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# Islam at the Margins: Salafi and Progressive Muslims Contesting the Mainstream in Germany

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**Abstract**

Based on ethnographic data collected in Germany, this article compares ultra-conservative Salafi and progressive, LGBTQI-plus Muslim movements and examines their negotiation of religious identity and practice within and in contrast to 'mainstream Islam' (e.g., DİTİB). While on the surface these movements appear to be on the fringes of Islam and clearly opposed to each other, a closer look reveals interesting moments of convergence and publicly gained prominence. In doing so, this article explores the actor biography issues that drive affiliation, including negative experiences with mainstream mosques and the search for authentic expression and roots. It analyses the politics of labelling (e.g., 'Salafi', 'liberal'), and how these groups define their target audiences in relation to the perceived mainstream. It examines the negotiation of cultural diversity and Islamic 'purity', contrasting Salafi reform with progressive interpretations. Finally, it examines strategies for challenging mainstream institutions. By comparing these groups, the article offers a nuanced insight into Islamic practices at the margins. It sheds light on the various strategies employed to discredit mainstream Islamic institutions, ranging from theological differences to power struggles within the contested religious field.

**Keywords:** Salafism; progressive Islam; religious mainstream; public discourse; comparative study; ethnography



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## 1. Introduction

While public discourse often frames German Islam in broad strokes, a more intimate view of its margins reveals a vibrant, often contentious, internal world. The following quotations offer a glimpse into the starkly divergent yet mutually critical perspectives of Salafi and liberal Muslim actors, illuminating the intense internal boundary drawing, as these marginalised voices fiercely contend for the authentic interpretation of Islam, each claiming legitimacy and implicitly challenging the other's vision of faith and practice against the backdrop of perceived mainstream norms.

"In our view, many who identify as liberal Muslims disregard clear aspects of the Quran and Sunnah, thus distancing themselves from Islam. Conversely, many labelled as radical [Salafis] find their positions firmly rooted in these foundational texts. Take the niqab [i.e., a face veil], for example: while some liberal Muslims consider it to be radical, it is explicitly detailed in all four Madhhabs [i.e., Sunni schools of jurisprudence]. The real question is about adherence to the established Islamic framework. So-called liberal

Muslims, for example, have no problem with homosexual marriage, which is unequivocally forbidden in all four schools, as well as in Shi'ite jurisprudence. Yet in Germany today, those who uphold these traditional rulings are branded radical and condemned" (DII Salafi leader, 2021 on his social media channel).

"I think that what the Salafis who are on TikTok, for example, are most afraid of is that if people who take this inclusive idea in Islam seriously, if they get into action, seriously have mosques all over Germany, invite people and people feel comfortable there and realise that there is a pluralistic image of Islam. Then they can pack their bags. And that's what they're afraid of" (Coordinator of a liberal-Islamic community, 27 March 2023).

Researching the contours of the Islamic field in Germany reveals a complex pattern of diverse interpretations and practices, often overshadowed by the prominence of (scholarship on) established organisations representing the perceived 'Islamic mainstream'. This article embarks on a novel comparative analysis, focusing on two seemingly antithetical movements operating at the margins of this mainstream of Islam: ultra-conservative Salafism, exemplified by the German Islam Institute (DII)[1], and progressive, LGBTQI+-inclusive Muslim groups, represented by the Liberal-Islamic Federation (LIB). While public and—at times—internal discourses frequently position these groups as diametrically opposed, a closer, empirically grounded investigation into their experiences as marginalised actors promises to unveil unexpected similarities in their contestation of established norms and their negotiation of religious identity, diversity, and practice. By juxtaposing these distinct yet peripheral expressions and organisations of Islam in Germany, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of religious plurality and the evolving power dynamics within the Islamic field, challenging conventional dichotomies and exploring the shared dynamics of operating 'against the mainstream'. In doing so, we will also analyse the internal negotiations between liberal Muslim and Salafi actors, who must balance the cultural diversity of their surroundings with the need to maintain an idea of Islamic 'purity'.

Drawing on principal considerations from a comparative analysis of religions (Freiberger 2019), this article will compare Salafi and liberal Islam in Germany as two groups that are rather marginalised within the Islamic field. Even if a more particular picture of the Islamic field can be drawn for good reasons, we consider both groups to be marginalised in the field due to the low number of organised communities or associations that see themselves as liberal or belonging to the Salafi field. By contrast, the DİTİB association, for example, which is often described as part of the Islamic 'mainstream' in Germany, is estimated to have around 900 communities nationwide (cf. Rohe 2016, p. 133). Our concept of marginalisation here therefore primarily refers to the balance of power of the number of organised groups and says nothing about the discursive power of these groups; actually, both groups have a high discursive presence in public German discourse. The discursive power of liberal Muslim and Salafi actors has frequently undermined the legitimacy of mainstream Islamic associations. In response, Murat Gümüş—General Secretary of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany and Deputy General Secretary of the Islamic Community Millî Görüş (IGMG)—has recently defended these associations. In this context, he stated that "Muslim representation is not always about a party membership book. It is about practice. Trust. Proximity." He added that "the relevance of Islamic religious communities is often downplayed, and their voice is delegitimised even though they support hundreds of thousands of people every day." (IslamIQ 2025).

We will use two specific religious groups (DII and LIB) in the Islamic field as comparands, which we will contrast in deputy for the two subfields (Salafi and liberal Islam). We are aware that condensing the sub-fields into these two organised groups necessarily shortens the perspective in each case. Nevertheless, we are convinced that this comparison by proxy of two certain groups will provide an important insight into the attitudes and strategies of the fields in relation to the 'mainstream'. Where there are clearly different

positions in certain questions within the sub-fields, we will refer to them. As a heuristic for the comparative category (*tertium comparationis*), we will initially use an emic approach to the concept of the Islamic 'mainstream'. The term 'mainstream' focuses on various references to the Islamic organisational field and refers to the established Islamic organisational landscape that has developed in Germany since the 1960s (cf. Rohe 2016, p. 67f.). From the diverse field of different Islamic associations and umbrella organisations, some of the associations with a Turkish background (DİTİB, VIKZ, IGMG) are generally considered to be the largest players in the field due to the number of associated mosque communities, which is why they are generally also the main reference points as 'mainstream'. Our analysis focuses on the similarities and differences between the two study groups in terms of their relationship and reference to this 'mainstream'.

Before we present the results of our comparative analysis in the following section, we would like to take this opportunity to discuss the current state of research concerning Salafi and progressive Islam and show what contribution this article provides. Afterwards, we will briefly outline our methodological approaches and the empirical basis of this article.

*Salafism in Germany* represents a multifaceted and evolving religious movement within Sunni Islam. At its core, it advocates a return to the practices and interpretations of the Quran and Sunnah as understood by the first three generations of Muslims, often emphasizing a strict adherence to what is perceived to be authentic Islamic tradition. This orientation frequently places Salafis in distinction to other Islamic traditions and mainstream Muslim organisations in Germany, whom they may view as having deviated from this original path.

Research on Salafism in Germany has undergone a notable shift. Early studies predominantly focused on the 'Salafi growth phase', roughly spanning from 2005 to 2015. This period was characterised by rapid expansion, driven by assertive public outreach, charismatic preachers, and the establishment of extensive online networks. Scholarship during this time has often examined the movement's appeal, its recruitment strategies, and its potential links to radicalisation. However, more recent research, as highlighted by Emmerich (2023), has increasingly focused on a subsequent 'reflection phase'. This newer scholarship investigates the re-orientation and critical reflection occurring within segments of German Salafism. This includes an examination of internal debates, shifts towards legal pragmatism and civic engagement, and attempts to navigate the German legal and political landscape.

Governmental figures suggest a numerical peak for political Salafism around 2019–2020, followed by a decline in annual growth rates (Verfassungsschutz 2021). However, academic research cautions against relying solely on these figures due to the fluid and network-based nature of the movement, with a significant portion of adherents remaining outside formal organisational structures.

The study of Salafism in Germany also explores the movement's transnational connections, particularly its historical and ideological links to Saudi Arabia. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasises the local adaptation of Salafi thought and practice to the specific context of being a religious minority (Bruckmayr and Hartung 2020). This 'local turn' examines how Salafis interpret and apply their religious framework within German society, often leading to unique manifestations of Salafism that diverge from global trends.

Furthermore, research delves into the internal dynamics of Salafi groups, including the role of converts, generational differences, and the ongoing negotiations between maintaining religious 'purity' and engaging with cultural diversity. The emergence of 'legal Salafism', characterised by the strategic use of legal and constitutional discourses, represents a significant area of contemporary research, exploring the attempts by some Salafi actors to gain recognition and advocate for their rights within the German state.

With regard to the *liberal and progressive Islamic field*, there is a growing interest in public debates as well as in research. Following academic–theologically orientated programmatic treatises in the second half of the 20th century (see, for example, Rahman 1982; Wadud 1992; Abu Zaid 2008), theoretical debates on the relationship between liberal values and Islamic teachings have emerged, for example, with regard to questions of gender equality, the relationship to Islamic tradition, the values of liberal democracies, and aspects of religious authority (cf., among others, Safi 2003; Hildebrandt 2007; Duderija 2014, 2022; Siraj 2016).

This is flanked by social and Islamic studies categorisations of the field in an overall view of contemporary Islamic thought. Despite differing emphases in the identification of subgroups, it is generally recognised that the field of contemporary Islam can be divided into three basic currents. In this context, 'liberal' or 'progressive Islam' serves as a collective term for perspectives that distinguish themselves from fundamentalist and extremist positions (puritanical Islam, political Islamism, militant jihadism) as well as from the bulk of traditional Islam, which encompasses established doctrinal and authority structures as well as established institutional networks (cf. Kurzman 1998; Saeed 2006; Amirpur 2013; Pink 2019).

In a heuristically oriented contribution on the relationship between liberalism and Islam, Schulze (2019) classifies different references to liberalism in the context of a general examination of processes of liberalisation in various European religious traditions from the 19th century to the present day. In doing so, he identifies two different directions. On the one hand, he refers to Muslim thinkers' disputes with political liberalism as it emerged in Europe as a network of state-supporting ideas. On the other hand, as a second reference, he summarises the already mentioned approaches of the reinterpretation of the Islamic tradition from the 1970s onwards, which refer back genealogically to the Islamic reform efforts at the end of the 19th century, and advocate for the empowerment of the religious individual, the rejection of exclusive religious claims to validity, and value-oriented action in society (Ibid. 264ff.).

Less common than a look at theoretical concepts and categorisations is research on practical aspects of progressive Islam. This includes studies that look at the challenges of a liberal-religious lifestyle from an intersectional perspective, for example, of homosexual Muslims (cf. Minwalla et al. 2005), in connection with religious pro-queer activism (cf. Rodríguez 2022) or with regard to the influence of progressive ideas on child education, as in the context of the curricula of Islamic schools in the US (cf. Saada and Gross 2016). Research into the practical aspects of *progressive Islamic communitisation* appears to be just beginning. In her study, Worthington (2016) refers to the rise of women's leadership, and outlines a shared authority approach for progressive Islamic communitarisation, which creates egalitarian religious spaces in progressive communities in the US and Canada.

More recent works have also investigated the communitarian practice of liberal Islam in Germany (cf. Müller 2024; Kalender 2024, 2025). In a separate study on the field of liberal Islam in Germany, Müller (2024) takes a differentiated look at the self-description as 'liberal-Islamic', among other things. While labels such as 'liberal' are profile-forming for organisations in the Islamic field and are also framed as a signal to potential new members and the non-Muslim majority society, some of the Muslims she interviewed reject the label for themselves despite leading a liberal-Islamic lifestyle in order to avoid giving the impression of a religious division in the field (Ibid., 111ff.). The finding points to the fact that 'liberal Islam', as a label in the German and wider European context, is certainly being applied to the field from outside as a desire. Media discourses thus produce a distinction that implicitly leads to a degradation of other (non-liberal) Muslims, as Karis points out in his media analysis (cf. Karis 2013, p. 50). Nevertheless, research in this area shows that a very heterogeneous field has developed globally in which 'liberal Islam' and other labels

are relevant as self-designations for organisations and individuals (cf. Schulze 2019, 267f.; Rane and Duderija 2021, 313f.).

A direct comparison of the two groups has hardly been made so far, even though they naturally refer to each other as antipodes of the field, so to speak. Previous research in the Middle East and Asia (Indonesia) has highlighted a global tension within contemporary Islam between conservative, Salafi, and progressive and liberal interpretations (cf. Qodir and Sight 2023). The Indonesian context showcases this contestation in the political sphere, while the work of Duderija (2007) provides a theoretical and historical backdrop, defining the core worldviews and approaches to modernity of Salafis and progressive Muslims.

Our study presented here on Salafis and liberal Muslims in Germany aims to contribute to the literature by examining these dynamics within a European minority context. It offers a comparative analysis of the two marginalised groups embodying these broader ideological trends, exploring their unique struggles, adaptations, and contestation of the mainstream Islamic field in Germany. Our following considerations are based on findings from two different research projects.

For the purpose of this study, *Salafism*, as exemplified by the "German Islamic Institute" (DII), is defined as an ultra-conservative strand strictly adhering to core Sunni theological principles, emphasizing the Quran and Sunnah as understood by the early generations of Muslims (the *Sahaba*), and vocally opposing other Islamic traditions (Roy 1994; Hegghammer 2014). For a comprehensive discussion of the diverse and fluid categories within Salafism, see Wiktorowicz (2006), Wagemakers (2017), and Bruckmayr and Hartung (2020).

Because of their exclusive claim to authenticity, Salafis frequently stress that only the Salafi *aqida* (creed) offers exemption from divine punishment. However, Salafism has also 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). This often involves engaging with constitutional rights and seeking avenues for political accommodation (Wiedl 2017). The Federal Agency for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (*Verfassungsschutz*) has monitored Salafi actors, including DII since 2007, based on the assessment that their ideology aims to introduce elements of Sharia law and to undermine Germany's liberal constitutional order.

DII was researched through a three-year organisational ethnography conducted between 2018 and 2022. This involved direct observation of social and religious activities and practises, engagement with leaders and lay members, and in-depth conversations to understand internal perspectives on their *da'wa* work. Complementing the ethnographic fieldwork was an extensive textual analysis of over 100 transcriptions of audio and video material from DII sermons and presentations, spanning the period from 2008 to 2022. This textual analysis aimed to identify recurring themes, shifts in discourse, and reflections on strategies, particularly concerning civic cooperation and potential collation building (see Emmerich 2023).

The basis for the *field of liberal Islam* in this article is a study on the formation of 'liberal Islam' in Germany, which began in 2022, and pursues a particular interest in the implementation of liberal Islamic ideas in processes of community and religious practice. The central question of this study is how a 'liberal-Islamic' understanding is translated into lived religion in the context of the community.

The empirical starting point of the exploratory qualitative study is the six communities of the association 'Liberal-Islamic Federation' (LIB), which was founded in 2010 as Islamic communities with an explicitly liberal orientation parallel to the existing established mosque association structures in Germany.

Based on strategies of social science ethnography (Dellwing and Prus 2012; Breuer 2010), perspectives of selected people from the association's board, community leaders and commu-

nity members are collected in semi-open interviews. A total of ten people were interviewed, including three men and seven women, four people with a migration background (Turkey, Greece, Lebanon, Iran), five converts to Islam, and one person who is a supporting member of the LIB with no Islamic affiliation. Further insights into community practice are gained through digital and local participant observation (for example, in online community meetings, in online and offline ritual practices, and at workshops). In addition, this study takes into account the association's own publications (including position papers on theological and social issues and published books that deal with the liberal-Islamic self-image) as well as self-presentations (on the association's own website, in press reports, interviews, and other mass media formats as well as on social media platforms).

## 2. Salafis and Progressives Against the Mainstream: A Juxtaposition

Since the material in this article is drawn from independent research projects, we have worked out different points of comparison in several comparative meetings, which shed light on aspects of the marginalised position of the two groups in relation to the 'mainstream'. The system of the following presentation has developed from this analytical work. Specifically, we will deal with actor biography issues, politics of labelling, strategies of challenging mainstream institutions, and negotiation of cultural diversity and Islamic 'purity'.

### *2.1. Actor Biography Issues*

Building upon the theme of marginalised Islamic groups contesting mainstream Islam, this section now delves into the individual experiences that drive affiliation with both Salafis and liberal Muslim groups. Examining the biographical narratives of German-born Muslims and converts within these two distinct yet peripheral groups reveals key motivations rooted in perceived exclusion and a quest for religious authenticity.

One key theme that emerges during the research with DII members is the shared experience of a perceived or actual exclusion from so-called mainstream mosques and institutions. For many Salafis, this exclusion stems from a perceived alienation from established Islamic organisations, often seen as overly bureaucratic, culturally bound, or compromised by their close ties to foreign state and religious authorities.

The example of German-born Muslims presents one interesting facet of the relationship with mainstream mosques. For instance, the example of Ibrahim, a German Muslim from a Turkish family, who attends a local DİTİB mosque, reveals a discontent with the existing structures, characterised by a conflict with the local Imam over the dissemination of Salafi-related content in the mosque (he was showing a video of the Salafi preacher Pierre Vogel). The Imam's rebuke, citing DİTİB's position as a 'state organ' and the associated risks, highlights the perceived constraints within established mosques. Ibrahim's subsequent departure from his "family mosque", and trajectory towards Salafism underscore a rejection of the authority and approach of these traditional institutions.

This sense of marginalisation often intertwines with a religious quest for authenticity and individual access to faith. In the context of Salafism, this translates to an emphasis on the Quran and Sunnah, interpreted through the lens of early Islamic tradition. This quest can be particularly pronounced among German-born Muslims, who may seek to strip away cultural accretions and perceived innovations (*bid'ah*) to arrive at what they believe is the 'pure' essence of the religion.

The Salafi movement has been described as a 'market leader' in the online *da'wa* (missionary) field, and this online presence allows it to bypass traditional channels of religious authority to reach a wider audience directly (Becker 2009). This is linked to religious deinstitutionalisation, suggesting that the Salafis emphasis on individual interpretation and

direct access to religious texts resonates with broader societal shifts away from established institutions (Özyürek 2014).

This sentiment is pronounced in the biographical narratives of converts to Islam who embody the individualism, confidence, and assertiveness which stands in stark contrast to the perceived fear and hesitancy of first- or second-generation migrant Muslims. This perspective is particularly revealing, as another Salafi respondent and former DII leader noted in 2018, "German converts are very important, as they grew up without any fear of the German state, police and so on." He elaborates on his own experience, stating, "I don't know how it feels to be afraid of the state, of course if you committed a crime, it would be different, but as long as you are within the limits of the *Strafgesetzbuch* (German penal code), I know with certainty, when you grew up here that nothing can happen to me. Hence, you know if you do the kind of legal advocacy, and public education for Muslims, which I do, none will come and takes your house away, or fires you from your job."

This quotation encapsulates a sense of security and familiarity with the German legal framework, which the Salafi leader believes empowers converts to engage more assertively in advocating for Muslim rights. His perspective suggests that converts, unburdened by the historical experiences of migrant communities, may feel better equipped to navigate and challenge the system. As Özyürek (2014, p. 5) observed, 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."

This perspective can, however, lead to complex and sometimes fraught relationships within the broader Muslim community, as the example of the convert Sascha exemplifies. Sascha, a 30-year-old business consultant "with many Muslim clients", describes his journey to Salafism and his background that included experiences with "a bad school" and past involvement with "drugs and fights". Sascha's views extend to a critique of certain cultural practices within migrant Muslim communities. He expresses a desire for a "more German Muslims and less ethnic Islam", and while acknowledging the existence of racism within convert communities, he also articulates frustrations with what he perceives as problematic behaviours. He mentions examples of *"Kanaken deiner Freundin auf den Arsch hauen oder sie dir in der Schule die Nikes abziehen"* (young men with migrant backgrounds harassing girlfriends or stealing Nikes at school) and criticises "gangster rappers who misuse Islam." These statements offer a glimpse into the critical debates within the Salafi movement, particularly regarding issues of cultural identity, integration, and cultural Islam. Examining the biographical narratives of individuals within Salafi movements provides valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges and motivations that shape their identities and actions within German society.

To a certain extent, the liberal-Islamic spectrum of organisations forms the ideological counterpart to the Salafi scene but, like the latter, it is also largely made up of people who have converted to Islam or have experienced exclusion in one way or another in mainstream Islamic communities. One convert, an employee of a trade union in her mid-40s, for example, who is now engaged in the Liberal-Islamic Federation after experiences in other mosques, describes a recurring feeling of alienation:

"It's little things like that, you go to pray and during the prostration the headscarf opens at the back, then you can see a bit of your neck and people came straight to me and put a big headscarf on me. […] That's nothing dramatic, but for me it's a moment when I think like that […] that's just rubbish for me. […] And then at the next prostration she saw that I had bright red painted fingernails and then this big headscarf went nicely over

my nails […]. You always have situations where you think 'I don't want to deal with that' when it comes to little things like that" (member of a liberal community, 4 July 2022).

The example highlights the difficulties of matching in mainstream communities, which are not based on targeted exclusion ("it's nothing dramatic"), but on a feeling of ongoing alienation ("that's just rubbish for me"). Associations such as the Liberal-Islamic Federation offer an alternative community context in these cases. Other interviewees reported far more serious experiences, some of which ended in psychological trauma and, in some cases, led to a withdrawal from religious community life. This applies to queer people, for example, who often feel marginalised and discriminated against in the established mosque environment. The coordinator of a liberal community describes this as follows: "Unfortunately, it is quite blatant, […] queer Muslims have no opportunity at all to live their queerness and religiosity in other communities, you can forget it!" (coordinator of a liberal community, 27 March 2023).

The Liberal-Islamic Federation and other organisations are very openly offering themselves as an alternative home. The special features of the theological orientation of the organisation play an important role here, as the coordinator goes on to describe:

"I would say […] that many people can't do anything with certain interpretations in traditional theology. […] And that, especially these gender issues or the topic of Islam and human rights—compatibility with a secular state, these are just topics where we struggle, because from our point of view theology in the […] traditionalist form […] has not been sufficiently developed. I would say that actually, yes, almost everyone in our communities agrees that in this or that respect there is a disagreement with the traditionalist […] offer" (coordinator of a liberal community, 27 March 2023).

From this perspective, the members of the liberal communities are united by a desire for a more open theology that is adapted to modern circumstances. The congregations of the Liberal-Islamic Federation see themselves as a free space for members to develop these theological approaches for themselves. In this sense, it is an active membership that the organisation demands. "I don't believe that anyone comes to us by chance" (coordinator of a liberal community, 27 March 2023), explains the coordinator, describing the members as people who have consciously set out to find new answers within the framework of their religion.

### *2.2. Politics of Labelling*

Labels are an important discursive instrument for establishing social relations and differences in the field. By looking at questions of how Salafis and liberal Muslims describe themselves, and are described by others, it is possible to gain an insight into the social dynamics of both groups, which can be an expression of positioning vis-à-vis the majority society as well as vis-à-vis other forces in the Islamic field. We want to pursue this idea in this section.

The issue of labelling plays a crucial role in understanding the dynamics within and around German Salafi movements, in particular regarding tension between how labels are used and understood in public discourse, and how they are perceived and employed within the Salafi community itself.

Salafi actors often feel that they are being defined and categorised by outsiders, leading to a sense of misrepresentation and injustice which, combined with the securitising and stigmatising power of the term, has rendered the label relatively ineffective and often associated with extremism, violence, and anti-constitutional views. To the contrary, in academic discussion, contemporary Salafis have been characterised—most prominently by the scholar and former chair of the U.S. Interagency Intelligence Committee on Terrorism, Wiktorowicz (2006)—as those who focus on daily practice and *da'wa* and accept secular governments; those who advocate political action to establish an Islamic state; and those

who excommunicate deviants and propagate political violence. Debates about the fluidity and validity of these categories and hybrid identities are ongoing (e.g., Wagemakers 2017).

During my fieldwork, Salafi actors often employed alternative terms to describe themselves, emphasizing their commitment to what they perceive as the 'pure', 'authentic', and 'original' form of Sunni Islam. This self-identification is crucial for understanding their worldview and motivations.

The term 'Salafiya' was still used in backstage areas during fieldwork discussions, but also often through attempts to defuse the threat content of the label, as exemplified in lengthy explanations of the meaning of 'Salaf'. This highlights the ongoing struggle to control the narrative and to challenge the negative associations attached to the term, unlike in the British context, with more public acceptance and an official organisation such as Salafi Publications (Emmerich 2020), which would not be found in Germany.

Interestingly, Salafis have also been able to re-appropriate the negative labels attached to them from the outside as a badge of honour and a source of gratifying fame through the negative press. This suggests that, for some individuals, even negative labels can become a form of distinction, a source of notoriety and even a sense of pride. Later in my research, some Salafis reflected critically on this boasting about negative labels. The tension between external stigmatisation and internal self-definition, and the strategic use of labels contribute to a dynamic and contested landscape of Salafism in Germany.

Among liberal Muslims, there is also a critical examination of external attributions and self-labelling. The label 'liberal' is by no means the only option being discussed, but it is quite central in the German-speaking discourse. At a symposium in February 2024, a representative of the Liberal-Islamic Federation described her stance on the topic and pointed out that 'liberal' is sometimes used as a combative term: Criticism of liberalism of liberal democracies, whose global activities make a mockery of liberal values, is sweltering on the political horizon. "On the surface," explains the speaker, "you are open and democratic and at the same time thousands are drowning in the Mediterranean and there are human rights violations worldwide" (field note, 6 February 2024). Of course, liberal Muslims do not want to be identified with this. Associations with market liberalism are also an undesirable connotation of the term liberalism for actors in the scene who tend to be post-colonially inspired and anti-capitalist orientated.

The fact that Muslim actors nonetheless attach the label 'liberal' to themselves is first and foremost a clear desire to distinguish themselves from the established structures in the Islamic field. For the Liberal-Islamic Federation, the term is primarily linked to certain role models, including not only the reference point of Protestant Christianity, which is certainly relevant in the German context, but Liberal Judaism. The latter is relevant in two respects. On the one hand, the formation of Liberal Judaism took place in contrast to the prevailing Orthodox Judaism and thus produced its own liberal-religious community structures; on the other hand, extensive reforms have also been implemented in the area of religious practice. This includes the disclosure of religious roles for women. Clear points of contact are seen here, which are also reflected today in co-operations with liberal Jewish communities, among others.

The alternatives to the label 'liberal' appear to be as numerous as the religiously individualised members bring different emphases to the table. In addition to 'reform Islam' (*Reformislam*), which is sometimes also called for in public discourse, and 'progressive', which is more widespread in English-speaking countries, 'inclusive', 'enlightened' (*aufgeklärt*), 'contemporary' (*zeitgemäß*), 'self-determined', 'libertarian' (*freiheitlich*), and 'secular' are other labels that are discussed in the field, and in some cases identify different sub-fields.

Criticism of these self-identifying groups usually comes from within Islam. In the form of hostility, this sometimes goes far beyond constructive criticism. A central point

here is the accusation of a dilution of Islamic content, and an arbitrary implementation of religious practice. As one board member describes: "The common prejudice is simply that we make up our own Islam to suit us" (board member, 27 February 2023). Another board member points out how little the association's concerns are taken seriously from some perspectives: "Well, there have been publications on islam.de that have asked what such a liberal association wants, do they now want to certify swingers clubs as halal?" (board member, 4 July 2022). This type of discrediting is in view of the actors attributed to a lack of understanding of the liberal principle of diversity: "What perhaps leads to these prejudices is that we simply don't demand justification from anyone and don't look anyone in the nose" (board member, 27 February 2023). According to the board member, this deliberate lack of social control, which allows the religious individual freedom in the context of a religious community, sometimes gives the impression of a certain arbitrariness from the outside. She had also experienced this as a representative at the 'German Islam Conference' (*Deutsche Islam Konferenz*), a regular forum for exchange between the state and representatives of national Islamic organisations initiated by the German Federal Ministry of the Interior. Particularly in the initial phase, the representatives of the Liberal-Islamic Federation were not taken seriously by other representatives of Islamic organisations.

It is noticeable in the dynamics of the Islamic field that, despite widespread scepticism towards labels such as 'liberal', more and more positions are emerging that at least soften previously firm conservative positions or are no longer so aggressively advocated (e.g., with regard to gender issues). This is certainly also due to the German public discourse, which is not only more positive towards liberal-religious attitudes, but seems to clearly favour them through state programmes that are accompanied by financial project funding—for the prevention of extremism as well as democracy-promoting, diversity-affirming, and queer-friendly projects.

### *2.3. Strategies of Challenging Mainstream Institutions*

In this section, we want to look more closely at how the specific reasons for the oppositional stance of the two groups we analysed lead to the strategies they use to challenge the mainstream institutions.

The relationship between Salafi movements and mainstream Islamic actors in Germany is characterised by a complex interplay of confrontation and, at times, tactical accommodation. A central theme from the fieldwork is the mutual vilification stemming from perceived theological differences to power struggles within the religious field.

One key driver of this adversarial stance is the Salafi critique of established Islamic associations. These associations are often perceived to be overly bureaucratic, hierarchical, and compromised by their close ties to domestic or foreign states. This critique is fuelled by the belief that these mainstream institutions prioritise pleasing the political establishment over serving the needs of the 'grassroots' Muslim community.

This often-encountered view is particularly pronounced in the context of mosque associations, where concerns about internal power dynamics and financial interests are raised. One Salafi respondent noted the following in this context: "The structure of the DİTİB, is a massive problem for German Muslims, in particular because the leadership receives very high salaries. Especially at the top level, people try to defend their privileges (*am Stuhl kleben*), and very few will dare to risk it by becoming publicly too assertive or to criticise internal miscarriages…" This perception of self-serving leadership within mainstream organisations can fuel resentment among Salafi actors, who often present themselves as champions of a purer, less corrupted form of Islam.

This perceived corruption and lack of accountability within established institutions is seen as particularly damaging to the relationship with Muslim youth. The same respon-

dent continues, "Muslim youth will sense such power games and they will react quite sensitive if there is a lot of money involved. If young Muslims realise how DİTİB and others work, they will lose trust in these institutions, and might turn their back to their *din*…" Another Salafi speaker echoed this, as follows: "DİTİB mosques can't hold their youth and teach all this cultural stuff from their forefathers."

Historically, Salafi actors, including those affiliated with DII, have employed tactics designed to undermine the financial and organisational stability of established mosques. Salafi leaders have even been known to provide guidance on the subject of "conquering established ethnic mosques".

This advice included the following recommendations: first, to refrain from paying mosque membership fees; second, to be elected to the mosque committee in order to assert influence; and third, to take over these mosques ("*moscheen einnehmen*"). This strategy is indicative of a pragmatic approach to infiltrating and even "taking over" existing mosque structures, rather than merely criticising them from the outside.

However, the relationship with established mosque associations is not always antagonistic, with more accommodating tones recently, including the occasional defence of DİTİB and IGMG, as seen amidst mosque raids during the COVID-19 pandemic, or the creation of legal advocacy organisations to serve longer-term goals, such as gaining official recognition and political influence. Hence, in times of crisis, when mainstream Islamic associations have faced heightened scrutiny, Salafi actors could become temporary allies, highlighting a complex and shifting power dynamic.

However, the dominant antagonism theme can also be seen from established institutions, like DİTİB, which have strategically utilised Salafi groups and their actions to deflect criticism and allegations of radicalisation aimed at themselves. In sum, the strategies of challenging mainstream institutions employed by Salafi actors are multifaceted and dynamic. While there is a strong element of antagonism and a desire to undermine traditional authority, there is also evidence of tactical accommodation and strategic alliances.

We have already outlined the reasons why liberal Muslims are also critical of the so-called mainstream. The criticism is primarily directed at the institutionalised form of Islam based on traditional values as represented by the large established Muslim associations. These associations are challenged in different ways. In the following, we focus on the pluralisation of the field and the relativisation of the mainstream as two central strategies of liberal Muslims.

The liberal Islamic field differs in its confrontation with the established mosque organisations. While some actors are quite harsh and direct in their criticism of the associations' positions (e.g., with regard to the role of women or political entanglements with the countries of origin), others tend to focus on setting counterpoints in the mosque landscape through deviant forms of public presentation and their own community organisation, thereby promoting the pluralisation of the field. The Liberal-Islamic Federation is more committed to the second approach and contributes to civil society and political discourse to the best of its ability, and with its own liberal theological viewpoints. The primary aim is not to persuade established organisations to change, as one board member explains:

"We are not assuming that conservative organisations will now feel so pressured by us that they will, I don't know, go off tomorrow and somehow marry two men in their mosque" (board member, 4 July 2022).

Aware of the limits of their influence on a transformation of the big associations, the players are not aiming for a frontal attack but are endeavouring to strengthen their own niche within what they see as a diverse field. The Board member summarises his own demands on the large associations once again:

"People would be helped if someone came to a mosque like this and revealed this [i.e., a homosexual orientation] to his imam, if he no longer told him, 'This is sick and you have to stop', but if he told him, 'I believe that this is not allowed, from everything I have learnt theologically. I can't tell you anything other than what I believe. But there are other people who see it differently. Why don't you look there?" (board member, 4 July 2022).

The quotation highlights the desire for liberal Islamic viewpoints to be recognised among the diversity of Islamic positions. A key challenge for the established associations is to accept this diversity and to reject the universality of their own position.

The second strategy in the debate with the big associations is to question their qualification as a majority. In this relativisation of the mainstream, many dialogue partners often operate by critically weighing up unclear proportions. For example, a member of the advisory board of the Liberal-Islamic Federation admits in conversation that his organisation only has a few hundred members. However, it is questionable to look at this 'only in legal terms'; the number of people who can identify with the liberal positions of the association is significantly larger and is also tangible 'on a global level' (advisory board member, 27 March 2023). On the other hand, the numbers of the so-called large associations are unclear, as they do not disclose their membership registers, so that, here too, it is unclear how many people they actually represent. In addition to this problematisation of the figures, the liberal actors paint a picture of the Islamic field as a fragmented collection of very different positions, in which both the traditionalist perspective of the large associations and the liberal positions are to be considered equally important.

The confrontation between liberal actors and the established spectrum of organisations is not one-sided but also provokes reactions. In its founding phase, the Liberal-Islamic Federation experienced various forms of devaluation, as already indicated. This included marginalisation on the part of representatives of large associations, for example, at the German Islam Conference, as well as various forms of verbal abuse, some of which were aggressive. Even though liberal Muslims are still criticised from various sides, the way in which mainstream actors define the relationship has changed to some extent. The representative of the Liberal-Islamic Federation at the last Islam Conference, for example, described how she was approached by a representative of one of the large associations after her theological lecture: "He came up to me […] and said: 'Yes […], let's have a coffee, apparently, we're not that far apart, because you pray and you fast too'" (board member, 27 March 2023). The quotation underlines once again how the label 'liberal' on the part of long-established Islamic actors apparently initially and sustainably generates scepticism about how serious liberal Islam is about its religious stance and, in particular, its religious practice ("You pray too and you fast too"). At the same time, accommodation effects with the presence of liberal positions in the field become clear.

### *2.4. Negotiation of Cultural Diversity and Islamic 'Purity'*

This final section will now examine the contrasting approaches of Salafi and liberal actions in navigating the complex terrain of cultural diversity while upholding distinct interpretations of Islamic 'purity'. Despite their differing theological orientations, both groups engage in boundary-drawing processes, and employ rhetorical strategies to define their relationship with the wider society and the internal Muslim community.

The dynamics within and around the Salafi movements are significantly shaped by one central tension: the negotiation between accommodating the cultural diversity within and of their surroundings whilst maintaining a homogeneous idea of Islamic 'purity'.

Salafi discourse in this context can range from inclusive, aimed at appealing to a broader Muslim audience (other conservative/traditional Muslims) or even engaging with non-Muslims (Orthodox Jews), to exclusiveness, emphasizing the superiority of Salafi in-

terpretations and practices. This rhetorical flexibility is often deployed to achieve specific objectives, such as recruitment or political accommodation or rigid boundary maintenance. Some Salafi actors may even be open to collaboration with other Muslim organisations or even non-Muslim entities at the local level, while others maintain strict separation to preserve their perceived 'purity'.

While Salafi groups, such as DII, will rarely tolerate non-Muslim members or non-Salafis as members, although Salafis do entertain mundane everyday relations with non-Muslims, a substantive number of people who pray in the few Salafi mosques in Germany are in fact not Salafis, which illustrates a practical inclusivity where the mosque functions as a place of worship for a broader community, regardless of ideological adherence (within Sunni Islam). However, this practical inclusivity can coexist with organisational exclusivity, where local Muslims defended a Salafi mosque as a place of religious infrastructure but not the Salafi committee, leadership, and doctrine. This suggests that, while the Salafis may be open to a diverse congregation, the organisational leadership and representation may remain firmly in the hands of Salafi actors.

Moreover, in response to what Salafis perceive as an 'onslaught' on their religious practices by liberal (Muslim) groups, Salafi actors have increasingly invoked discourses of constitutional diversity and religious freedom. Liberal Muslims and Salafis thus become opponents in the name of upholding the right kind of diversity. Salafis thus position themselves as defenders of religious liberties against what they view as an overly aggressive and exclusionary liberal agenda.

Interestingly, this defence of religious freedom can lead to unexpected alliances, some political accommodation and institutionalisation efforts among Salafis may result in boundary blurring with other conservative constituencies but continues with sharp demarcations towards liberal groups. This can be seen in the following statement by a DII leader: "We Muslims can no longer openly say that homosexuality is a sin in Islam. But we live in a democracy where freedom of opinion and religious freedom are guaranteed, meaning that Muslims, Jews, and Christians have the right to say that homosexuality is a sin." Salafis, in their struggle to maintain their religious practices, have hence found common ground and discursively formed coalitions with conservative Christians and Jews who share similar concerns about the erosion of traditional values. This strategic partnership further exacerbates the emerging antagonism between Salafis and liberal Muslim groups in the public sphere.

Like other players in the (progressive) Islamic field, the members of the Liberal-Islamic Federation are also committed to the values of the German Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) of 1949 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1949. Despite the explicit removal of the concept of liberalism from a purely political context, the libertarian attitude that is always emphasised refers to a civic character of the liberal understanding of Islam, which is specifically formulated in a separate position paper, the so-called "LIB Charter", and placed in an Islamic reference horizon. In contrast to previous positions of Muslim states and certain Muslim groups, the authors of the charter emphasise that, in principle, there is no conflict between Islamic values and general human rights, as the Sharia, in the sense of an "(individual) ethical guide for every believer", aims at "conditions oriented towards the common good (*maṣlaḥa ʿāmma*)" (Charter of the Liberal-Islamic Federation 2017, p. 1), the specifics of which must always be redefined by the members of a generation. As Muslims in the context of liberal democracies, they are therefore also committed to the open values of society for religious reasons.

On the one hand, this committed stance takes up the positioning of Islamic associations that is often called for in public discourse and, on the other hand, is specifically directed against Islamist positions that place Sharia law above the constitution and against Islamic associations that, in the view of the Liberal-Islamic Federation, are not clearly com-

mitted enough to liberal values. Here, too, the players are focussing on equal rights for women and the acceptance of queer Muslims. This applies in particular to the radical spectrum, to which LIB actors also include members of the Salafi scene, who must be countered with targeted awareness campaigns and involvement in projects to prevent radicalisation. Strengthening alternative (i.e., progressive) Islamic positions is also cited as a clear strategy. What applies externally also applies internally, as the internal organisation of the association. For example, religious practice is geared towards the equal participation of women and trans people, and ritual prayer is performed without physical separation of the sexes. In addition, space is given to denominational and cultural differences, for example, with regard to special mourning times in Shiite Islam (*Ashura*) or in the consideration of regional customs in the organisation of Muslim weddings.

Clear boundaries are also drawn in the internal organisation where equality and diversity are called into question. An incident in the early history of the organisation shows that interfaith marriages, for example, can also lead to an internal stress test if they are called into question by members. For example, one person left the congregation because she was unable to assert her critical stance on the marriage of a Muslim woman to a Christian.

What applies internally also points the way for external behaviour. With regard to cooperation in the Islamic field, for example, the imam of one community emphasises the following:

"We have more in common with some [i.e., Islamic organisations] and less in common with others. […] It also depends a bit on which point it's about, because sometimes it's also quite good when it comes to anti-Muslim racism, everyone should stick together, for example, but the question is when it comes to the issue of cooperation, that's where I'm a bit stricter, because I think that we should at least share certain basic positions and for me that includes the unrestricted equality of people of all genders. For me, this also includes the fact that there are more than two genders. I simply consider that to be a fundamental human right" (Imam of a liberal community, 14 February 2023).

While a symbolic alliance with other Islamic organisations on certain issues is largely described as good and important, there are restrictions with regard to concrete joint projects, which are primarily based on the basic attitudes already mentioned. The membership regulation, which until recently denied membership to people who already belonged to another Islamic organisation, should also be understood against this background. Even if the regulation has been softened with regard to multiple memberships in liberal communities, an exclusive dynamic can still be identified here, which paradoxically limits access to membership in order to protect diversity.

Finally, a special feature of the membership structure is that there are also non-Muslim members in the Liberal-Islamic Federation. These have often joined the organisation as paying members out of a desire to strengthen a liberal Islamic voice in public discourse in view of the poor image of Islam and the problematic positions of some Islamic associations. This membership is therefore to be understood as an act of solidarity and support.

## 3. Findings and Conclusion: Implications for Understanding the German Islamic Field

In this section, we will bring the most important findings from both case studies closer together in a concentrated discussion and link them back to the state of research outlined at the beginning. Here, too, we will orientate ourselves along the systematics already outlined, and address biographical aspects, labelling, strategies for challenging the 'mainstream', and dealing with cultural diversity.

Both Salafis and liberal Muslims, as analysed earlier, share a common thread of experiencing alienation from mainstream Islamic communities, albeit for different reasons. For Salafis, this often stems from perceiving mainstream mosques as overly traditional, culturally influenced, and too closely aligned with state authorities, leading individuals, like Ibrahim, to seek a more 'authentic' and less compromised form of Islam. Converts within Salafism, like a former DII leader, express a confidence rooted in their upbringing within German society, contrasting with the perceived fear of migrant-background Muslims, and a desire for a "culture- and tradition-free Islam" (Özyürek 2014, p. 5). This can lead to internal critiques of 'ethnic Islam', as seen in Sascha's narrative. By contrast, liberal Muslims' alienation arises from the perceived rigidity and lack of inclusivity within mainstream mosques concerning personal freedoms and interpretations of faith, as illustrated by the convert's discomfort with enforced headscarf adjustments. Queer Muslims, as another example, face blatant exclusion. Both groups, therefore, represent segments of the Muslim population seeking alternative religious spaces due to feelings of marginalisation within established structures, yet their quests for authenticity and belonging lead them to vastly different theological and social conclusions—except for their united belief in radically reforming the Islamic mainstream.

The labelling of Salafi Muslims and liberal Muslims in Germany is a complex and contested issue. Salafi Muslims often feel that they are being defined and categorised by outsiders, leading to a sense of misrepresentation and injustice. They have attempted to re-appropriate the negative labels attached to them from the outside as a badge of honour and a source of gratifying fame. However, this strategy has not been universally successful, and some Salafis have reflected critically on the boasting about negative labels. By contrast, liberal Muslims have also engaged in a critical examination of external attributions and self-labelling. They have attached the label 'liberal' to themselves as a way to distinguish themselves from established structures in the Islamic field. However, this label is not without controversy, and liberal Muslims have faced criticism from within Islam for allegedly diluting Islamic content and implementing religious practice arbitrarily.

Both Salafi Muslims and liberal Muslims have employed alternative terms to describe themselves, emphasizing their commitment to what they perceive as the 'pure', 'authentic', and 'original' form of Sunni Islam and practice. However, while Salafis have sought to reappropriate negative labels, liberal Muslims have focused on creating a distinct identity that is separate from the mainstream Islamic community. The dynamics of self- and other-labelling in the Islamic field in Germany are characterised by a tension between external stigmatisation and internal self-definition. Salafi Muslims and liberal Muslims have both sought to challenge the negative associations attached to their labels, but with varying degrees of success. The use of labels has become a strategic tool in the contestation of power and identity within the Islamic field.

With regard to the attitudes with which the two groups position themselves towards the Islamic 'mainstream', there are initially striking similarities. Both groups are critical of the established Islamic associations, and see them as too bureaucratic, hierarchical and compromised by external influences (i.e., dependent on the German state or foreign governments). Both groups see themselves as driving forces for a pure, less over-formed version of Islam. Both groups see the needs of the 'grassroots' Muslim community as more important than the needs of traditional religious institutions. Both groups have a complex and changing relationship with the established Islamic organisations. Nevertheless, there are some important differences: Liberal Muslims are in favour of recognising and accepting diversity and variety in and beyond Islam, while Salafis strive for a pure form of Islam in exclusion of other positions. Concerning other Muslim groups, liberal Muslims are open for cooperation and collaboration, but rely on substantive markers of demarcation

(e.g., gender equality), which can prevent cooperation in the field. Salafis, on a practical level, maintain more open boundaries with other Muslims, including mainstream Muslims, despite their narrow ideological understanding of Islam. Last, but not least, both groups clearly oppose each other as antipodes of the Islamic spectrum in mutual rejection, which not only rules out cooperation between these subfields, but would downright call into question the core identity of these groups.

Both Salafi and liberal Muslims engage with the complexities of cultural diversity and Islamic 'purity', but their approaches diverge significantly. Salafis often prioritise a strict interpretation of Islamic 'purity' based on their understanding of early Islamic tradition, leading to boundary drawing that can range from inclusive at a practical level (allowing diverse Sunnis into Salafi contexts) to exclusive at an organisational level (leadership and membership). Their engagement with broader cultural diversity is often framed through the lens of constitutional rights, particularly religious freedom, which can lead to unexpected alliances with other conservative religious groups against perceived liberal 'onslaughts' on their practices. As the example regarding homosexuality showed, this can lead to boundary blurring with conservative Christians and Jews while maintaining sharp demarcations towards diverging faith-based and liberal groups. By contrast, liberal Muslims prioritise the values of the German constitution and universal human rights, viewing traditional (Salafi influenced) Islamic values as inherently compatible with these principles. Their negotiation of diversity involves an active commitment to equality and inclusion within their own organisations, extending to gender and queer Muslims, and a willingness to accommodate denominational and cultural differences within the broader Islamic field. While they may form symbolic alliances on issues like anti-Muslim racism, their commitment to unrestricted equality often creates clear boundaries with more conservative groups, including Salafis, hindering deeper cooperation on joint projects.

In conclusion, the positioning of Salafi and liberal Muslims towards mainstream Islam in Germany, while seemingly oppositional, reveals the shared dynamics of marginalisation and a contestation of established norms. Both groups, despite their divergent theological and social orientations, navigate the Islamic field with a degree of fluidity and a concern for the practical application of their beliefs in everyday life. Much like the nuanced agency observed in the scholarship on urban religious networks (Kuppinger 2014), where superimposed doctrines interact with temporal realities, both Salafis and liberal Muslims demonstrate a practical everyday judgment (Emmerich and Ebbiary 2025) of their faith, adapting and negotiating their identities within their specific social contexts. While their institutional strategies and boundary-drawing processes differ, the lived realities of individuals within these movements often involve complex negotiations that transcend rigid ideological categories, highlighting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of Islamic practice at the margins of the German Islamic field.

Further research is crucial to fully grasp the nuanced and often contradictory dynamics within the German Islamic field. Longitudinal studies, incorporating diverse qualitative data and analysing the evolving interactions between these marginalised groups and the mainstream, are necessary to track the long-term impact of securitisation and shifting socio-political landscapes on their identities and strategies.

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## Notes

[1] The original name of the Salafi organisation has been changed to DII. The names and other identifying details of respondents and locations have also been changed or omitted. Media quotations that could identify DII respondents have been omitted. We proceed differently with the presentation of the liberal dialogue partners, whose statements we also present anonymously, but whose affiliation to the Liberal-Islamic Federation we name in agreement.

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