

Germans offer children a moderate form of Islam

FRANKFURT

Early lessons, sanctioned by the state, are aimed at heading off radicalism

BY ALISON SMALE

In a sun-splashed classroom, Timur Kumlu asked his 19 six-year-old students each to take a strand from a large wool ball. He then instructed the children — whose parents hailed from Muslim countries as varied as Afghanistan, Albania, Morocco and Turkey — to examine how, like the threads, they, too, were woven together.

It was a simple lesson containing a gentle message filled with symbolism —

that they were linked by their Islamic faith, practices of prayer, or even the food they eat. But the class also amounted to an early intervention by the German authorities, an effort to head off the tug of radical Islam for this next generation of Germany's Muslims by teaching a moderate and, in effect, state-sanctioned version of the religion.

The instruction, introduced in public schools last semester after long debate here in the central state of Hesse, was the first in Germany to teach Islam according to an officially authorized curriculum and textbooks — giving it a state seal of approval. The classes are part of a building consensus that Germany, after decades of neglect, must act more assertively to better integrate its Muslim population if it is to foster social harmony, overcome its aging demo-

graphics, and head off a potential domestic security threat.

The need, many here say, is ever more urgent. According to German security officials, at least two young Germans from Hesse — one said to be just 16 — were killed over the last half year in Syria after heeding the call for jihad and apparently being recruited by hard-line Salafist preachers in the city of Frankfurt.

Such cases have stirred alarm not only that young Germans are vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment but also that they will eventually bring their fight home, along with new skills in the use of weapons and explosives gained on distant battlefields. Other parts of Europe with expanding Muslim minorities — including France, Britain, Spain and the Scandinavian countries

GERMANY, PAGE 3

Germans offer children a moderate version of Islam

GERMANY, FROM PAGE 1

— are facing similar challenges.

For the German authorities, countering the expansion of Salafism has presented a vexing problem. For now, the domestic intelligence service keeps close watch on a growing number, with 4,500 Salafists under observation in 2011, and a total of 5,500 in 2012, according to an annual government report. The figures for 2013 are not yet available, but “we are reckoning with another increase, whether sharp or gradual I cannot say,” a security official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Increasingly, attention has turned to education and ways to nurture greater inclusion for Germany's four million or so Muslims, a number that has steadily increased since German industry recruited the first Turks as “guest workers” in the 1960s. How to integrate that minority has long been a source of tension in a country of more than 80 million that has struggled to absorb even Christian and European outsiders into the fabric of German life.

So-called honor killings, defined broadly as killings conducted in a patriarchal family context, mostly by men against women perceived to have violated family honor by their sexual conduct, totaled 122 from 1996 to 2005, according to a 2011 study conducted for the Interior Ministry, the most recent available.

Suspicion of radical Islam mounted when a Hamburg-based cell of Arabs

became bombers in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, in the United States.

The so-called Sauerland cell — which was accused of planning to bomb German targets in 2007 and a foiled bombing of the Bonn rail station in December 2012 — involved Germans not born or raised Muslim.

Enduring battles over whether any public servant can wear a head scarf also underscore the persistent gap between Germans and Muslims who are nonetheless an ever larger part of each other's lives.

For many teachers, German officials and, not least, Germany's Muslims, wider instruction in Islam is a belated effort to redress decades of exclusion that, they say, has allowed the beliefs of many of Germany's Muslims to be shaped by rote teaching at Quran schools, or the hard-line musings of Salafists and others over the Internet or in the courtyard mosques of immigrant neighborhoods in major cities, such as Hamburg or Berlin.

“I think it's clear now that for years we made the mistake of alienating people,” said Nicola Beer, who as education minister in Hesse was one of several politicians, professors and teachers who pushed for instruction in Islam. Now, she said, Germans recognize that “we are here together, we work together and we educate our children together.”

In the broadest terms, the curriculum in Hesse emphasizes the distinct values

of Islam and its practice, but also clearly aims to teach tolerance, in word and deed, of the beliefs of others, a counter to the strident proselytizing of more hard-line strains of Islam. But while offering instruction in Islam is part of the equal treatment craved by many of Germany's Muslims, it is also no straightforward task in legalistic and federal Germany.

Each of the 16 states determines its own education system and how non-compulsory religion — or ethics — instruction is offered. Islam instruction in some form is available in all former West German states, though none of the eastern ones, where there are historically few Muslim immigrants. What makes Hesse special is that the state developed a university program and has taken charge of training teachers, effectively placing Islam instruction on equal footing with similarly state-sanctioned ethics training in the Protestant and Catholic faiths.

In other places, such as Berlin, instruction in Islam has been offered already for several years, but teachers have been provided by organizations such as the Islamic Federation, a community group.

Fazil Altin, 34, a lawyer who is president of the Islamic Federation, said Muslims and the city authorities in Berlin had wasted a good 20 years while they battled in court about whether Islam could be taught. Then, Mr. Altin

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said, the federation had to overcome suspicions about indoctrination — and all for 40 minutes' instruction per week, which "is pretty paltry," he said.

In his view, it will take more than formalized state instruction in Islam to bridge the cultural gaps between observant Muslims and a highly secular German society.

"It is difficult to be a Muslim in Germany," said Mr. Altin, who added that he had been denied access to clients in jails because of his faith. "The fact is, we are seen as a danger."

The Jens Nydahl school — an inner-city school in Kreuzberg, a Berlin district that is heavily Turkish and Arab — is a prime example of the challenge of integration. During a recent visit, the influence of neighborhood Quran schools was easy to discern among first and

second graders.

When their teacher in Islam posed a question for which they had a standard answer, the children chanted in unison. When he asked something that required them to think and formulate their own answer, the children had far greater difficulty. For some, it was hard to deliver the answer in passable German.

During an "open house" day designed to attract new parents, the only visitors — a native German man and his wife — got a heavy sell from the deputy principal, who assured the couple that if they could recruit four or five other parents, the school would never split up the resulting nucleus of German-speaking children.

Sabine Achour, a German lecturer and educator in Berlin who is married to a Moroccan lawyer, noted that even German parents who live in lively, multicultural districts like Kreuzberg draw the line at too many immigrants in their children's schools.

Ms. Achour voiced doubts about Germans' willingness to meet Muslims halfway. "Teachers here have a feeling

that something doesn't fit with Islam and democracy," said Ms. Achour. Even, say, where Shariah law fits with German practices, it is not applied because "Shariah is seen as something very traditional and even contemptuous of human beings," she said.

It is not clear that other German states will shift toward the state-sanctioned version of Islamic instruction where Hesse has been the pioneer.

Mr. Kumlu, 31, the first-grade teacher, who was born in Lübeck, belongs to the first substantial generation of Muslims with academic qualifications. Like the other 18 graduates who were accepted in Hesse's first group of Islam teachers, he had to add 240 work hours in a course at Giessen University, even though he was already a qualified secondary school teacher.

Mr. Kumlu was motivated, he said, by his own ignorance about Islam when confronted with prejudice as he grew up. "I wanted to clear this up," he said. His pupils now are third to fifth generation German, he noted, "and they should be on an equal basis with other religions."

Victor Homola contributed reporting.



GORDON WELTERS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

An Islam lesson being given last summer for first graders in a school in Frankfurt. Their parents are from countries as varied as Afghanistan, Albania, Morocco and Turkey.

