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## **Church tax: German bishops get tough on Catholics who opt out**

By Tom Heneghan

Reuters (21.09.2012) - Germany's Roman Catholic bishops have decreed that people who opt out of a "church tax" should not be given sacraments and religious burials, getting tougher on worshippers who choose not to pay.

Alarmed by a wave of dissenting Catholics quitting the faith, the bishops issued a decree on Thursday declaring such defection "a serious lapse" and listed a wide range of church activities from which they must be excluded.

Germans officially registered as Catholics, Protestants or Jews pay a religious tax of 8 or 9 percent of their annual tax bill. They can avoid this by declaring to their local tax office that they are leaving their faith community.

The annual total of church leavers, usually around 120,000, rocketed to 181,193 two years ago as revelations about decades of sexual abuse of children by priests shamed the hierarchy and prompted an apology from German-born Pope Benedict.

"This decree makes clear that one cannot partly leave the Church," a statement from the bishops conference said. "It is not possible to separate the spiritual community of the Church from the institutional Church."

Church taxes brought in about 5 billion euros (\$6.5 billion) for the Roman Catholic Church and 4.3 billion euros for the Protestant churches in 2010, according to official statistics.

***No religious burial***

The bishops said the consequences of leaving the church had not been clearly spelled out in the past. Some Catholics have tried to remain active in their parish or have a religious burial despite leaving the church to avoid paying the tax.

The Vatican gave its approval for the decree before it was issued, the statement said.

Catholics who leave can no longer receive sacraments, except for a special blessing before death, the decree states.

They cannot work in the church or its institutions, such as schools and hospitals, or be active in church-sponsored associations such as charity groups or choirs.

They cannot be godparents for Catholic children and must get a bishop's permission to marry a Catholic in a church ceremony.

"If the person who left the Church shows no sign of repentance before death, a religious burial can be refused," it added.

The bishops conference said local pastors would invite all leavers to meet to discuss their reasons for quitting, explain the consequences and offer a chance to rejoin the church.

### ***Protestant exodus***

Germany's Protestant churches have also seen a steady exodus in recent decades as members - who become registered at baptism - leave because they no longer believe, disagree with some policy or want to save several hundred euros in church tax.

A major departure wave from both Catholic and Protestant churches occurred in the early 1990s, when the government raised taxes to finance ex-communist eastern Germany.

Since the levy was almost the same as the church tax - whose origins date back to the 19th century - Germans could neutralise the tax boost by quitting their church.

Catholics and Protestants are almost equally distributed in Germany, with each at about 24 million, or 30 percent of the 82 million population. There are about 4 million Muslims and 120,000 Jews in Germany which has a total population of almost 82 million. (\$1 = 0.7721 euros) (Editing by Robin Pomeroy)

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## **ECJ answer to a question of interpretation of a German Court**

AEDH Newsletter 214 (14.09.2012) - On September 5, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled in response to a question submitted by a German court on the interpretation of several provisions of the Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2004 on minimum standards for the qualification and status of third-country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted.

The question was to know how religion could be a ground of persecution and may justify the granting of international protection. The Court recalls that the right to freedom of religion is enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights and is one of the "foundation of a democratic society." But any prejudice to that freedom is not necessarily an act of

persecution. To determine the actions that can be considered as persecution, the authorities must evaluate the severity of the measures taken or that could be taken against the person.

According to the Court, persecution may result in particular in an attack on the outward manifestation of the freedom of religion. Even if the person has not been subject to persecution in his country, the decision to grant protection can be based solely on the applicant's fear when it is reasonable to assume that if he was to return to his home country, he would perform religious acts exposing him to a real risk of persecution.

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## **German Muslims say anti-militant posters offensive**

Reuters (05.09.2012) - A poster campaign by Germany's Interior Ministry to advertise a hotline for those worried that a friend or family member may be turning to radical Islam has incensed some Muslims who say it stigmatizes them.

Germany, home to four million Muslims, has become increasingly concerned about home-grown Islamic militants over the past decade after Hamburg served as a base for three of the September 11 suicide airline hijackers in 2001.

Officials are especially worried about the ease with which individuals can be recruited over the Internet by extremists. Last year a young Kosovo Albanian Muslim shot dead two U.S. airmen at Frankfurt airport after being radicalized online.

In the new campaign, posters showing four fictitious missing persons - 'Hassan', 'Fatima', German convert 'Tim' and 'Ahmed' - will be displayed in Arabic, Turkish and German in major cities with big immigrant populations from September 21.

"This is my brother Hassan. I miss him and hardly recognize him anymore," one poster reads.

"He has become reclusive and gets more radical every day. I'm afraid of losing him completely to religious fanatics and terrorist groups. If you're experiencing something similar, contact the information center for radicalization," it says.

Critics fear the campaign could fuel stereotypes of Muslims.

"Muslims are always regarded as a potential threat," said Aydan Oezoguz, a Turkish-German member of parliament and integration commissioner for the opposition Social Democrats.

"This is a very important issue, but it risks alienating an entire religious community," Oezoguz added.

The Interior Ministry says the campaign was crafted with the help of Muslim interest groups as part of a larger initiative to improve ties between security agencies and Muslim communities.

### ***"False perceptions"***

However, four of the six interest groups involved in the confidence-building initiative have since withdrawn their support.

"Constantly associating Islam with issues of violence and security policy can only lead to false perceptions," the groups said in a joint statement.

Mistrust among Germany's immigrant population increased after the authorities' botched handling of a wave of neo-Nazi killings of mostly Turkish shopkeepers. For years, authorities told victims' families that the murders were the result of score settling between organized criminal gangs.

Erol Puerlue from the Association of Muslim Cultural Centres, one of the groups involved in the initiative, said too much focus was placed on extremism among Muslims rather than in German society as a whole.

"Addressing extremism only among Muslims risks putting them under a general suspicion," he said, adding that more classes on religion in schools would be a more effective way of combating radicalization among young people.

"We also have to talk about protecting Muslims. They can fall victim to extremism too," said Puerlue.

Joachim Trebbe, a professor of media analysis at Berlin's Free University, said stereotypes were unavoidable when trying to depict people with immigrant backgrounds.

"The alternative would be to not include any pictures, you're always going to be stereotyping someone," he said.

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## **Berlin says ritual circumcision legal, if performed by doctor**

Haaretz (06.09.2012) - The German capital has formally declared that doctors can legally perform ritual circumcisions on infant males, though it stopped short of authorizing a mohel to do so. In an exclusive interview with Haaretz, Berlin mayor Klaus Wowereit said it is crucial "not to let this debate [on circumcision] create additional tensions in our society."

Berlin instructed its prosecutors not to file charges against any doctor who circumcised a baby boy, as long as the parents consented in writing and proved the procedure was religiously motivated. Parents also had to be informed about medical risks, and all possible means of reducing pain and limiting bleeding had to be employed.

"If medical standards are observed, circumcision at home or in a synagogue is also acceptable," said the state's justice minister, Thomas Heilmann. He noted however that the state government does not have the power to make it legal for a mohel to carry out the ritual, and that only federal legislation could do that.

Wowereit agreed that only federal legislation would end the debate for good and keep the issue from being discussed at the criminal level. "We must strike a balance among different fundamental values of our constitution: freedom of religion and bodily integrity," he said, "But we must not allow space for prejudice against the other."

Federal lawmakers pledged to introduce a law legalizing circumcision after a court in Cologne ruled in June that a doctor inflicted unlawful bodily harm by circumcising a 4-year-old Muslim boy at his parents' request. Although the ruling was only binding in a

small region, doctors across the country halted the operations for fear of prosecution. Last month, a doctor in Bavaria filed a police complaint against a rabbi who performed a brit. Prosecutors are still considering whether to charge him.

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle told a Jewish daily that federal legislation would be announced soon. "It must be made clear that Jewish and Muslim traditions are protected in Germany," he said.

Two other German states also instructed prosecutors not to interfere if there was parental consent for circumcisions and they were conducted hygienically, though they made no formal declarations. Other states made no general decisions or were leaving the matter until federal legislation is passed.

As Berlin officials moved to ensure circumcision rights, the city's Jewish community is reeling from two recent anti-Semitic incidents.

Last week, Rabbi Daniel Alter was physically assaulted while walking with his six-year-old daughter. On Monday, 13 Jewish schoolgirls were surrounded and verbally assaulted with anti-Semitic slurs.

Alter assured Haaretz in an interview this week that the city's 12,000 Jews can live in Berlin without fear. Mayor Wowereit echoed that sentiment. Wowereit, 59, was photographed in a kippa for a German paper last weekend, as part of a campaign to show solidarity with the city's Jewish community in the wake of the attack.

It is not dangerous to be a Jew in Berlin, he insisted. "Berlin is a liberal metropolis where we don't accept intolerance, hatred of foreigners and anti-Semitism. Jews can live in peace and without danger in our city. They are important to us, and they make an important contribution to Berlin's cultural variety.

"The cowardly attack on Rabbi Alter was a contemptible act by individuals. It was an attack on the shared, peaceful life of everyone in our city. The spontaneous solidarity demonstrations that took place in the city over the weekend were a good sign that Berliners aren't willing to accept intolerance and violence toward residents of the city."

When asked what Wowereit was doing to make Berlin's Jews feel safe to wear kippot, he said police are using all available means to find Alter's assailants. "Above all, we're conducting an interfaith dialogue among our city's religious communities. Their communities and schools must implant the values of tolerance and a desire to live together in peace on a daily basis.

"I myself, like other politicians and public figures in the city, wore a skullcap as a sign of solidarity. No one can challenge the right to wear a skullcap."

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## **Yarmulke flash mob: Protests continue over Berlin Anti-Semitic attack**

***An attack on a Berlin rabbi reportedly perpetrated by youths of Arab origin has sparked a debate about anti-Semitism in the country that has increased tensions between Germany's Jewish and Muslim communities. After weekend demonstrations of solidarity with Jews, both groups are calling for increased efforts to combat xenophobia.***

Spiegel Online (03.09.2012) - They numbered in the hundreds and many wore yarmulkes, the traditional Jewish skull cap. At two different events over the weekend, demonstrators turned out in Berlin to protest against an anti-Semitic crime in the German capital that occurred on Tuesday, when unidentified youths attacked a 53-year-old rabbi in the German capital who had been wearing a yarmulke.

"We are not going to accept that people will be attacked on our streets because they can be visibly recognized as being Jewish," organizers of a flash mob protest on Saturday that attracted over 100 people wrote on their web page.

A second solidarity demonstration on Sunday attracted more than 1,000 people, according to organizers, including rabbi Daniel Alter, the man who had been attacked and only recently released from the hospital. "My cheekbone was broken," he told the crowd, "But these people did not break my will to promote interfaith dialog." He said Berlin remained a cosmopolitan and open city. "They can't take that away from us."

Last Tuesday's attack happened in front of the rabbi's young daughter. A man approached Alter and asked: "Are you a Jew?" Then the group of four men hit Alter in the face repeatedly. They shouted religious insults and threatened to kill his daughter. The rabbi said the attackers appeared to be of Arab descent.

The attack has generated a heated discussion in both the Jewish and Muslim communities in Germany. The head of Germany's Central Council of Muslims, Aiman Mazyek, said last week that Muslims had the "deepest disgust" for such attacks. "We hope the perpetrator is caught soon and is held accountable," he said. He said that Jews and Muslims had to stand together to fight violence of any type and "anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia in our society."

### ***Jewish Leader: Actions speak louder than words***

The apparent involvement of Muslims has prompted the German Jewish community to apply pressure against the Muslim community to do more to stop anti-Semitism. In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung* newspaper on Friday, the head of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Dieter Graumann, called on Muslims to redouble such efforts. Graumann said he would welcome it the organizations "finally acted more decisively against the anti-Semitism within their own ranks." He said expressions of solidarity from the groups were "nice and with honest intentions," but that actions speak louder than words.

Responding several days later, Ali Kizilkaya, the head of the Coordination Council of Muslims in Germany (KRM), told the *Berliner Zeitung* on Monday there was no need for the Muslim community to undertake additional efforts to combat anti-Semitism. "An attack like that is an attack on everyone," Kizilkaya told the paper. "Society has to do something about it," he said, adding that Muslims don't need to be taught anything. "Anti-Semitism is incompatible with Islam," he said. He also said that if one raised the issue of anti-Semitism, then one must also address Islamophobia, because both are xenophobic.

Since last Tuesday's attack, Jewish leaders have called for greater caution among the faithful. Gideon Joffe, the head of Berlin's Jewish community, warned against wearing a yarmulke in parts of the German capital. "I would not today recommend that Jews wear kippas in every part of Berlin," he said. In neighboring Potsdam, where the Abraham Geiger Kolleg trains rabbis, school officials have advised students that they should instead choose "inconspicuous head coverings." The school's rector, Walter Homolka, told the *Berliner Morgenpost* newspaper, "One is safe when that person is not visible as a Jew."

Another Berlin rabbi, Walter Rothschild, spoke in an interview last week of a "new dimension" in anti-Semitic attacks in Berlin, saying he had recently been attacked and that he was getting insulting emails and had stopped wearing the yarmulke in public.

Police have not yet detained any suspects in the case, but it has already led to a vocal debate about xenophobic crimes in Germany.

The chairwoman of the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, an anti-racism organization, warned last week that attacks were increasing in German cities and populous areas. "There have been more physical attacks on Jews than we have seen in recent years -- especially in metropolitan areas or large cities," said Anetta Kahane.

### ***Right-Wing extremism remains greatest threat***

Despite a tense atmosphere between Jewish and Muslim leaders in recent days, experts say the main threat to Jews in Germany comes from the right-wing extremist scene rather than from Muslim immigrants.

Researcher Juliane Wetzel, the co-author of a report on anti-Semitism commissioned by the German parliament, has written that "the vast majority" of crimes committed against Jews in the past decade have been attributable to right-wing extremist. She said that although the threat of anti-Semitic violence committed by Arab immigrants should not be underestimated, there wasn't enough data to assess the frequency of Muslim violence against Jews in Germany.

Despite a recent downward trend, there were many anti-Semitic attacks in the first half of 2012. After a member of the Germany's Left Party submitted a request for information in parliament, the government released data indicating that 13 violent anti-Semitic crimes have been registered so far, with 11 of those having been perpetrated by individuals deemed by investigators to be right-wing extremists. In total, Germany's Federal Bureau of Criminal Investigation has counted 436 crimes with anti-Semitic links this year. Of those, 85 were anti-Semitic propaganda crimes.

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## **Circumcision ban makes Germany a laughing stock**

Reuters (17.07.2012) - German Chancellor Angela Merkel has warned that Germany could become a laughing stock if it fails to overturn a district court ban on circumcision that has enraged Jews and Muslims.

Merkel's government has already criticised the Cologne court ruling and promised a new law to protect the right to circumcise male infants, but the conservative leader's strong comments underline how sensitive Germany is to charges of intolerance because of its Nazi past.

"I do not want Germany to be the only country in the world where Jews cannot practise their rituals. Otherwise we will become a laughing stock," the Bild daily quoted Merkel as telling a closed meeting of her Christian Democrats.

Joerg van Essen, parliamentary floor leader of Merkel's junior coalition partner the Free Democrats, told the Financial Times Deutschland newspaper that the new law would be introduced in the autumn.

The Cologne court, ruling in the case of a Muslim boy who suffered bleeding after circumcision, said the practice inflicts bodily harm and should not be carried out on young boys but could be practised on older males who give consent.

This is not acceptable under Jewish religious practice which requires boys to be circumcised from eight days old, nor for many Muslims, for whom the age of circumcision varies according to family, country and branch of Islam.

Jewish and Muslim groups have branded the court ruling an attack on their religious freedom and Jewish leaders say it could even threaten the continued existence of their community in Germany - a disturbing claim for a country still haunted by the Nazis' murder of six million European Jews in the Holocaust.

But the court ruling has drawn support from some, including Britain's Secular Medical Forum which has written to Merkel urging her to resist pressure to make non-consensual circumcision lawful.

"We are shocked that religious groups deny the harm [caused by circumcision] and at the distorted and disingenuous claims made by those opposing the court's decision, wrongly suggesting that it is an indication of anti-Semitism," the chairman of the Secular Medical Forum, Dr. Antony Lempert, said in the letter.

"We urge you not to let such emotional blackmail persuade you to change the law or criticise the court's decision. As it stands, the court's decision ensures that today's children will be free to grow up to make their own decisions," it said.

Echoing such comments, Ronald Goldman, head of the U.S.-based Jewish Circumcision Resource Center which opposes the practice, cited studies he said show that circumcision causes considerable pain and trauma.

"The majority of the world does not circumcise because of an instinctive awareness of the harm, analogous to cutting off any other healthy body part," it said in a statement entitled "The German Circumcision Ruling: What about the harm to the child?"

The German court ruling applies only to the city of Cologne and its environs - home to a large Muslim minority - but Jewish and Muslim groups fear it could set a precedent and the ban could spread to other parts of Germany.

German doctors have also urged politicians to act to clarify the legal situation, fearing the ruling may force circumcisions underground and increase health risks for young boys.

Germany is home to about 120,000 Jews and some four million Muslims, many from Turkey which has criticised the court ruling.

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## **Angela Merkel backs circumcision right after German ruling**

BBC (13.07.2012) -Berlin, Germany - Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman said it was a case of protecting religious freedom.

Steffen Seibert said: "Circumcision carried out in a responsible manner must be possible without punishment."



European Jewish and Muslim groups had criticised the Cologne court ruling.

The case involved a doctor who carried out a circumcision on a four-year-old that led to medical complications.

The court said that a child's right to physical integrity trumped religious and parental rights.

But Mr Seibert said: "For everyone in the government it is absolutely clear that we want to have Jewish and Muslim religious life in Germany."

He said the government would look urgently at establishing "legal certainty".

"It is clear this cannot be put on the back burner. Freedom to practise religion is a cherished legal principle," Mr Seibert said.

### ***'Basic rights'***

Germany's Medical Association had told doctors not to perform circumcisions following the court ruling.

The doctor involved in the case was acquitted and the ruling was not binding. However, critics feared it could set a precedent for other German courts.

European Jewish and Muslim groups had joined forces to defend circumcision.

An unusual joint statement was signed by leaders of groups including the Rabbinical Centre of Europe, the European Jewish Parliament, the European Jewish Association, Germany's Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs and the Islamic Centre Brussels.

"We consider this to be an affront [to] our basic religious and human rights," it said.

The BBC's Stephen Evans in Berlin says opinion in Germany about the issue has been mixed, though one poll showed a majority in favour of the ban.

He says that many readers' comments on newspaper websites have indicated anger that this generation of Germans seems to be being constricted in its actions because of the Holocaust.

Thousands of Muslim and Jewish boys are circumcised in Germany every year.

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## **Circumcision ruling condemned by Germany's Muslim and Jewish leaders**

***German court rules that procedure is bodily harm and contravenes right to choose religion in later life***

Guardian (27.06.2012) - Jewish and Muslim leaders were united on Wednesday in their condemnation of a German court's decision to in effect outlaw the circumcision of boys after a judge deemed that the religious practice amounted to bodily harm.

Representatives of the two religious communities called the ruling insensitive and discriminatory, saying it was an attack on centuries of religious tradition.

A judge at a Cologne court said that the circumcision of minors went against a child's interests because it led to a physical alteration of the body, and because people other than the child were determining its religious affiliation.

Religious leaders said the court had stepped into a minefield with its decision, which undermined their religious authority and contravened Germany's constitution.

Ali Demir, chairman of the Religious Community of Islam in Germany, said: "I find the ruling adversarial to the cause of integration and discriminatory against all the parties concerned."

Dieter Graumann, president of Germany's Central Council of Jews, called it "an egregious and insensitive measure" which amounted to "an unprecedented and dramatic intervention in religious communities' right of determination".

The ruling followed a lengthy legal battle, sparked when a Muslim couple decided to have their son circumcised, specifically for religious reasons, by a Muslim doctor in Cologne. The doctor, identified only as Dr K, carried out the circumcision on the four-year old boy in November 2010, before giving the wound four stitches. The same evening, he visited the family at home to check up on the boy. When the boy began bleeding again two days later, his parents took him to the casualty department of Cologne's University hospital. The hospital contacted the police, who then launched an investigation. The doctor was charged with bodily harm, and the case was taken to court.

While the court acquitted Dr. K on the grounds that he had not broken any law, it concluded that circumcision of minors for religious reasons should be outlawed, and that neither parental consent nor religious freedom justified the procedure. It ruled that in future doctors who carried out circumcisions should be punished.

The court weighed up three articles from the basic law: the rights of parents, the freedom of religious practice and the right of the child to physical integrity, before coming to the conclusion that the procedure was not in the interests of the child.

It rejected the defence that circumcision is considered hygienic in many cultures, one of the main reasons it is carried out in the US, Britain and in Germany.

After much deliberation, it concluded that a circumcision, "even when done properly by a doctor with the permission of the parents, should be considered as bodily harm if it is carried out on a boy unable to give his own consent".

It ruled the child's body would be "permanently and irreparably changed", and that this alteration went "against the interests of a child to decide for himself later on to what religion he wishes to belong".

The doctor was acquitted, the court said, because he had acted "subjectively and with a clear conscience" and because carrying out the procedure had not been punishable at the time.

Holm Putzke, a professor of penology – the study of the punishment of crime – from the University of Passau, told the German news agency DPA that the ruling would set a legal precedent and would act as a warning. "The ruling is not binding for other courts, but it

will have the effect of a warning signal." He added while Dr K had been let off, from now on no doctor would be able to claim that he or she did not know it was forbidden.

He said unlike politicians who have long faced pressure to deal with the issue, "the court did not allow itself to be scared off by charges of antisemitism or religious intolerance".

Demir predicted a ban in Germany would lead to a rise in "circumcision tourism in neighbouring countries in Europe".

Condemnation also came from elsewhere in Europe, with Rabbi Aryeh Goldberg of the Brussels-based Rabbinical Centre of Europe calling the ruling "fatal to freedom of religion". He told the Jerusalem daily Haaretz that it "contravened the EU's convention on human rights, to which Germany is subservient and harms the basic freedom of religion enshrined in the German constitution".

Women's rights groups and social policy makers also condemned the decision, but for the reason that it would have the effect of putting male and female circumcision on the same footing, when they were "in no way comparable", said Katrin Altpeter, social minister in the state of Baden-Württemberg. Female circumcision she said, was a far more drastic act. It is already outlawed in Germany.

In Austria, the lay initiative Religion is a Private Matter, welcomed the Cologne decision, calling it "an important and long overdue change of direction". Its chairman, Heinz Oberhammer, said: "Bodily harm is bodily harm and children cannot be excluded from benefitting from basic rights, and certainly not for religious reasons," he said.

The World Health Organisation estimates that every third man is circumcised. Around 70% of them are Muslims, around 1% Jews.

From Twitter and Facebook to the online discussion forums of German newspapers, the decision was being hotly debated on Wednesday. An online survey of the readers of the leftwing Berlin daily Taz found two-thirds of respondents in favour of the decision.

One respondent wrote: "The issue is quite clear: the religious freedom of the parents ends precisely there where the physical harm of others begins, regardless of whether it's that of your own child or that of an unknown heathen."

But another wrote: "As a circumcised Jew, I can only add the following: did the state prosecutors in Cologne ... have nothing better to do than ... interfere in our thousands of years of Jewish religious law? No way, and that's why we need to act decisively against this horrendous decision by the Cologne regional court."

Putzke, who is a leading voice in the discussion about circumcision and the law, welcomed the decision: "After the knee-jerk indignation has subsided, hopefully a discussion will kick off about how much religiously motivated violence against children a society is ready to tolerate."

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## **AJC criticizes German court ruling on circumcision**

PRNewswire (27.06.2012) - AJC criticized a German court's ban of circumcision as an infringement on private religious practice. A district court in Cologne ruled that circumcision is acceptable only when performed as a medical necessity.

"We are deeply concerned about the court's lack of understanding of basic religious freedom," said AJC Berlin Director Deidre Berger. "This decision throws into question the fundamental, age-old tradition of two of the world's three monotheistic traditions."

The case involved a Cologne doctor charged with injuring a 4-year-old Muslim boy during a circumcision procedure in a local hospital. Although the doctor was acquitted in a lower court, a state prosecutor appealed to a district court, which ruled that the child's parents had violated their son's right to physical and religious autonomy.

"Children's rights are important but German Jewish and Muslim parents have a right to give their children a religious upbringing," said Berger, who called on the German parliament to uphold the rights of religious minorities."

The district court ruling must now be upheld by either the Federal Constitutional Court or the German Federal Court of Justice.

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## **Germany weighs ban on Salafists after clashes**

By Elisa Oddone

Reuters (09.05.2012) - Germany is considering a legal ban on ultra-conservative Salafist Muslim groups, its interior minister said on Wednesday after violent clashes with the police, one of which was provoked by German ultra-rightists.

Last weekend, Salafists turned on police protecting far-right anti-Islam protesters during a regional election rally in the western German city of Bonn, injuring 29 officers, two of them seriously. Police arrested 109 people.

The far-right protesters had infuriated the Salafists by waving banners showing cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad.

There have been similar clashes in other German towns in the past week, including in Cologne, where around 1,000 police were mobilized on Tuesday to keep Salafists and far-right activists far apart.

"We will use all the possibilities at the disposal of a constitutional state to oppose them (violent Salafists) wherever they fight against... our constitutional order," Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich told n-tv television.

"Germany will not allow anybody to impose religious wars on us, neither radical Salafists nor far-right parties such as the Pro NRW," he said, referring to the ultra-nationalist that clashed with the Salafists in Bonn.

An interior ministry spokesman confirmed to Reuters that the government was examining the possibility of a ban on Salafist groups. "However, there is nothing official yet," he added.

Friedrich said Germany was home to some 4,000 Salafists, not all of whom were violent.

"Without question the Salafists are ideologically close to al Qaeda," the minister told the Rheinische Post in a separate interview. "They have the clear political goal to destroy our liberal democracy. We will not allow them to do that."

## **Koran Campaign**

Germany is home to around four million Muslims, about half of whom have German citizenship. Many came from Turkey as "guest workers" in the 1960s and 1970s and contributed to Germany's economic growth. Germany's total population is 82 million.

Salafists, whose roots are in Saudi Arabia, recently stirred unease with a campaign to hand out free copies of the Koran around the country, prompting conservative lawmaker Volker Kauder, a close ally of Chancellor Angela Merkel, to say Islam was not "part of our tradition and identity in Germany".

Security experts have warned that German language Islamist propaganda is fuelling militancy among a small number of socially alienated Muslim youths in Germany.

But despite the prominence of Germany in the saga of al Qaeda due to Hamburg's role as a base for three of the September 11 suicide airline hijackers, its indigenous militant scene is much smaller than that in Britain or France, the experts say.

The recent Salafist clashes have become an issue in campaigning for Sunday's election in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Germany's most populous state, which the main opposition centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) are expected to win.

Regional SPD leader Hannelore Kraft has vowed "zero tolerance" towards both the Salafists and the Pro NRW activists.

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## **Germany monitors Koran distribution by Salafists**

BBC News (11.04.2012) - A branch of the German security service is monitoring a campaign by Salafist Muslims to give away 25 million Korans to see if it violates constitutional rules on religious freedom.

Ibrahim Abou Nagie, a Cologne-based preacher, says he wants to save non-Muslims from hell.

The interior ministry in North Rhine-Westphalia said the campaign was a form of aggressive proselytising.

So far, about 300,000 copies have been given away.

Salafists are very conservative Muslims who try to emulate the earliest followers of the Prophet Muhammad.

### ***'Disturbing the peace'***

The Office for the Protection of the Constitution in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, which keeps extremist and violent groups under surveillance, has been monitoring Mr Abou Nagie's organisation.

Parties from across the political spectrum united to criticise the Koran giveaway.

"Wherever possible, this aggressive action must be stopped," said Guenter Krings of the governing centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), in an interview with the Rheinische Post newspaper.

He admitted that handing out religious material was not in itself objectionable, but said the Salafist radicals were disturbing the religious piece with their behaviour.

The centre-left Social Democrats and the Green Party have also expressed their concern.

Salafists have been handing out the German-language copies of Islam's holy books in the pedestrianised zones of cities, including Cologne.

"What is presented as the simple distribution of the Koran is in truth the subtle spreading of the Salafist ideology," said a spokesman for the state interior ministry of North Rhine-Westphalia.

Additional copies are also being distributed in Austria and Switzerland.

Last summer, the president of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Heinz Fromm, said: "Not all Salafists are terrorists.

"But almost all the terrorists we know about had contacts with Salafists or are Salafists themselves."

The project has been funded by Muslims buying a copy of the Koran which then funds the production of a second one to be given away.

Wealthy donors based in Bahrain have also made contributions.

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