

TRANSNATIONAL ISLAM, IMMIGRANT NGOs AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION: THE CASE OF THE IGMG

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Abstract: In the literature of economic development and civil society, extensive research has been done on the role of western NGOs in fighting poverty; however, there is hardly any study on the role of the NGOs originating from Muslim nations on this issue. There is even a complete silence when it comes to expatriate Muslim NGOs that are functional in the West. This paper aims to fill this gap by studying a Muslim immigrant NGO, *Islamische Gemeinschaft Milli Görüş (IGMG)*, with a focus on its *Kurban* (meat distribution) projects in more than 70 countries between 2004 and 2009. It argues that a strong transnationalism tendency exists in the expatriate Turkish community living in Germany. The *Kurban* projects have both the characteristics of this transnational leaning and play an important role in strengthening their own identity in Germany. Through such projects, immigrants not only get first hand information about the situation of Muslims in other countries but also feel part of transnational Islamic community, *ummah*. Such activities create awareness about poverty among Muslim immigrants and directly contribute to poverty alleviation by aid, investment and projects. From a broader perspective, this study argues that such projects reinforce their identity as immigrants internally/domestically by highlighting the transnational role of Islam and challenges the argument that immigrants are only consumers rather than active contributors to the poverty alleviation. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Today the existence of a large Muslim population and identity in Europe is regarded as one of the most urgent challenges being faced by European countries. Initially invited as cheap labour force, in great demand, to enable the development of Western economies, Muslim

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population have settled in Europe permanently since the 1960s. As a result of this process, Turkish immigrants today dominate German cities with their organisations, businesses and investments (Mandel, 2008). Much of the debate on Turkish immigrants in Germany has been focused on multiculturalism, terrorism, Muslim incompatibility with western values and the policy response of Germany with regard to their requests on identity-related issues (Kucukcan and Gungor, 2009; Odmalm, 2009; Yurdakul and Yukleyen, 2009; Warner and Wenner, 2006; Avci, 2006; Boston, 2002). In general, Muslim immigrant organisations in Germany are very active, but also very much decentralised and fragmented (Ogelman *et al.*, 2002). They have different perspectives not only on German domestic issues but also on international, Islamic and Turkish politics. Although all of them have projects directed towards Turkish immigrants, some have projects reaching beyond Germany, making it a challenge to call them *only* an immigrant organisation in Germany. This paper intends to look at Turkish immigrants from a different perspective by analysing the *Kurban*¹ project of an immigrant organisation, Islamische Gemeinschaft Milli Görüş (IGMG), in the context of economic development, poverty alleviation and domestic/transnational identity politics.

Below, I first outline the theoretical approaches to economic development and the role of immigrants. Especially with the co-development policy, a new line of scholarship is emerging that designates a positive role for immigrants in economic development. In the second part, I analyse the *Kurban* as a poverty alleviation project by positioning it in a transnational identity context to make claims at a broader level and improve the situations of immigrants. In the last part, I discuss whether such projects may pave the way for a new ground between the host country and the immigrants.

2 DEVELOPMENT, IMMIGRANTS AND TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY

The term ‘development’ was not connected to migration in academic and public discourse in an explicit way until the 1960s. Since then the direct link between the two became prominent but it has mirrored and stemmed from the dominant social and development paradigms reflecting the general paradigmatic shifts (de Haas, 2010: 230, 256). During the 1960s, there was an emphasis on the labour gap in the North and development in the South. It was assumed that development would result from financial remittances, return immigration and transfer of human capital (Kindleberger, 1967). These optimistic ideas had changed in the 1970s and 1980s and the term development became more controversial and mostly replaced by ‘dependency’. As long as dependency existed as a structural condition of the periphery dominated by a centre, underdevelopment was an inevitable result. Dependency theorists argued that underdevelopment led to loss of highly skilled workers due to immigration to industrialised countries. This out-immigration, in turn, was thought to create even more underdevelopment and increased migration flows (Martin, 1991; Delgado and Covarrubias, 2005).

Since the 1990s, however, the academic trend seems to be paying more attention to the positive contributions of immigrants to development. The idea of ‘co-development’ best describes this new policy approach to immigrants as development agents and has been propagated by several countries including France, the UK and the Netherlands as well as

¹In this article, *Kurban* refers to the whole project, whereas *kurban* is used to mean a single animal that is to be slaughtered in the name of God.

the World Bank (Faist, 2008: 26, and Raghuram, 2009). It is argued that international immigration is an ingredient to fuel development in the South, but this time not only via financial remittances as in the 1960s but also through knowledge flows and social remittances (Maimbo and Ratha, 2005).

The co-development approach is focused mainly on the role of immigrants in the country of origin (Weil, 2002; Lacomba and Boni, 2008). Their contributions in creating business networks, investments, transfer of technology and knowledge for their country of origin have attracted so much attention that the transnational nature and role of immigrant organisations have been overlooked (Allievi and Nielsen, 2003; Nielsen, 2003). Even when it is analysed, the dominant perspective on Muslim immigrants in Europe has been on security issues and terrorism (e.g. Leiken and Brooke, 2006; Neumann, 2006). This often derived from, first, considering transnational ideas and beliefs as a negative element in analysing immigrant organisations (for an exception Van der Veer, 2002), and second not taking them as development agents within development endeavours. Similarly, the role of religion as a transnational idea in international affairs and in the projects of immigrant organisations has been considered limited—and mostly related to identity—rather than a means to create a broader agenda, through which immigrant organisations act, produce projects and contribute to global political economy.

Religion is frequently portrayed in international relations scholarship as the source of considerable negativity. Until recently, religion is not seen as a positive contributor to development projects (Rakodi, 2007; Selinger, 2004: 526). Newly emerging Muslim immigrant NGOs as an agent of development are challenging the negative associations with religion, not only on theoretical ground but also with empirical data.

Indeed, a quick look at the history of humanitarianism actually challenges the current association of religion with conflict, violence and instability. Religious beliefs and organisations, most notably those influenced by Christian theology and ethics, helped to create modern humanitarianism in the early nineteenth century and have shaped its expanding scale, scope and significance ever since. Today, faith-based agencies are scattered throughout the world and involved in various kinds of projects, enterprises and programs (Clarke, 2006; McDuie-Ra and Rees, 2010).² However, in the literature much of what is known about faith-based agencies derives from Christian organisations originating from missionary activities and there is very little knowledge about religiously-inspired organisations outside of Christianity. Until recently, this has been especially noteworthy in the cases of Islamic charitable and philanthropic organisations (Benthall, 1997; Cizakca, 2000; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, 2003; Benedetti, 2006). Nevertheless, there is still hardly any research on charitable Muslim immigrant organisations.

The concept of Charity is an established tradition in Islamic history implemented through the institutions of *Waqf* (Endowment) (Cizakca, 2000) and *Zakat* (Alms) (Kochuyt, 2009), but most contemporary Muslim charitable organisations can be traced back to the early 1980s, inaugurated with modest aid and relief activities in conflict-driven areas. In the 1980s, due to their lack of experience and limited numbers, Islamic NGOs had been less prepared to compete with Western NGOs even in crisis areas inhabited by Muslims. However, since the 1990s when the number of Islamic NGOs increased, the more

²World Faiths Development Dialogue project, established in 2000 by James D. Wolfensohn, then President of the World Bank and Lord George Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury, can also be seen as recognition of this trend. <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/PARTNERS/EXTDEVIALOGUE/0,contentMDK:21955861~menuPK:5555051~pagePK:64192523~piPK:64192458~theSitePK:537298,00.html> (5 January 2010)

ambitious and successful development/relief projects have been developed by those NGOs (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, 2003), resulting in visible Islamic humanitarian activism in many countries.

In general, the IGMG cannot be seen as an example of the international Islamic charity organisations, because its overall focus is more in line with broad religious and secular-national diaspora organisations. Still, as evidenced by its *Kurban* project, the IGMG has a shared agenda with international Islamic charity organisations.

By taking the *Kurban* project of a Turkish organisation in Germany, the IGMG, this paper both aims to portray the endeavour of Muslims to combat poverty worldwide and intends to challenge two assumptions theoretically. The first is the misconception that the positive role of religion in international affairs is minor, especially among immigrants. The second is to defy the assumption that immigrants are *only* consumers, or exploiters, of the countries in which they reside and do not contribute to development projects and poverty alleviation in the world in any significant measure.

3 THE IGMG AND ITS KURBAN PROJECTS

The IGMG has its origins in Turkish politics in the late 1960s and has been popular among Turkish immigrants since the early 1970s in Europe. Its headquarter is located near Cologne, Germany, and it has regional federations in 10 other European countries. According to its Secretary-General Oğuz Üçüncü, the IGMG has 54 865 members and manages 323 mosques in Germany, and has 86 866 members and 514 mosques in Europe (quoted in Yukleyen, 2010: 446).

The IGMG, established originally to serve Turkish immigrants in religious matters, is one of the strongest and the largest Islamic organisations in Europe, particularly Germany. However, it has extended its activities to a certain degree, for example, making claims directed to the German state in terms of identity and supporting projects in many countries, and can no longer be considered only as a religious organisation. A better definition for the IGMG is that it is a multidimensional organisation and displays overlapping identities and aims (Sezgin, 2008). Since the 28 February process in Turkey,³ which created a division within the Milli Görüş movement both in Germany and Turkey following a soft military coup and led the existence of the current ruling party, Justice and Development Party (AKP), in Turkey, all organisations that belong to Milli Görüş underwent a transformation. The IGMG is the organisation that transformed itself more than others in terms of its orientation by changing its focus from Turkey to Europe.⁴ In line with this argument, the IGMG can no longer be seen as a European branch of a Turkish political party as it was in 1980s and 1990s (i.e. Amiraux, 2007). It is a multidimensional German-based NGO representing Turkish Muslims in Europe against discrimination and assimilation (Canatan, 2001: 239–242). It aims to improve the lives of Turkish Muslims in Germany by demanding equal citizenship rights for them and generates public discourse to support this demand. (Sezgin, 2008: 90)

³This refers to the decisions issued by the Turkish Military leadership on a National Security Council meeting at February 28, 1997 that precipitated the resignation of the Milli Görüş leader and then Prime Minister of Turkey, Necmettin Erbakan, as prime minister and the end of his coalition government.

⁴This can be observed through its activities and themes they deal in their publications and projects, see www.igmg.de.

Using the typology of Clarke (2006: 840–845), the IGMG can be defined as a *faith-based socio-political organisation* that interprets and deploys Islam as a socio-political construct by organising and mobilising a social group (Turkish migrants) on the basis of Turkish-Islamic identity in pursuit of broader socio-political objectives. However, a broader view on its projects and services indicates that the IGMG also has characteristics of the *faith-based charitable/development organisation* that usually mobilises the faithful in support of the poor, and manage programs to tackle poverty directly or indirectly. First of all, such types of organisations usually play a role in tackling poverty directly by funding programs in helping the poor and facilitate new opportunities for them. Their second role is an indirect one that involves raising awareness of poverty among their own members and community (Clarke, 2006: 841).

The IGMG has several types of activities in that way. Collecting *zakat* and distributing it through aid and scholarships to students is a year-long activity. In the cases of emergency, such as earthquake, flood, drought and other grave situations, the IGMG mobilises its members to extend their hand to those in need. For example, when earthquakes took place in Turkey (1999), Iran (2003) and Pakistan (2005, 2008), the IGMG not only sent aid convoys to severely damaged areas but also contributed to the re-construction process through establishing schools, dormitories and housing complexes.⁵ These projects do not deal with poverty alleviation directly but create awareness among its constituencies about poverty and crisis situations around the world.

The main project linked directly to poverty alleviation that has a consistency and regularity is the *Kurban* project. It is the second biggest project of the IGMG beyond Germany after the *Hajj* (pilgrimage) project every year for European Muslims. It has started in 1986 and since then it has continued without any intermittence. Initially, it was organised with strong help from Turkey and directed at Muslims in Turkey. However, it has changed its focus and scope since the early 1990s. In 2009 alone, the IGMG organised such projects in 78 countries ranging from Asia to Latin America and from the Middle East to Southern Africa.

In terms of choosing the countries, majority Muslim-populated countries were initially the primary concern. However, the Head of the Social Services of the IGMG, Ali Bozkurt indicates that the IGMG has started to open up to Muslim minority countries too as well as continue the projects in previously chosen countries.⁶ This diversification can be observed in the list of countries where the *kurbans* were sent in latest years. Among others, the list includes Muslim minority nations such as Venezuela, Colombia, Ivory Coast, Burundi, Russia, Romania, and Liberia.⁷ Considering its geographical coverage, the *Kurban* project has become truly global in its outreach, and with its financial back-up it is relatively enormous as illustrated in Table 1.

The *kurban* is a religious duty and act of worship performed by Muslims during Eid ul-Adha (tenth, eleventh or twelfth days of the month of DhulHijjah in the Islamic hijri calendar). On these days, approved types of animals are slaughtered and distributed to the poor, and consumed among friends and relatives of the performer. Both for the Muslims in Europe and the IGMG, the *kurban* as a religious duty occupies a central place. As evidence

⁵See 'Bem kentinde, deprem sonrasında yaptırılan Milli Görüş ilkokulu öğretime başladı', *IGMG Perspektif*, Vol 11, No 132, December 2005, p.16; and 'Pakistan ve Bangladeş'te Yurt ve yetimhanelerimiz açıldı', *Perspektif*, Vol 15, No 173, May 2009, pp.14-15.

⁶See 'Kurban Kampanyası Başladı', *IGMG Perspektif*, Vol 13, No 155, November 2007, p.15.

⁷See 'Kurban Kampanyası Başladı', *IGMG Perspektif*, Vol 13, No 155, November 2007, p.15; and <http://www.igmg.de/tr/teskilat/kurban-kampanyasi.html> (15 February 2010).

Table 1. The *Kurban* Project (2004–2009)

	Year-1424 (30 Jan–4 Feb 2004)	Year-1425 (20–24 Jan 2005)	Year-1426 (10–14 Jan 2006)	Year-1427 (31 Dec 2006/ 3 Jan 2007)	Year-1428 (20–24 Dec 2007)	Year-1429 (8–12 Dec 2008)	Year-1430 (27–30 Nov 2009)
Price (€)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
No of donations	28.740	39.151	61.016	63.615	75.264	64.304	75.618
No of executed <i>Kurbani</i>	31.635	47.177	76.926	84.560	88.889	65.691	82.363
No of delegate	65	75	122	161	199	222	261
No of country	52	60	65	68	73	75	78
Project value (€)	2.874.000	3.915.100	6.101.600	6.361.500	7.526.400	6.430.400	7.561.800

Source: It is drawn from the official journal of the IGMG, Perspektif (until December 2008 as IGMG Perspektive) January 2005–December 2009 issues and confirmed by the Department of Social Services of the IGMG on 15 January 2010 to the author.

Author's note: The difference between the number of donations and number of executed *kurban* is due to lower price per *kurban* in some countries. More specifically, if the price is less than 100€, more *kurbans* are purchased.

of this, the IGMG publications have always placed great importance on this project both in terms of its religious and social aspects. For example, in January 2003, the official publication of the IGMG, *Milli Görüş & Perspective*, clearly states that it is difficult to find 'really needy Muslims' in Western Europe to distribute 1/3 of slaughtered *kurban* as urged by Islam. Similarly, in Europe, the circumstances make it difficult to 'utilise fully' skin leather and internal parts of *kurban*. The result is that the *kurban* duty is not completed as required by Islam (Mollaoglu, 2003: 16–17). Such religious arguments are frequent in the IGMG publications but the main focus has always been on social, identical and cultural dimensions of the project. Muslims in Europe who have two *kurbans* have been advised to send at least one of them to Muslim brothers and sisters in other countries for variety of social, economic and religious reasons. Among others, the most emphasised ones are to develop a consciousness of *ummah* among fellow Muslims, to carry out communal responsibility through economic aid if possible, to get the blessing of the oppressed and needy and to perceive and put into practice the transnational character of Islam as a religion of peace, tolerance and relief (Mollaoglu, 2003:17). Before the implementation of the *Kurban* projects, the IGMG campaigns for participation through its publications, pamphlets and TV ads.

As stated, through this project, the IGMG indirectly contributes to poverty alleviation by creating awareness about poverty all over the world to its constituencies.⁸ However, there are also cases in which this project directly helps economic development. Businessmen are usually invited to take part in delegations to visit and execute the project in selected countries. This invitation is especially aimed at creating an opportunity for possible investors to see economic and political situations along with the needs of society at large. For businessmen and the IGMG, this is a win–win situation. For the former, it is a great opportunity to see the ground and evaluate future investments; for the latter if an investment takes place, it is a success in terms of helping to alleviate poverty by creating jobs and opportunities for the poor.⁹

In the *Kurban* project, there is another dimension that can be considered a direct capital inflow into the needy places. As seen in Table 1, the amount of money allocated for this project is not modest, especially considering the fact that the organiser is an immigrant organisation. Under the project, each country receives the equivalent price of the allocated *kurban* and this money is directly spent in the country in question by buying animals and paying for the services required for slaughter. In many poor areas, which raise animals, it is very difficult either to sell in the same area due to poverty or to take them to city, because transportation might be costly. With the *Kurban* project, poverty-ridden areas not only have an opportunity to sell their animals but also to consume the meat when it is distributed back to the society. Although this fast cash entrance in big sums happens once a year, it might be vital for the economy of some areas where raising animals is a means of survival.¹⁰

Yet, the broader question that arises is the very nature of such a huge transnational project. Generally speaking, immigrant communities have projects that aim to connect the immigrants themselves to the country of origin for cultural and identical reasons; many of them neither consider nor act in much broader areas than their immediate (mostly local)

⁸This is expressed in the official website of the IGMG and its publications. For example, see 'Bir kurban, binlerce dua...', *IGMG Perspektif*, Vol 14, No 157, January 2008, p.20-23.

⁹Personal communication with Ünal Koyuncu, member of the *Kurban* commission. January 2010.

¹⁰Personal observation in Xinjiang, China, December 2008. There were some farm-owners specifically waiting for Muslim NGOs to come from outside and buy their animals during the Eid ul-Adha when the *Kurban* project is organized. They see this as one of significant opportunity to be able to sell the majority of their animals.

areas of concern. Why, and for what reasons, has the IGMG needed to have these types of projects? These questions have been partly addressed above as 1/3 of the *kurban* meat must be given to the poor, and most Western Europeans do not qualify for this for socio-economic reasons. The other part may be found in the national context of German political system. Whether the political system of the host country has opportunities rather than constraints is very important in determining the outlook and visions of immigrants. Odmalm (2009:153–154) argues that in Germany ‘the lack of formal political opportunities have led migrants to develop alternative and more civil society-oriented means of participation’. Such tendencies not only have a direct connection with the perception about, and definition of, immigrants in Germany as ‘foreigners’; but also force them to make claims at a broader level to improve their situations. The *Kurban* project of the IGMG should be seen in this context. Along with the lack of formal platforms in the host country that force immigrants to deviate towards supra-national and transnational levels, the IGMG itself has been seen as a ‘threat’ by German authorities and kept under observation for years by the German state.¹¹ Nevertheless, what it seems is that the German authorities’ view on the IGMG as ‘dangerous’ neither restrains the IGMG from having claim-making projects within Germany, nor from supporting and defending the rights for Muslims through legal means. Today, the IGMG is vigorously active in German domestic politics with regard to themes related to Muslims as well as at the transnational level through the projects like *Kurban*.

Another answer to the question posed above may have something to do with the nature and characteristics of Turkish immigrants in Germany. There is an often overlooked fact in immigrant research that might be indispensable in understanding transnational dynamics (Mandaville, 2001). Turks are not ‘typical immigrants’ in Europe and particularly in Germany having to do with the fact that they lacked the background of former colonial history, in contrast to many Muslims in France, Britain, Spain and other European countries (Boukhars, 2009, 309). Whether the inclination to have a greater level of confidence in leading transnational projects, such as ones organised by the IGMG, has something to do with the above-mentioned characteristics of Turkish community is open to debate and a theme for further research. However, what is clear is that a strong tendency persists towards transnationalism among Turks in Germany. The *Kurban* project has both the characteristics of this transnational leaning and plays an important role in strengthening domestic identity within Germany. In that sense, it serves in at least four ways, which will be analysed in detail in the following section.

3.1 Strengthening Domestic Identity through Transnational Networks

Increasing immigration to Europe and the ensuing problems that immigrants face within Europe have not only fuelled the growth of immigrant organisations but also created a feeling that immigrants need to maintain their strong links to their homelands. Most of those organisations representing immigrants have a strong religious dynamic that makes them connect to the pan-national faith community *ummah*. For example, the IGMG has strong links in Turkey and runs the biggest share of its *Kurban* projects in various

¹¹For a legal and polemical response of the IGMG to such ‘threat’ conception by German authorities in its official publication, see Mustafa Yeneroglu, ‘IGMG Neden Anayasa Koruma Raporlarında yer alıyor?’, *Perspektif*, No 15, No 175-176, July-August 2009, pp.8-9.

Turkish cities.¹² This should not only be seen as a sign of the IGMG's strong intention to help most of its motherland society, families and nationalities, it also serves to help its own faithful Turkish community maintain its cultural and religious identity (Clarke, 2006: 839).

Identity politics and projects are very much in line with the IGMG's reasons for being in existence since the 1970s and the IGMG's members' profile require focusing on such issues. The survey of the Center for Turkish Studies in Essen reports that the average age of the IGMG supporters in Germany is 35.5 (quoted in Yurdakul and Yukleyen, 2009: 219). It is the younger third generation that faces the identity crisis because most of them are neither Turkish nor fully German in cultural terms, as compared to members of the older generation that usually have a settled belief and identity. A comparison between the IGMG and other Muslim organisations in Germany perhaps may explain what makes the IGMG act differently, sometimes even at the cost of 'clashing' with German institutions. A comparison with another biggest Muslim organisation in Germany, Diyanet Isleri Turk-Islam Birliđi (DITIB), may better illustrate this point. Since its existence in 1983, DITIB has developed relatively good relations with German authorities and even partly received support from them. A closer look at the projects and the message of DITIB indicates that not only does it have few projects directly related to identity and youth, but also its message 'resonates more with the first generation than the younger generations, who are concerned with improving their living conditions in Germany' (Yurdakul and Yukleyen, 2009: 219). As a sign, or/and result of this, the above-mentioned survey found that the average age of DITIB supporters is 41.8 (quoted in Yurdakul and Yukleyen, 2009: 219)—higher than that of the IGMG.

The IGMG organises projects to support integration of immigrants into German society and promote Turkish and Islamic identities (Sezgin, 2008: 89). Such projects towards strengthening identities among youth help them better integrate into German social and political life. The *Kurban* project, though it is a religious obligation for Muslims, serves well to support and strengthen distinct cultural identities of Muslim immigrants. For example, on the first day of Eid celebration when Muslims gather at mosques for Eid prayer, the *Kurban* delegations are contacted by local Imam (religious leader) through the phone to speak to the gathering in the mosque. Delegates usually talk in brief about their observations on the situation of Muslims with a special focus on difficulties they face and problems they have. At the end of the talk, there are usually comparisons between the situation of Muslims in Germany and other places and listeners in mosque are urged to be thankful to God for whatever they have and try to be better Muslims. These connections usually end with conveying the thankfulness and the regards of local Muslims to those in Europe for their help and care.¹³ Such connection with different parts of the world usually leaves an emotional imprint on the people and gives them a feeling that what they are doing is very important.¹⁴ This in turn helps in a self-realisation of being Muslim and keeps Islamic identity strong. Thus, connecting Muslims in Germany to other Muslims all over the world certainly strengthen the consciences of *ummah* and Islamic identity. As mentioned, the IGMG's *Kurban* project is well publicised through TV ads, pamphlets and the official website of the organisation. Upon completion of the project, observations and comments along with project photographs and videos are put on the website and distributed

¹²See 'Kurban bizi ummetle birleştirdi', *Perspektif*, Vol 15, No 169, January 2009, pp.14-15.

¹³Personal communication with Ünal Koyuncu, member of the *Kurban* commission. January 2010.

¹⁴Personal communication with Ünal Koyuncu, member of the *Kurban* commission. January 2010.

in a CD to those who contributed.¹⁵ Representatives who travel to execute the *Kurban* project also share their experiences with their local communities after their return.¹⁶ In that sense, the *Kurban* project from its initial preparation to post-execution does contribute and strengthen Islamic identity among Muslims in Germany.

3.2 Aid, Ummah and Investment

Aid and *ummah*, the humanitarian aspect and the religious aspect, are intimately interwoven and make up the essential part of the identity of both transnational Islamic relief organisations and immigrant organisations. However, for immigrant organisations, aid represents only a small part of their activities, thus becoming either short-time oriented (usually in *Kurban* and *Ramadan* periods) or comparatively little in its quantity compared to works of Islamic relief organisations. The *ummah* is a moral and imaginative concept that usually refers to the community of Muslims. It is generally considered that helping the *ummah* in creating or/and connecting is a religious duty for each Muslim.

Seen from this perspective, the activities of Muslim NGOs all over the world should not be seen as a mere mimicking of western NGOs. They have implications and repercussions beyond that merit special attention. Today, Islamic charity organisations are important locally as they try to improve the material and moral livelihood of people by humanitarian aid. They also offer new ways of improving life conditions and a sense of belonging to *ummah* (Kaag, 2007: 85). This sense of belonging to *ummah* usually shows itself in an emotional way and spreads a feeling that there are Muslims in far away places who care for them. This often motivates them to work harder in overcoming their problems.

The main strategy that the IGMG follows in its implementation of the *Kurban* project is very similar to that of Islamic relief NGOs. It arranges partnerships with local organisations in the countries designated for the project. These partnerships are an important element of creating a network of *ummah*¹⁷ and identity formation. First of all, partnership enables the indigenous/local Islamic NGOs (or partners) to obtain supra-national recognition and legitimacy in their own society. Second, it gives an opportunity for asserting their identity and strengthening it.¹⁸ This identity often works in two ways helping each other. For those who donate their *kurbans* to Muslims all over the world, it is accomplishment of an Islamic duty and satisfaction that religious responsibility has been fulfilled. For those who receive this aid, it is a feeling that there are other Muslims who care about their problems, poverty and future.¹⁹ For that aim, many countries chosen for projects are countries in which Muslims live as a minority or in conflict-ridden areas. While many Latin American and African countries are examples of the former, Palestine, Pakistan and Kashmir are representatives of the latter. Within the project, the places where Muslim minorities live under tight and conflict-ridden conditions such as the Chinese province of Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan) are also chosen because the IGMG considers that the existing situation may endanger Islamic identity. A representative who went to Xinjiang in 2008 told me that

¹⁵For the 2009 project, see <http://www.igmg.de/tr/teskilat/kurban-kampanyasi.html> (15 February 2010).

¹⁶Personal communication with Ünal Koyuncu, member of the *Kurban* commission. January 2010.

¹⁷Interview with Oğuz Üçüncü, 12 October 2009.

¹⁸See Interview with Ali Bozkurt in *IGMG Perspektive*, Vol 14, No 165-166, September–October 2008, p.11.

¹⁹Personal observation in Xinjiang and Pakistan (December 2007). This usually shows itself in a way that local people or organizations usually prepare some more projects for the upcoming year and ask Islamic NGOs for implementing it. Those projects are usually well-thought and well-formulated.

when he distributed *kurban* meats in cooperation with local authorities in Chinese governmental buildings, many of those who came to collect the meat thought that it was governmental aid. However, when he explained to the gathering through his interpreter that it came from German Muslims as an expression of Muslim brotherhood for Eid celebration ‘all eyes shined’. Even after the IGMG delegation left, ‘they made prayers for them in all mosques’.²⁰

It is obvious that the *Kurban* project of the IGMG alone cannot alleviate poverty or cater to the magnitude of the needy created by nature and/or other reasons in many countries. Neither can the *Kurban* project be seen as a social welfare program that aims to eliminate the roots of poverty. However, the major contribution of the *Kurban* project in alleviating poverty is its ability to create awareness among Turkish-Muslim immigrants to donate and help the poor more. Especially, the reports of delegates about the country, conflict and possible projects are for this purpose. Similarly, as mentioned above, businessmen who are also invited to take part in implementing projects not only exercise a voluntary service but primarily create an opportunity for them to see the ground for future investments in the country in question to tackle poverty directly.²¹

3.3 Gathering Direct Information: Reports and Observations

The *Kurban* project is a way to acquire knowledge, resources, experience and expertise about other Islamic countries and Muslims societies. In this sense, this project is vital for collecting information and knowing the real situation in the Islamic world through first hand information. The IGMG considers this an important element of the project not only for using data for planning the future project, but also most importantly for avoiding the incorrect or incomplete information which is prominent in media. To accomplish this, the IGMG calls for meeting of representatives to inform them and support them with the earlier years’ reports and data before they depart to their destinations. Along with this first information, representatives are urged to read articles, books and media materials about the conflict, current situations and problems of the destination country. When they arrive in the field, they are asked to have informal interviews, talks and consultations with the local authorities and leaders from all segments of society if possible.²² Furthermore, a visit to German and Turkish embassies is recommended²³ for receiving information which may be vital for them and also informing the embassy about the project. On their return, each representative is asked to write their observations, thoughts and suggestions for the next year’s projects individually. As a group, it is expected that with the collaboration of each member, a country report will be presented with the details of the projects, execution, and recommendations. Some country reports go beyond this standard form and present perspectives on the country in question and even possible ways of helping to solve problems along with suggestions for new partner organisations in following years.²⁴

²⁰Personal communication with Ahmet Yılmaz, the *Kurban* project organizer in China in 2007 and 2008.

²¹Personal communication with Ünal Koyuncu, member of the *Kurban* commission. January 2010.

²²See Interview with Ali Bozkurt in *IGMG Perspektive*, Vol 14, No 165-166, September-October 2008, p.11.

²³Interview with Oğuz Üçüncü, 12 October 2009.

²⁴For example, the selection of new countries and projects along with possible partners in Latin America in 2009 was based on the reports of 2008 envoy to the continent. Personal communication with Ünal Koyuncu, member of the *Kurban* commission. January 2010.

The IGMG is an organisation that supports students with scholarships. The *Kurban* project is also targeted to serve students, researchers and future leaders to gain in depth information about the conflict areas and world problems as well as provide them an opportunity to travel to areas, which otherwise would be difficult individually. Those who are scholarship holders and postgraduate students are especially asked to join the project. Not only because it is helpful for their studies but also the reports which will be generated will be more academic and realistic, which is considered better for the IGMG constituencies. They were also asked to contribute with commentaries to the IGMG publications like the *Perspektif* to share their thoughts and perspectives with donors and broader readers.

The *Kurban* project, Üçüncü argues, serves to improve the situation of the Muslim community in Germany for the long term. In this way, there exists a direct link in exchanging information between European Muslims and the Muslim worldwide.²⁵ It creates an opportunity to evaluate their own situations, share experiences and gain a better perspective on the Muslim world and their problems. In that sense, Üçüncü articulates that 'while some Muslim minorities learned from the organisational experiences of the IGMG, we have learned from the experiences of Muslim minorities in many countries'.²⁶

3.4 Consciousness of *Vefa*²⁷

The *Kurban* project seems to manifest its psychological and emotional part when it comes to deciding the number of *kurban* sent to each destination. For example, Turkey and Pakistan top the list of countries where the donations are sent. Turkey as a country of origin is especially paid attention to in terms of helping the poor,²⁸ which may be understandable given the fact that the IGMG is a Turkish-immigrant organisation. However, the situation of Pakistan is interesting. Pakistan is important for two reasons according to Secretary-General of the IGMG, Oğuz Üçüncü. First, historically there exists a strong brotherhood between Turkish and Pakistani societies. It goes back to the establishment of Turkey when Pakistani people sent their private collection to help Turkey's independence war. These historical ties are considered to be very important both in Turkish politics and Turkish-origin organisations. The IGMG's *Kurban* project represents a continuation of this policy of *vefa* (a type of loyalty) to Pakistani people. Second reason is that Pakistan has a large Muslim population and many Muslims live in severe poverty.

The policy of *vefa* has also shown itself in times of crisis both in Turkey and Pakistan. For example, because of the severe economic crisis in Turkey in 2000–2001, the IGMG decided to send 1/3 of *kurban* donations to Turkey in 2003. It was argued that as an organisation, the IGMG should help to recover the influences of economic crisis, and the *Kurban* project is an ideal way to share solidarity.²⁹ Similar *vefa* policy is observed when the earthquake took place in Pakistan in 2005 and 2008; the IGMG allocated most of its

²⁵Interview with Oğuz Üçüncü, 12 October 2009.

²⁶Interview with Oğuz Üçüncü, 12 October 2009.

²⁷*Vefa* is a Turkish verb and usually translated as a type of fidelity and loyalty. I preferred to use the verb in its original version because none of the translations really explains what I want to say. Here a functionalist definition of the verb as a concept is intended to use: caring and concerning for the situations of the beloved ones and trying to help them whenever possible.

²⁸Interview with Oğuz Üçüncü, 12 October 2009.

²⁹See "Kurban kampanyası devam ediyor", *Milli Görüş & Perspektif*, Vol 9, No: 98, February 2003, p.7.

kurban donations to Pakistan. In addition to this, the IGMG has also built dormitory and school in the earthquake area and sent emergency aid to Pakistan.³⁰

4 GERMANY AND THE *KURBAN* PROJECT: DRAWING NEW LINES?

Piper (2009) argues that from an ideational perspective, the debate on the migration–development nexus is not new in the policy-making world. However, in a political sense it is a new development because immigrants want to be recognised beyond their role as agents. They want to be considered as partners in development and given more say in their host country political life. Such considerations are not articulated by the IGMG in relation to the *Kurban* project. However, below, I examine possible ways of interaction and communication based on such projects between the IGMG and the German authorities.

4.1 A Channel of Communication?

The IGMG is considered as ‘the most responsive Turkish Islamic organisation to state policies’ due to its activities such as providing Islamic education and advocating the right to wear the headscarf in public schools (Yukleyen, 2010: 446; Amir-Moazami, 2005). Furthermore, the IGMG is seen as a ‘threat’ to German society in the reports of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz—BfV). The BfV reports damage Milli Görüş’ relations with German politicians and media, and create a situation in which the lack of communication channels reinforces the distrust between the IGMG and the German authorities (Yukleyen, 2010: 456). Perhaps because of this, there is hardly any discussion, critic or commentary on the *Kurban* project in German media locating it in a context of the IGMG and state relations. However, considering the lack of communication between German authorities and Muslims in Germany (and the IGMG), whether the *Kurban* project as it stands would create a space for communication and collaboration may be worth investigating. If this is the case, there may be at least two ways of collaboration between the parties.

One possible way is that if Germany is interested in listing the projects of the IGMG, especially the *Kurban* one, as a possible contributor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As immigrant NGOs are steadily growing in prominence, it is important to have cooperation between governments and civil society organisations in order to combat poverty (Bebbington *et al.*, 2008). With civil society participation, society does not usually feel excluded from achieving MDGs and creating awareness about it because it often utilises independent voluntary efforts to promote its values and aspects of social, economic or political development. Smith (2005) argues that there are basically three legs in development and poverty reduction: private, government and citizen sectors. The citizen sector including NGOs hold comparative advantages in addressing poverty traps and so can play a central role in ending extreme poverty.

Similar voices emphasising the importance of NGOs in implementing MDGs have also been raised by UN officials. In 2004, UN Special Ambassador for the MDGs, Erna Witoeler, said that ‘civil society groups and NGOs are the best to help governments get to

³⁰See ‘IGMG Pakistan Deprem Yardimlari Suruyor’, *IGMG Perspektif*, Vol 12, No 133, January 2006, p.14; and ‘Pakistan ve Bangladeş’te Yurt ve yetimhanelerimiz açıldı’, *Perspektif*, Vol 15, No 173, May 2009, pp.14–15.

message out about MDGs and to help them achieve the targets'. This is 'because NGOs know more about the poor than governments. They work with the poor, while governments only work for the poor' (quoted in Macan-Markar, 2004). While Germany's official development assistance was 7.5 trillion dollars in 2004, it increased to 9.9 trillion in 2005.³¹ Considering the amount of money that the IGMG spent each year for the *Kurban* project, which can be seen in the Table 1, its endeavour cannot be underestimated in terms of its help alleviating poverty worldwide.

A close analysis of Turkish immigrants shows that they underwent a deep transformation since the 1980s and began to realise that their stay in Germany is not temporary. They have also become more settled in Germany with the existence of the third generation (Sohler, 2004). With this in mind, it would be wiser and more rational in the long run if German authorities consider positive actions of Turkish migrant organisations and draw new lines of communication with immigrants. For example, in the case of the *Kurban* project, Germany may utilise it as another line of aid policy towards the Muslim world by recognising and honouring it. Berlin would openly claim that it is money earned in Germany, and is sent by German-Turks. As Germany faces difficulties gaining grounds in the Islamic world due to its approach to the Palestinian–Israeli issue and immigrant problems, nothing could provide a better legitimacy than this. Apart from this, if a new line is drawn, the most important gain would come from domestic process through which new channels of communication could be opened between the state and immigrant organisations. This certainly has outmost importance given the fact that the efforts of migrant organisations to support the integration of Turkish migrants into the German society have generally been ignored, and they are excluded in many cases from negotiations with the government directly (Sezgin, 2008: 81).

A second possible way of collaboration would be in implementation. When I asked the Secretary-General of the IGMG about this, his answer was very clear-cut: 'if the issue is slaughtering animals, it does not create sympathy immediately'.³² However, he emphasised that they strongly recommend that representatives should visit German embassies, wherever they go for the project. He has also pointed out that the overall (negative) German perspective on the IGMG is preventing possible cooperation. Nevertheless, there has been some cooperation with the German-origin humanitarian organisations in Africa. The organisation called Together was born as part of this cooperation. Those who invited to see the project in the ground such as historian and journalist Erhard Brunn have also shared positive experiences with the German public.³³

4.2 A Reason for Rejection?

It is mentioned above that the IGMG has been under state observation and considered as a 'threat' to Germany. Since 2008, the German authorities have increased their pressure on the IGMG legally. Since then, the IGMG offices have been searched four times and a list of accusations, rather than concrete evidence (e.g. court decisions), have been made public.

In December 2009, just after the completion of the *Kurban* project, the Cologne Public Prosecutor's Office accused the IGMG with the accusation of fraud in *kurban* donations.³⁴

³¹http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/07_OECD_2005.pdf (20 December 2009).

³²Interview with Oğuz Üçüncü, 12 October 2009.

³³Interview with Oğuz Üçüncü, 12 October 2009.

³⁴<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,4963247,00.html> (2 December 2009)

In a press release, the IGMG responded that ‘the alleged embezzlement of *kurban* donations is very serious and honour-breaking. This claim openly targets the image of the IGMG and its credibility among Muslims. Popular searches accompanied by media and “storming for pressure” have not, and will never, reach their aims and this is shown clearly with the support of the *Kurban* campaign and donations’. To show the credibility of itself and trust of donors, the IGMG advertised the number of the latest *Kurban* project (in 2009), and argued that ‘had prosecutor and responsible fiscal authority looked at consigned photos, lists and reports about those who accompanied and observed the project, they would know easily exact numbers about how many *kurbans* slaughtered and distributed, and where’.³⁵

It is clear that the German authorities are not happy with the activities of the IGMG. It has been portrayed consistently as a dangerous and anti-integration organisation in the media not by specific threats to the German social and political order, rather by fears and polarisations stemming largely from political and social conflicts within Turkey (Ewing, 2003) and the post-9/11 climate in which Muslims are portrayed as potential terrorists (Ewing, 2008).

Somewhat confirming this, each time accusations have been made, the IGMG has more strongly emphasised its willingness to integrate into Germany, if assimilation is not presented as a condition.³⁶ In the long run, whether the *Kurban* project will be a reason for rejection of the IGMG by German authorities for communication and consultation is to be seen, but one thing is clear—the *Kurban* project has implications beyond *only* being a *Kurban* project. It helps to create social, religious and cultural benefits for Muslims immigrants in Germany by creating transnational links and identity, while providing economic and social benefit for the poor in many countries.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the character, working method and effect of an immigrant Islamic NGO through its *kurban* activities. The transnational character comes to the fore in its funding, the geographical scope of its coverage, the composition of its staff and its objectives, which are most often formulated in terms of *ummah* and enforcing Islamic identity.

Many argue that the situation of Muslim immigrants in Western European countries can be fully grasped only if the local political, social and economic conditions are taken into account (Scott, 2007: 9). For instance, a nation’s policy for naturalising immigrants plays a part in reception of Muslims; as opportunities to participate in political and economic life in the host country. From the perspective of immigrants in general and the IGMG in particular since 9/11, Muslims are more interested in German domestic politics and establishing a viable relation with the host country institutions. The response should be an inclusive one utilising and emphasising the positive contributions of immigrants to find a better common ground between immigrants and state institutions.

³⁵“IGMG’ye yönelik iftira kampanyası boşa çıkacaktır” 3 December 2009, <http://www.igmg.de/tr/teskilat/basin-aciklamalari/yazi/2009/12/03/igmg-ye-yoenelik-iftira-kampanyasi-bosa-cikacaktır.html> (4 December 2009).

³⁶For example, the official journal of the IGMG, *Perspektif* (formerly known as *IGMG Perspektive*) urges its members to vote and participate in elections and use their citizenship rights. See Üçüncü, 2009.

At first sight, aid and the consciousness of *ummah* seems to be intimately interwoven in the *Kurban* project. However, its implication for Muslim immigrants in Germany and Europe in terms of strengthening identity as Muslims and a feeling of accomplishing Islamic duty among Muslims deserve a special mention. Although it is planned and implemented by a religious motivation as *duty*, the *Kurban* project has socio-political implications, and organisations that execute similar project can be seen as socio-political actors, using aid to enlarge *ummah* and transnational connections both in a moral and religious sense as well as in a geographical sense.

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