

# Could Germany soon have a Muslim holiday?

“Why shouldn’t one consider a Muslim holiday in parts of the country where many Muslims live?” The suggestion by conservative Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere has sparked a fundamental debate in Germany.

De Maiziere’s proposal quickly turned into a political issue within his own Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The interior minister has latched onto a hot topic that comes on the heels of a debate over whether the CDU lost votes in Germany’s recent national election because it abandoned much of its conservative profile. But de Maiziere’s own constraints, as well as accepted practice in Germany, put the proposal into perspective. All Souls Day (Nov. 1), which honors the memory of the deceased, for instance, is only observed in regions where many Catholics live. De Maiziere envisions a regionally defined Muslim holiday.

## **Reactions to the idea**

Holidays have a long tradition in Germany, said Lower Saxony’s CDU party chairman, Bernd Althusmann, who immediately criticized the interior minister’s proposal.

Althusmann says he fails to see the necessity of changing Germany’s long-standing holiday calendar. But that was not his only criticism.

Althusmann is fundamentally opposed to any discussion of religious holidays in the middle of an election campaign. Lower Saxony will hold regional elections on Sunday, and de Maiziere traveled to the state as one of the CDU’s most prominent speakers. Such a controversial topic, one that could spook parts of the party’s conservative base, is seen by many as risky.

The interior minister’s proposal immediately set off a heated online debate. “The submission is moving ahead,” tweeted Erika Steinbach, the influential former chair of the Federation of Expellees, an organization representing ethnic Germans expelled from various Eastern European countries during World War II. Beatrix von Storch, a leading politician from the far-right populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), quickly and succinctly tweeted: “NO! NO! NO!” Others called for a federal regulation of holidays before any consideration of a Muslim holiday

could begin.

The reaction from the Central Council of Muslims was predictably positive. The Council's chairman, Aiman Mazyek, said that such a holiday would promote integration.

He added that the concept was not about giving Muslims the day off, rather, "It is about granting Muslims a sense of being taken into account at school and in the workplace." For example, a Muslim police officer could get the day off at the end of Ramadan and then be able to fill in for a Christian colleague that has the day off to celebrate Christmas, said Mazyek.

### **Holidays set by the states**

In reality, there are already a number of legally regulated Muslim holidays taking place in Germany at the state level. Muslim students in Berlin, Hamburg and Bremen have the right to take a day off. And employees are also afforded the opportunity to go to mosque or pray on the job. In Berlin that right is guaranteed during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha (Sacrifice Feast). Hamburg and Bremen also include Ashoura (Day of Remembrance).

Holidays in Germany are mainly regulated at the state level. There are nine legal holidays across the country, but only one, the Day of German Unity (Oct. 3), is federally mandated. De Maiziere's proposal is not the first on the subject. In 2013, the Central Council of Muslims called for the introduction of a Muslim holiday, and the Turkish community followed suit the next year.

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