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Germans wary as mosque rises in Cologne

PLANS TO BUILD THE LARGEST MOSQUE IN THE COUNTRY HIGHLIGHT A FUNDAMENTAL DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE THAT SOME FEAR POSES A THREAT TO EUROPE'S CHRISTIAN CULTURE.

By Isabelle de Pommereau

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In the Middle Ages, Cologne, in the heartland of German Catholicism, set out to build the biggest cathedral in the world. In 2010, the city's Gothic masterpiece will have a new rival on the skyline: The soaring minarets of Germany's largest mosque.

The mosque has been a controversial topic in the country since it was first discussed in 2001 and only won construction approval last year. Cloaked within complaints about noise, parking, and its possible impact on property values was the unease of a Germany that is coming to grips with a fundamental demographic change – the rise of its Muslim minority – and worried that it might pose a threat to Europe's Christian culture.

Cologne's 120,000 Muslims are the most in any German city. By 2020, two-thirds of Cologne's residents are expected to have foreign – mostly Turkish – roots. Designed for 2,000 worshipers, the mosque's completion will be something of a coming-out party for a booming minority that has long lived in society's shadows.

And it's not just here. A handful of mosques 10 years ago have swollen to 164, and close to 200 more are under construction across Germany, says Claus Leggewie, co-author of "Mosques in Germany – religious home and societal challenge."

"[It's] like a dream come true," says Nalan Cinar of Ehrenfeld, the multiethnic neighborhood that's home to the new mosque. Ms. Cinar, like most of Germany's Muslims, doesn't wear a head scarf or consider herself to be particularly devout. But she says "the feeling of something beautiful being ours is invaluable."

Mosques leave the shadows

Germany's Muslim population is largely Turkish and arrived in the late 1960s as "guest workers" in Germany's postwar construction boom. Many of them stayed. They set up community organizations, moved up the economic ladder, and eventually decided that humble back-street prayer rooms weren't enough. Domed mosques with minarets were the natural next step. At first, mosques tended to settle in peripheral industrial centers. Now they are being estab-

lished in the hearts of residential communities. "If we pray in hiding, then people are afraid," says Deniz Demirci, an Ehrenfeld Turkish-German translator.

"Mosques demonstrate the presence and self-confidence of Muslim immigration in Europe – the attitude is now, 'We're building because we want to stay here,'" says Mr. Leggewie, a social scientist at the University of Giessen. "At stake is the place Muslims occupy in German society and the place that the German majority are willing to carve out for them."

Last year, most of Cologne's political parties approved the \$40 million structure, but that didn't come easily.

The mosque's location, in the middle of a bustling neighborhood, angered residents. So did its size and minarets, which will be as tall as an 18-story office tower.

Opposition crystallized in Pro-Cologne, a far-right group opposed to "the Islamization of the Cathedral City." It won five local council seats in recent elections. Berlin, Lauingen, and Hanover have all had anti-mosque incidents.

Yet some see signs of political maturity emerging. When about 100 Pro-Cologne members tried to hold an antimosque rally this past fall, thousands more rallied against them. "A multicultural society is a conflict-filled society," says Navid Kermani, a Cologne playwright of Iranian descent. "The question is: Are the conflicts played out violently, or are they discussed out in the open?"

In Cologne and other German towns, dialogue has led to the downsizing of planned mosques and promises to not broadcast the muezzin's call to prayer.

Engaging society to lessen conflict

Necla Kelek, a prominent feminist and social scientist of Turkish descent, says mosques are different from churches and synagogues. Their use as community centers make them "obstacle to integration" she says, pointing out that original plans for the Cologne mosque designated only one-fifth of its space for prayer: The rest was for

a doctor's office, a bakery, a hairdresser, a law office, and a bank, among other things.

"The [mosque's] architects delivered what their conservative clients wanted," Ms. Kelek says: "a political statement from Islam in concrete." German law, she adds, is ill-equipped to deal with the issue. But Leggewie says German Muslims are now engaging broader society when they solicit plans for their houses of worship, creating more understanding and lessening resentment – and the occasional conflicts that came with it.

"Overall, mosques are being accepted as part of Germany's normality," says Dieter Oberndoerfer, a University of Freiburg expert on Germany's Muslim population. "You can't say, on the one hand, 'we grant you freedom of religion,' and, on the other, we're telling one community 'you can't have places of worship.'"