

Muslims get threats after forming society in Germany

A group of former Muslims in Germany who have formed a society of atheists have received threatening letters, pronouncing them fit for death, and have been given police bodyguards.

Mina Ahadi, an Iranian-born woman, founded the society in Cologne with 10 sympathisers several weeks ago and called it the National Council of Ex-Muslims. At the end of February she called a news conference in Berlin to publicly pronounce herself non-Islamic.

The police have assigned plainclothes bodyguards to protect her ever since.

'I'm a target,' said Ahadi, 50. She said members had received letters telling them they would be shot in the back. When she went online with a fierce attack on Islamic organisations, somebody circulated a statement suggesting she was fit to be killed, she said.

Ahadi, who has lived in Germany since 1996, has also received a degree of support.

'We are going to get involved in politics, oppose women wearing head-scarves, oppose building plans for mosques,' she said. Referring to practices many Germans believe are typical of Islam, she said, 'We'll stop honour killings, stop people being stoned to death.'

Ahadi, whose husband was executed by the Islamic rulers of Iran, is demanding that Germany do more to help women and girls, who she claims are oppressed, even in Germany, by 'political Islam.'

'The girls are not allowed to have boyfriends. They are forced to marry. They have to wear headscarves. If they get pregnant outside marriage, people call them sluts,' she said.

Nur Gabbari, 40, a former Muslim and refugee from Iran who is on the committee of the society, said he knew it was very dangerous to form such a group: 'But we cannot remain bystanders, as if we were in a theatre, when we see what religion is doing to people.'

The National Council of Muslims, a Cologne-based group representing many of Germany's mosque-going Moslems, says the new society should be tolerated, despite its cheeky parody of the mainstream group's name.

'These people have the same right as anyone else to establish a society,' said Ayyub Axel Koehler, the Council's German-born chairman. 'Everyone has a right to their own opinions, and of course they are entitled to express them publicly.'

The new group was criticised by Lale Akgun, a member of the German parliament who liaises with the Muslim community for the Social Democratic Party, one of the two parties in Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition.

Akgun flatly rejects the claim that Islam and human rights are incompatible, and she says those who make that claim are stoking up latent Islamophobia, which is already present among some Germans. 'Why on earth do non-believers of Muslim extraction have to set up a society specially for themselves?'

The ex-Muslim group says it wants to stop mosque groups speaking in the name of the entire community.

Gabbari explained: 'If these organisations assert that 3.5 million people are outraged by cartoons depicting Mohammed or that schoolgirls should wear headscarves or be excused from swimming classes, we are going to say, No.'

He added that the group's collective no, pronounced in Berlin as a solemn, and provocative, renunciation of Islam, breached a taboo among Muslims who made no allowance for anyone to reject the faith as Christians do when they formally cease paying church contributions.

Other ex-Muslims in Germany and abroad have rushed to join the group, according to Gabbari. 'In a short space of time, we have grown to more than 400 members and we are getting daily contacts from places like Morocco, Iran, Egypt, Turkey and of course from Germany. A lot of people offer us unpaid help or to protect us.'

The society has received assistance from a German atheist organisation, the Giordano Bruno Foundation, and is planning to rent an office after advice from the police on a safe location.

In May, the society says it will hold a conference on the topic, 'Sharia' and the German constitution.

Critics associate several founders of the group with communist parties in their countries of origin. Some have suggested that Ahadi's own political views would not endear her to Germans and have described her as a 'hardliner' with 'Stalinist sympathies.'

Ahadi replied, 'I was campaigning in Iran against the death penalty, against people being stoned to death. We saved people's lives. Yes, I did work with the Communist Party back then.'

'But if you look at the story of my life, you'll see my politics are in defence of human rights.'

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