politicians, local governments, or competing Islamic traditions. The securitization discourse and media attention around Salafism in the early 2010s has made the movement more noticeable and attractive and thus contributed to its expansion (Thielmann, 2014). Salafi actors such as DII established ambivalent relations with journalists—featured in long-read articles and as guests in talk-shows on national television. These attempts could be partially seen as a genuine effort by a nascent movement to convince an antagonistic public and promote Islam in Germany, albeit with negligible success.

While the majority of German Salafis used democratic means to assert their discontent during the growth phase, a small number went to Syria. Around 2016, state authorities became increasingly more restrictive with bans and imprisonments. Following the proscription of the nation-wide Qur'an dissemination campaign ("*Lies*": German for "read") in 2016 and the Islamic Center in Hildesheim in 2017, due to links to IS as well as other occurrences of violent clashes in Solingen and Bonn, street-*da'wa* driven Salafis started to lose momentum and drastically reduced presence in the public domain. Large scale-events stopped entirely, and street *da'wa* and Islamic information stalls only happened, occasionally. In 2019, Abu Bakr, a founding fathers of the German Salafi movement told me after explaining my research that "the *da'wa* is dead. It was never able to mature. The [movement's] prime time was between 2001 and 2011, but the government killed it, destroyed our material and put mosques on blacklists." The decline is partly a result from counter-extremism programs and correlated with the diminishing influence of and crisis within transnational Salafi centers. Furthermore, local mosques and Islamic associations started to respond with more effective youth programs in German, preventing their own teenagers from joining Salafi groups (Emmerich, 2021). Next to these external factors, the following section shows that the exclusive, charismatic and informal network mobilization, which dominated the Salafi growth phase, is now critically questioned within segments of the movement and paved the road for a new more accommodating manifestation of German Salafism.

Reflection and adaptation during crisis

During the domestic growth phase, Salafis with their charismatic and informal mobilization strategies were less interested in fostering intra- and interfaith relations or

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engaging in political lobbyism. Within the current decline, the article however shows how Salafi leaders and adherends affiliated to DII started to critically reflect on past experiences and mistakes within the German *da'wa* movement, which has created a novel space for the emergence and acceptance of legal Salafism and plans of long-term institution-building. While the consolidation and growth phase was largely defined by an emotional counter-culture with highly mobile youth preachers (Schahbasi, 2009; Dantschke et al., 2011; Herding, 2013; Dantschke, 2014*a*; Gerlach, 2016), these early pioneers have now become 40 years of age and above with families, children and professional commitments.[2] Although adolescent activists continue to join the movement, the current demographic structure consists of various sedentary key actors with several decades experience in grassroots mobilization, event organization and internal and external confrontations. This arguably constitutes a period conducive for contemplation over whether to set up permanent institutions and how to pass on the Salafi *aqida* and *manhaj* to the next generation. De Koning (2019, 94) already showed that Salafis in Amsterdam, who started to use petitions to advance their interests, "clearly thought a great deal about what forms of dissent will be considered acceptable in Dutch society."

DII visitors today may recognize old reminders and symbols from the growth phase such as certain books, authors and publishers, campaign flyers or wall papers. I used these items to ask about the changing stages of DII's *da'wa* work. Rahman, a long-standing activist critically responded in November 2019: "Ten years ago, the *da'wa* was different […] with younger leaders. It was definitely more heated like when we publicly celebrated our expansion plans," which attracted media attention, and led to an official investigation against DII. He then admitted that "90 percent of our projects were destroyed by us [and] not by our opponents." Hassan, another well-known and frequent DII speaker noted in January 2020 that "we did a lot a mistakes during the public *da'wa* phase, but it was an important learning process." Back then, Hassan spoke differently, using emotions such as anger and zeal *("man hat sich in Rage geredet")* on stage. "In these moments, you didn't think too much how you came off." He recalled large scale events in city centers, where he agitated the audience with religious exclamations such as "*takbir*" (speaking loud allah akbar) and "*allah akbar*" (God is Great) or used words such as "*jihad*" or "*kuffar*", albeit aware of the negative connotation in the German public. "Could we not have used other words like 'effort' ['*Anstrengung*'] for '*jihad*' or 'a person of different faith' ['*Andersgläubiger*'] instead of '*kuffar*?'" During the growth phase, however, these public assertions and intended provocations were effective to mobilize and elevated some speakers to celebrity-like figures. Among DII members in my research was an emerging consensus that the emotionalization from 2010 onwards has not been beneficial for the Muslim youth. Especially after some participants from the Qur'an dissemination campaign ("*Lies*") went to Syria, the German *da'wa* was "seriously compromised." During the Friday prayer with 120 attendees in November 2019, a DII imam reflected on the improved and content-based *da'wa* during his sermon, comparing it to public events and protests during the growth phase: "No one cares, if we demonstrate on the street in anger like with the cartoons. In fact, non-Muslims already expect an angry mob, whilst the press will sell these biased images. But if you touch a non-Muslim's heart, he will not buy the tabloid and might even defend

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us in public." Critical reflections within segments of the Salafi movement in Germany regarding the effectiveness of public provocations have been occasionally documented in earlier studies (Damir-Geilsdorf et al., 2018), which is connected to the emergence of legal Salafism in the final section of this article.

Salafi activists during the growth phase were convinced that their informal and person-centric mobilization was enough to establish the movement in Germany. If a project or initiative failed or was outlawed, leaders—so the rationale—only had to come up with the next campaign idea to advance the cause. Such confidence in the person-centric and event-based mobilization has changed by the time I started my fieldwork in 2018. In a personal "cry-for-help" video in 2019, a prominent Salafi speaker and DII affiliate stressed that he lost most of his team, due to state-led counter measures. He then complained about those "passive Muslims" who constantly demand more high-quality *da'wa* content, which he felt unable to deliver. A supporter empathically responded to him: "I understand your pain and disappointment […] At some point you have to give up, especially when everything depends on one person […] there will be better times again, *inshallah*."

The Salafi growth phase has been defined by sharp boundary framing against other Muslims and non-Muslims.[3] During the current decline, we now see reflections on such boundary work. Earlier, I mentioned the negative reputation of Salafis among other Muslim groups, which is detrimental to find political and religious allies or to set up lasting Islamic infrastructures. DII respondents critically described the Salafi *da'wa* as the "weakest structural movement of all" or the notion of a coherent Salafi movement as a "myth". A senior Salafi activists and—by now—advocate for unity recalled in September 2018 that "a couple of years ago, we had a meeting with the leading figures of the German *Salafiyya*, but it ended up in more in-fighting." The main dispute was whether public events are adequate means for *da'wa* but the meeting became antagonistic whereby some participants called each other "traitors of Islam." The activist admitted: "What is missing from the German *Salafiyya*, is a culture of accepting disagreement." More recently, veteran preachers in my fieldwork started to reflect on their relations with other Muslim groups. In one instance, a speaker noted that "our *manhaj* or evidence-based methods, which are a great entry point to Islam, do not always speak to the heart, but lead to instant judgment like if someone goes to hell or not." He admitted that Sufis have dealt with that in a much more elegant way, focusing on the emotional needs of people, which ensures long-term commitment. In this context, he referred to the phenomena of the "Salafi burn-out," which he discussed in his sermons and how Salafis may learn from Sufis.

During a DII weekend seminar in September 2018, around fifty attendees listen to Murat, another Salafi pioneer, who joined the movement in 2002. He has been inactive for several years and has two children, now. In a venerating manner, mosque attendees approached him after his talk, and reminisced over the growth phase. Although remembering the time, fondly, Murat reflected openly about his own impatience and rigidity during that time: "Muslims should refrain from pushing other Muslims to become more pious. When you push someone, they might get off the path, entirely." He then recalled a male Salafi group in his hometown, which lived in total isolation, as they were afraid to run into unveiled women on the street.

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"They would only go to the mosque, if someone would pick them up by car. Such practices are not sustainable." Comparing Islamic practices to "the slow pace of the elephant," Murat reminded the audience, that "we are all imperfect. There were even *sahaba*, who drank alcohol." The trend of accommodating differences and disagreements was also expressed during the COVID-19 pandemic in October 2021, when Bilal, a Salafi speakers widely associated with rigid boundary framing against other Muslim groups, publicly defended Turkish Sufi mosques, which were raided and accused of subsidy fraud. Bilal, who faced similar accusation five months earlier, rebuked those Salafis, "who were happy that some mosques were closed due to the charges […] You don't have to agree with all that what other [Islamic] traditions are doing, but we have to keep our hearts united."

In a conversation with two DII members in 2019, who were part of the growth phase, Hakim contextualized this period of his life: "The focus was a lot on converts and how to quickly expand, but we neglected the *adab* [social and religious etiquette] of our own brothers and sisters. We are trying to make up for this, now, focusing more on self-improvement and less on expressing public grief." Muhammad agrees as he prefers the current "intellectual and calm seminar style." DII's online *da'wa* has changed over the last five years with high-quality videos, and creative and entertaining green-screen productions—edited by volunteers and distributed on different social media platforms. While Salafi actors have always used the virtual space, arguably, more effectively than other Muslim communities in Germany, the content during the growth phase has been markedly different with ad-hoc filming of large crowds and congregational scenes with assertive religious chanting. The privacy of the audience during that time was often breached with faces (including children), identifiable. Such privacy concerns are taken more seriously in the decline phase, while the content engages less with political grievances or media biases, and instead provides practical (and entertaining) religious guidance for Muslims in a minority context. Mosque members are instructed not to speak to journalists, while well-known Salafi speakers are not publicly announced to avoid scrutiny. Media attention has decreased substantially, which partially reflects the decline and inward-looking trend of the movement, but also the shifting "German Islam focus" towards Turkish mosques and national associations, mirroring the current tension between Germany and Turkey. This new inward-looking phase has let some Salafi pioneers such as Dawood (see Introduction), who expressed disappointment and hurt over the decline in the past, to re-interpret the current situation: In August 2021, Dawood ask me, rhetorically, "Did we really do more around 2011? It was certainly different with more media provocations. We also responded much more, publicly. Now, we do better online *da'wa*. Did you see? We just became a TikTok sensation," referring to a short clip with several million likes. The next section demonstrates that the current reflection phase and internal changes within DII were an essential prerequisite for the arrival and acceptance of legal Salafism.

Legal Salafism and the federal Islamic union

Although, German Salafis disproved of political formalization and long-term legal strategies during the growth phase,[4] the following discussion suggests that the

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ongoing reflection and reconfiguration phase mirrors Weber's (1978) notion of the routinization of charismatic leadership, indicating an institutionalization process and transition towards bureaucratic organization within segments of the Salafi movement. This development requires a closer look, given that the movement has been predominately characterized through rigid boundaries and informality.

In doing so, I introduce the FIU, before I illustrate the wider support and entanglement with Salafis such as DII. According to its website, FIU had 4439 members in October 2022.[5] It was launched by two Muslim converts, Marcel Krass and Dennis Rathkamp in Hannover, 2017. Both have been active and well-connected in the visible Salafi *da'wa* movement during the growth phase from the mid-2000s. Their internal reputation and networks were essential, when embarking upon a legal Salafism endeavor within a movement that is traditionally suspicions of formal structures and cooperation with non-Salafi and state actors. In an interview on FIU's social media channel, Rathkamp looked back and critically remarked that during the Salafi growth phase, "there was no real lobby ('*Interessenvertretung*')… [but] a lot of *da'wa* and [Islamic] seminars" (Föderale Islamische Union, 2020*b*) However, for him, the movement, which was built largely on charisma and emotions, would face difficulties in the long-run.

In the beginning, the FIU encountered internal challenges to generate trust and illustrate how their work is different from the existing mosque umbrella platforms. Legal Salafism and political accommodation may be internally contested as it produces "fear among Salafis that they will become much easier to co-opt through the normal channels of political representations, […] forced to make compromises and 'dilute' Islam" (de Koning, 2019, 88). Rathkamp hence differentiated between FIU and "the large [Islamic] associations [which] are not doing enough for the grassroots, but are only interested in pleasing the political establishment, but not the needs of common Muslims" (Föderale Islamische Union, 2020*b*). Among leaders and members of FIU and DII was a belief that ethnic mosques fear government sanctions, due to intimidation and memories from heritage countries such as Turkey, Egypt and Morocco, where mosques have been closed, arbitrarily. Karim, a senior FIU member noted in 2018 that "In Germany, one phone call by the police to inquiry about a speaker will be sufficient for a mosque [chairman] to have a panic attack." Hence, FIU's rationale is that German converts with their innate trust in court procedures are crucial for the legal turn. Karim argued further that "as long as you are within the limits of the *Strafgesetzbuch* [German penal code], converts know nothing can happen to you."[6]

Rathkamp, who stressed his legal knowledge *("im juristischen Bereich sehr stark bewandert"),* studied the requirements of how to obtain "a status like the churches" (officially known as corporation under public law in Germany—*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*). On its social media site, the FIU clarified this objective: "In ten to twenty years, we aim to have independent teams for all Muslim affairs with the size of government departments, similar to how the Catholic Church is organized, today". While FIU's individual court cases and petitions have been occasionally discussed in the media, its main objective and long-term strategy to achieve *Körperschaft* has received less attention. In explanatory videos and mosque sermons, FIU affiliates explain the prerequisites such as a certain membership has to be proven, a structured,

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organizational form as a legal body, a clear religious authority speaking for the membership on religious issues, at least 25–30 years of existence (so-called "Gewähr der Dauer"), being law-abiding (rechtstreu), and independence from foreign authorities, as well as the advantages regarding Islamic education in schools, operating cemeteries or publicly-paid religious staff, similar to Christian and Jewish communities (see also, de Wall and Muckel, 2019). To achieve this goal, FIU repeatedly stressed the importance of overcoming intra-Islamic difference and a "representational voice" ("*Sprachrohr*") for all Muslims in Germany.

Unlike the charismatic and mass mobilization strategies, which relied on sharp boundaries and public attention, a legal advocacy organization that works within the system requires a different organizational profile and management style. The key challenge is how to express the particularistic needs of one community in a way that it also includes other interest groups (Schiffauer, 2010). Krass and Rathkamp are often seen as non-confrontational, technocratic and professional (wearing business suits). During the growth phase at open-air events, Krass visibly struggled with his lecture-like style to arouse and keep the attention of large audiences. Shortly after FIU's victory at the Federal Constitutional Court in 2020, an observer of German Salafism remarked that "Krass was a misfit in the charismatic Salafi scene with his less exciting vita, a former polytechnical teachers, rather than a boxer or rapper […] Until now, no one took him too serious, because of his lack of street credibility." This has changed during the current decline and reflection phase. Because of his public recognition and reputation within the Salafi street *da'wa* movement, Krass became the public face of FIU—introduced in a promotional flyer as chairman and "one of the most well-known preachers in German speaking countries," while the newspaper, *Neue Presse*, warned that "Top-Salafist Marcel Krass is relocating to Hannover" (Mahrholz, 2018). Three years later, Rathkamp self-critically stressed the need for more labor division within the FIU to reduce the person-centric management style. He envisioned the FIU as "independent of specific individuals" ("*personenunabhängig*") in the foreseeable future, so that "our children and their children can still benefit from it" (Föderale Islamische Union, 2020*b*).

Although FIU is the most visible example of the current trend of legal Salafism, my analysis indicated wider resonance in other Salafi milieus and mosques through critical reflection on boundaries and public provocations.[7] FIU's inception has led to decoupling processes that help local Salafi groups to focus on Islamic education and other internal affairs, without investing in external communication with the media and politicians. DII welcomes the new "service provider", invites FIU speakers to seminars, and communicates FIU's message and legal campaigns to members. During the pandemic, DII relied on FIU's legal expertize to keep the mosque operational. DII's chairman argued that "you need legal advice to quickly respond to policy changes, otherwise you won't even realize the changes [*sonst kriegst du das alles garnicht mit*]." He noted that it would be beneficial to expand such services to other mosques as a "regional mosque consultancy," which is becoming more concrete in the following example. After the proscription of the Muslim relief organization, Ansaar International, in May 2021, the FIU commenced a fundraising campaign with the aim of 500,000 Euros for a "money pool"—a permanent fund for the long-term advancement of Muslim minority rights. FIU's chairman asked supporters "do

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you realize that something must always happen first, before we get together and discuss, mobilize money and try to solve an acute problem? Mosques are never prepared when something happens… [But] the next challenge is already at our door step". He referred to the potential political decision that could forbid wearing a veil for civil servants. "I can promise you that from next week our telephone will ring all the time, but we are never prepared."

The final section briefly illustrates how legal Salafism with its constitutional and minority rights discourses is used to defend certain illiberal, yet legal, views within DII and to align with other conservative Muslim and non-Muslim groups. In early 2022, a social media company banned DII from streaming its content, due to alleged anti-LGBTQI + rhetoric, in which the speaker compared homosexuality to an illness. In a brief statement to its supporters, DII ensured its followers that it is going to use other streaming platforms, thanking the viewers for their support and patience. In the backstage, however, DII collaborated with FIU, and decided not to take further legal action. Only if additional content is banned, "we will use legal means to go ahead." According to the DII activist, the content of the disputed video "is covered under constitutionally-guaranteed freedoms of religion and opinion, which we mentioned in our formal complain to challenge the decision, together with citing relevant paragraphs and past court verdicts. When certain issues are religiously-justified, we could in fact have said much more [assertive statements]." The activist further reflected that "we got more experience through the FIU, and now know when it makes sense to hire media lawyers". Schiffauer (2010) already stressed the importance cooperating with external lawyers, who can depoliticize through the universal language of the law. Moreover, the social media ban constitutes one of many examples, in which legal discourses were used to defend conservative views, while building bridges with other like-minded groups. A DII speaker in January 2022, who again equated homosexuality with a disease, urged the audience to remind ("*ermahnen*") queer Muslims to stop practicing. He explained that the German constitution allows such discussions and "warnings" ("*Ermahnungen*"), before he criticized the LGBTQI + movement: "It goes so far that we, Muslims, can't say openly anymore that homosexuality is a sin in Islam […] But we are in a democracy, we have freedom of opinion and religious freedom, which means that a Muslim, a Jew or a Christian has the right to say that homosexuality is a sin." This example indicates that the ongoing political accommodation and institutionalization among Salafis may result in boundary blurring with other conservative constituencies, but continues with sharp demarcations towards diverging faith-based and secular groups. Since such illiberal agendas are not expressed at mass events or newspapers articles anymore, Salafis learned through past experiences and legal expertize to "hold conservative views in private", rather than to "broadcast them in public," which mirrors the trajectory of other Islamic movements such as Deobandis in Britain (Gilliat-Ray, 2018, 134).

Conclusion

Salafism that initially relies on informal grassroots mobilization, is eventually confronted with the question of formal organization and institutionalization and whether to establish stable legal representations and political associations to advance its cause

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and obtain recognition, similar to other Muslim groups and Islamic traditions in Western Europe (Rosenow-Williams, 2014). Established mosque associations have used legal means since the 1980s to defend minority rights (e.g. halal butchering, Islamic education for children or exemptions from swim classes and sex education), and struggled for public recognition, thereby creating a localized Islam in Germany (Schiffauer, 2007, 2010; Spielhaus and Herzog, 2015). After September 11 in particular, European governments encouraged the creation of pan-Islamic umbrella platforms to identify reliable Muslim partners and institutionalize Islam to reduce interreligious tension and promote social cohesion. Muslim partners in this process gained privileged access to governments, policymakers and other influential stakeholders (Laurence, 2011). Analyzing the organizational change of Milli Görüs (MG) in Germany in early 2000, Schiffauer (2010, 267–272) illustrated how second-generation leaders refrained from staging large-scale demonstrations and chose instead "silent" institutional strategies, including lobbyism in city councils, petitions, and especially court cases. Opting for an institutional route, MG internally recognized that Muslim minorities enjoy the same rights in the legal system. Victories at the Federal Constitutional Court in particular helped reformers to convince "hardliners" within MG that a cooperative future is possible in Germany.

While MG and other established Islamic associations consolidated in a comparatively neutral public sphere towards Islam, the growth phase of German Salafis took place within a highly ambivalent and polarized political environment of the early 2000s. While legal opportunities and constitutional protection for Muslim minorities have increased—with parliaments and courts encouraging the institutionalization of Islam, the post-September 11 securitization context reduced political opportunities for Islamic welfare and legal advocacy endeavors. Policymakers, security agencies and parts of the media in this context have partially adopted a constitutional understanding embedded in a particular value, cultural and religious (Christian) order and favoritism (Habermas, 2005; Schiffauer, 2010; Kortmann, 2019). In such an environment, charismatic assertions, open confrontation and informal network mobilization seemed to be more viable and rewarding strategies in the short-term for a nascent movement without the required legal pedigree. However, two decades later, new actors have emerged at the forefront of the Salafi movement, promoting institutional strategies, including the use of court cases, enhanced professionalization and hierarchical leadership structures. The effort by Salafis to become a recognized legal body under Germany's public law (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*) is especially noteworthy and can be interpreted as a response to the changing policy environment of integrating Muslim communities through local and national treaties (Spielhaus and Herzog, 2015; Körs, 2019). Such participation marks an internal change within elements of the movement from rejecting institutional recognition through protest and withdrawal towards a communitarian focus on the "right to be different" within Germany's changing legal and policy framework (Schiffauer, 2007). The new phase of legal accommodation thereby mirrors earlier trajectories of Islamic movements and conservative religious actors in navigating liberal democracies.

Long before Salafism was debated in Germany, Seiwert (2003, 374) showed how a relatively small number of NRMs in the 1990s caused mass hysteria and political opportunism, framing NRMs as "dangerous and undesirable organizations." Such

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deep-seeded mistrust towards "closed religious communities… [with] high levels of commitment" stems from Germany's history of totalitarianism and ascend of post-modern and individualistic lifestyles. Despite the lack of social and political tolerance towards NRMs, Seiwert (2003, 372) however "attested to the functioning of the legal and political system […] where freedom of religion is protected not only by the text of the Constitution, but also by the working of the legal system and the courts." This could be observed in 2017, when Jehovah's Witnesses obtained public cooperation status in all sixteen German states after more than twenty years of legal advocacy, indicating a transition from non-engagement to close cooperation with state authorities. Similar to NRMs, Salafis started to promote constitutional protection for their lifestyles and religious freedom. Critical voices, including the German intelligence service, however perceive the use of court cases as an attempt to erode democratic institutions and introduce components of Sharia law through the back door. Legal advocacy strategies by Muslim organizations are then accused of rejecting the value canon, in which the constitution is embedded. This dynamic mirrors what de Koning (2019) has called the "paradoxes of accommodation", where the externally expected and pro-active legal pragmatism by Salafis that speaks to secular concepts of democracy, is simultaneously framed as problematic and linked to the reluctance of Muslim minorities to integrate. However, dismissing the ongoing reconfigurations as merely tactical, undermines negotiations and reflection processes through past experiences and generational changes among Salafis, and supports those internal and external skeptics of political accommodation and democracy itself.

Although converging trends between Salafis and other Islamic actors in Germany could be documented, challenges regarding the current direction and objectives of these Salafi actors remain. First, the comparatively small number of members and supporters as well as the lack of religious infrastructures such as mosques, community centers or official youth and women wings make the cooperation with Salafis less appealing. Second, the movement started only recently to build pan-Islamic and interreligious alliances. Generating rapport with government officials, national Islamic associations or local mosques may require substantive long-term efforts, given the history of antagonistic relations and mutual distrust. A third factor is the prevailing anti-cultural and anti-ethnic mentality among Salafis, which can be seen in the founding spirit of the FIU. The FIU highlighted cultural differences in the German Constitutional Court case during the pandemic in 2020, implying that only those congregations which refrain from cultural practices such as chanting should reopen (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2020). Although less frequently, DII speakers would still reprimand local mosques for teaching "cultural elements from their forefathers." However, ethnic, cultural and transnational identities constitute important mobilization resources among the majority of Islamic associations and local mosques in Germany. This prominent ethnic and cultural understanding of Islam goes against the Salafi *aqida* and the envisioned role of converts within legal Salafism.

Conflicting interests between accommodative and exclusive Salafi actors exist resulting in dynamic negotiations over the new trend of legal Salafism. It is important to acknowledge that these debates are currently ongoing within spaces such as DII without new feuds and factionalism necessarily emerging, whilst the consolidation

of FIU with its long term institutional strategy has been largely accepted within the heterogenous Salafi movement. This suggests a novel understanding for the need to compromise allowing internal and—to some extent—external differences, in particular with other conservative Muslim and non-Muslim constituencies, alongside sharp boundary maintenance towards liberal groups.

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Notes

1. The original name of the mosque has been changed to DII. The names and other identifying details of respondents and locations have also been changed or omitted. Media citations that could identify DII respondents were omitted.
2. For the intelligence service of Lower Saxony, the most dominate Salafi cohort is between 26 and 35 years in 2020 (Verfassungsschutz, 2021).
3. However, some studies have illustrated that Salafi actors can maintain amicable relations at the neighborhood level, and engage in boundary framing at the national level and in virtual spaces (Horst, 2013).
4. While some Salafi actors have used constitutional discourses in the past, this has been done sporadically in contexts of obtaining event permissions or preventing potential mosque proscriptions. At public events, Salafi activists have also spoken out for Muslim rights in cases of hate crimes or veil and minaret bans, which could occasionally generate pan-Islamic support (Gerlach, 2016; Wiedl, 2017). In other instances, DII affiliated speakers criticized the biased legal system and expressed distrust in German courts. A long-term and proactive legal strategy with macro-organizational structures has not been formulated during the growth phase.
5. See: www.islamische-union.de
6. A significant increase of conversions to Islam in Germany coincided with the emergence of Salafism in the early 2000s. Özyürek (2014, 5) showed that converts and Salafis are often united in their "call for a culture- and tradition- free Islam that speaks directly to the rational individual… [which] ends up being strictly particularistic or, more precisely, Eurocentric. It assumes that the "European" or "German" mind is truly rational—and hence the "Oriental" mind is not—free of the burden of cultural accretions, and thus uniquely capable of appreciating and directly relating to the real message of Islam in its essential form."
7. The legal Salafism trend, which is manifested by FIU and its cooperation with the assertive *da'wa* institution, DII, is indeed visible in other Salafi centers across Germany. For instance, FIU is supported and at times co-hosted at events with prominent Salafi speakers and groups from Berlin, Duisburg, Hannover, Munich, Cologne, Mönchengladbach, Braunschweig, Bremen and other places. These fluid and not openly-promoted alliances are also an outcome of the ongoing decoupling and professionalization processes within a segment of German Salafism.

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