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Faith-based organizations as political actors in local refugee politics: Christian and Islamic communities in Germany

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Abstract

This study analyses the role of selected Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic faith-based organizations (FBOs) as political actors in the context of local refugee politics in Germany. We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with leaders from local FBOs and examined the data via structured content analysis. The empirical material provided information on three aspects: the self-perceived role as political actors, contacts with political decision-makers, and the perception of the FBO's means in and influence on (local) political decision-making. Most religious leaders do ascribe a political role to their activities in refugee aid. However, the goals and strategies of this role vary markedly, revealing patterns across the three religious groups. We argue that these differences can be interpreted against the background of the historically evolved role of different faiths in Germany. The study offers new insights into how FBOs engage in politics, advocating for their positions in local refugee and integration policies.

Keywords: Church-state relation; faith-based organization; Germany; local refugee aid; political role

Introduction

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by mid-2023, Germany was “the third largest refugee-hosting country in the world” (UNHCR, 2023a), giving shelter to “2.5 million refugees” (UNHCR, 2023b). As municipalities are primarily responsible for refugee reception and integration in Germany's federal system (Schammann et al., 2021; Schmidtke, 2021), they have faced unprecedented challenges and have relied on the help of civil society actors, including faith-based organizations (FBOs). FBOs in Germany, such as Christian and Islamic organizations, have established a diverse range of assistance to support refugees (Nagel, 2019).

Researchers have increasingly focused on FBOs and their activities in the various fields of refugee aid in Western countries (Eby *et al.*, 2011; Garnier, 2018; Nawyn, 2007). On the one hand, their studies describe the part FBOs play in the infrastructure of local aid as providers of basic needs such as food, clothing, and housing. On the other hand, studies examine FBOs' efforts to foster integration when offering language courses and support in dealing with authorities (Ceylan and Charchira, 2019; Nagel, 2019, 2023). Apart from focusing on the provision of services, researchers have also increasingly examined the role FBOs play in political advocacy efforts in favor of immigrants (Garkisch *et al.*, 2017). This political advocacy role has been particularly under study by a growing number of researchers focusing on countries such as Australia (Wilson, 2011), Canada, the USA (Libal *et al.*, 2022), or the UK (Snyder, 2011), whereas research on the German case is still rather at the beginning (Ceylan and Charchira, 2023; Hidalgo and Pickel 2019). Furthermore, studies on the German example have rather neglected the local level—a research gap that appears surprising given the important status of FBOs in local refugee aid and integration in the country. This paper aims to help fill this gap by providing insight into the ways local Christian and Islamic FBOs in Germany get involved *politically*, that is, how they aim to convey their interests to the political system and influence political decisions in the field of refugee politics. The study is based on thirty qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives from 19 FBOs between November 2021 and January 2022.¹

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: First, we review the literature on the political role of FBOs in (local) refugee politics. We first review studies on countries beyond Germany that particularly include so-called classic immigration countries before taking a closer look at the role of Christian and Islamic FBOs in refugee politics in Germany. In the following analysis, we present our empirical results that refer to three crucial categories: The FBOs' self-perception as political actors, their contacts with political decision-makers, and the self-assessment of their political means and impact. In the final section, we summarize our key findings, discuss possible explanations for our findings, and highlight the implications of our study for further research.

Literature review and own research focus

Although local FBOs play an important role in German refugee aid, research on this role in the country is “still at the very beginning,” as Nagel (2019) has argued a couple of years ago. This also holds for the more *political* role of German FBOs in this policy field (Schroeder and Kiepe, 2019), that is, activities that aim to address interests to political decision-makers and to exert influence on political decisions, particularly at the *local* level. This is in contrast to the state of research on other countries and, first and foremost, on the so-called classic immigration countries such as the USA. Therefore, the following review of research will first relate to the role of FBOs in refugee aid and political advocacy internationally before focusing on FBOs in (local) German refugee politics.

FBOs and refugee advocacy from a global perspective

FBOs have had a long tradition as actors in immigrant integration politics in countries that have been considered classic immigration countries, such as Australia, Canada,

and the USA, but also the United Kingdom. With regard to the USA, Nawyn (2007) even states that a majority of organizations that are committed to “refugee resettlement” have a religious background. According to the UNHCR, “refugee resettlement” contains the “transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement.”² Regarding resettlement activities, FBOs are usually responsible for integration measures such as the accommodation (Frazier, 2022; Nawyn, 2006), socioeconomic participation (Garnier, 2018), or political mobilization (Coddou, 2017) of refugees.

Given the crucial function of FBOs in the refugee integration schemes of these countries, researchers have also taken a closer look at their political advocacy role in favor of immigrants. In this context, studies are particularly interested in how FBOs reconcile their political and their religious roles, for instance, when it comes to the rhetoric they use in the political discourse. Whereas Ager and Ager (2011) do not see any differences in the language used by secular and religious agencies active in immigrant advocacy, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2008, 176) depicts how they dose their religious narratives cautiously, “being careful not to get too denominational or exclusive.” Furthermore, the religious character of FBOs may also be in conflict with their role in refugee politics since “faith-based resettlement NGOs [in the USA] are prohibited from spending federal dollars on religious activities,” as Nawyn (2006) emphasizes. Another challenge for the political advocacy role of FBOs derives from the fact that their memberships are usually politically diverse. As attitudes on the issue of refugee politics vary internally, it is difficult for church activists to take clear political positions on the issue, as Nagel and Ehrkamp (2016) argue. Other challenges may result from contacts FBOs maintain with political decision-makers (not only) in the field of refugee politics. Particularly if they provide refugee aid on behalf of the state, FBOs might expose themselves to the “risk of being co-opted into practices [...] that run counter to a humanitarian ethic” they are based upon, as Garnier (2018) implies. Furthermore, Wilson (2011, 558) observes for the Australian case that governmental actors, which actively involve FBOs in refugee politics, may do so “in order to neutralize a highly volatile and polarizing political issue.”

Studies dealing with the political advocacy role of FBOs also examine the resources they dispose of and the impact they have. In this context, the question arises as to what extent the factor “faith” serves as an asset. Empirical results imply that faith not only has a “determining influence on the development of humanitarian thought and practice” (Ager and Ager 2011, 456) but also serves as a resource in the work itself since FBOs can claim “moral authority” (Eby et al., 2011, 603). In this context, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2008, 175) refers to resources such as “oratory skills and charismatic talents of many of the clergy,” but also “vital resources of church meeting halls, folding chairs, and office equipment.”

When it comes to impact, many researchers perceive FBOs not only as important actors in refugee work but (potentially) also as “powerful advocates” (Eby et al., 2011) in favor of immigrants. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2008, 186) presents two possible indicators of political impact: First, the realization of concrete improvements for immigrants, and, second, the increase of political and societal awareness toward existing grievances. Most researchers particularly mention the latter indicator when they attribute influence to the political advocacy for immigrants by FBOs. Examining

FBOs that are politically active in refugee politics in the UK, Snyder (2011, 161) describes successful strategies to “unsettle any established population attitudes and policies which contribute to the difficulties faced by newcomers.” Concerning the case of Australia, Wilson (2011, 555) depicts FBOs as the most important voices that “speak out against the harsh treatment of asylum seekers within the Australian immigration system.” In a similar vein, Eby *et al.* (2011, 603) perceive FBOs as actors that are able “to promote greater tolerance and justice in US policy and society at-large.”

However, previous research on FBOs’ political advocacy in favor of refugees also implies that there is a need to account for differences across denominations. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2008, 174) shows how Christian and Jewish activists can “use religious tools more freely” as resources in their commitment in favor of Latino immigrants in the USA, whereas “the demonization of Islam” in the country “makes it hard for [Muslim Americans] to use religion in their pursuit of immigrant civil rights.” Consequently, there is a growing need for studies that apply cross-denominational comparisons since, as Snyder (2011, 578) underlines, “it is likely that there are differences in the roles, strengths and weaknesses of organizations from different religious groups.” This need for differentiation also applies when it comes to the regional level at which FBOs operate on. Nawyn (2006) sees the local level as the crucial level since “the process of resettling refugees who have been granted admission [...] is a local process.” For Eby *et al.* (2011), it is particularly the simultaneous involvement of both national and local faith community levels that makes FBOs crucial actors in refugee resettlement. However, in this context, Libal *et al.* (2022, 2552) point to cross-national differences when showing that “political solidarity actions” are limited to the local level in the US, whereas in Canada, this commitment also unfolds at the national level.

To conclude, the review of studies on FBOs’ advocacy role in favor of refugees outside Germany shows that FBOs have to reconcile their political and their religious roles and that this task appears to be a bigger challenge for Islamic organizations than for their Christian counterparts. Furthermore, previous studies also imply that it is fruitful to particularly focus on the local level, where the main refugee work is done. However, given cross-national disparities, it appears also to be useful to have a closer look at the impact of relevant national contextual factors such as traditional church-state relations. Finally, there also seems to be a need for more differentiation between conditions and activities of FBOs from divergent denominations.

Therefore, when having a closer look at the German case, the following section will pay particular attention to the specific contextual factors, the situation at the local level, as well as differences between Christian and Islamic communities.

FBOs and refugee advocacy in Germany

Könemann *et al.* have a point when they argue that the research gap on the political role of FBOs on the local level in Germany “is surprising, to say the least, because a large part of the activities of religious organizations relates to the local area” (Könemann *et al.*, 2015). Germany provides for specific contextual factors when it comes to both the political role of FBOs and refugee politics at the local level due to the

special status of churches under constitutional law and—in accordance with the subsidiarity principle (Cecil et al., 2018)—the significant role of the local level in the federal political system, respectively. Regarding church-state relations, FBOs are neither strictly separated from the state as in France nor officially established as the Church of England in the UK. Instead, the German system is described as a “mixed type” since the constitution—albeit negating the existence of a state church—establishes a prominent status for religious communities if they are officially recognized as public corporations (Beyme, 2015; Willems, 2018). It is, above all, the Christian Churches that have benefitted from this status that grants them not only a far-reaching right of self-determination but also privileges such as the right to levy a church tax on their members (Könemann et al., 2015). Furthermore, their welfare organizations, the Catholic Caritas and the Protestant Diaconie, which together have almost 1.1 million employees, are important pillars of the German welfare state (Schroeder et al., 2019). Although the constitutional privileges are principally open to non-Christian FBOs, too, organizations established by the largest non-Christian minority in the country, Islam, still have trouble convincing the responsible German Ministers of the Interior in the federal states (*Bundesländer*) to also grant them the status of public corporations (Kortmann, 2019).

When it comes to politically relevant resources that FBOs in Germany dispose of, researchers often refer to “material” or “organizational” means, such as finances and real estate, but also their membership basis. Despite increasing exit rates, almost 50 per cent of the population is still a member of the Christian Churches, which have an infrastructure of local communities stretching across the whole country (Könemann et al., 2015). This still distinguishes them from the small—albeit growing—Muslim community and the Islamic organizational landscape, which is more concentrated in the urban areas and less established and professionalized.

Another type of resource FBOs benefit from is their contact network, both to institutional actors and political parties, which enable them to make use of so-called “insider strategies.” Insider strategies describe the attempts to exert political influence by directly contacting decision-makers. In contrast, outsider strategies are characterized by indirect attempts to influence policy-making processes outside the formal political sphere, for instance, through the media or the mobilization of members and adherents (Binderkrantz, 2005). In Germany, it is again the Christian Churches that enjoy favorable conditions due to their privileged status, which opens them the door to advisory and decision-making bodies where Islamic organizations are far less involved (Willems 2007). The same holds for party political networks, particularly when it comes to the Catholic Church, which traditionally maintains good relations with Christian Democratic parties (Könemann et al., 2015, 109). Finally, the churches still benefit from a certain form of moral authority and trustworthiness, as Könemann et al., underline: “Despite secularization tendencies and scandals, the churches in Germany continue to be instances that take a stand on important moral issues and are also heard” (Könemann et al., 2015, 109).

Regardless of their prominent role at the local level, the political involvement of FBOs in German municipalities has hardly been studied—neither in refugee politics nor in other policy fields. Recent studies that have focused on the political involvement of FBOs in Germany concerning the issue of immigrant integration have

rather accounted for the national or state levels (Minkenberg, 2008). In doing so, they have noted a contrast between positions held by FBOs that have spoken out in favor of the generous acceptance of refugees and a state policy trying to achieve the opposite (Fülling, 2019; Schröder and Kiepe 2019).

One of the rare studies that not only deals with “religious interest intermediation” primarily on the German *local* level but also refers to refugee politics has been provided by Könemann *et al.*, (2015). Focusing exclusively on the Christian Churches, the authors emphasize an important “institutionally guaranteed mediating role” of religious communities. However, their findings also show that networks between churches and local authorities are primarily of an *informal* character and either depend on personal contacts between representatives of both sides or on the establishment of—more or less regular—exchange on the organizational level (Könemann *et al.*, 2015, 114–118). Könemann *et al.*, also examine how Christian religious communities communicate publicly, observing a language and tone that is “stylistically characterized by a high degree of neutrality and balance” (Könemann *et al.*, 2015, 152). Finally, capturing their self-image as societal actors, the authors emphasize that “the churches understand themselves as an integral part of society and, against this background, claim to help shape society on the basis of the Christian message” (Könemann *et al.*, 2015, 126).

Empirical analysis

As refugee politics is particularly crucial in the German municipalities, we examined the—to date still understudied—advocacy role of FBOs at the *local* level. Furthermore, given their different legal and political conditions, the empirical analysis included both traditional Protestant and Catholic churches as well as rather recently established Islamic Mosque communities.

Methodology

To gain access to information that is otherwise unavailable, we conducted semi-structured expert interviews, which allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of experiences and insights (Helfferich, 2011). In our sampling process, we identified Christian and Muslim organizations in Germany that have been active in refugee aid and advocacy at the level of municipalities. In order to increase their comparability, all included FBOs are located in larger cities and urban areas, respectively, with a relevant proportion of immigrants in the population. Furthermore, all included FBOs have been established in the (former) Western part of Germany. In total, 30 interviews were conducted throughout Germany. The participants belonged to different local FBOs of either Catholic (9 interviewees from 5 FBOs), Protestant (13 interviewees from 7 FBOs), or Islamic (8 interviewees from 7 FBOs) denominations.

We interviewed representatives who qualified for an expert interview considering their job position, experience, and responsibility within the FBO, subsuming them into the occupational categories of imam, priest, pastor, or project manager and coordinator. Regardless of their different positions, all interviewees have been actively involved in refugee aid and integration measures. Based on this, we assume that the

representatives were able to make differentiated, critically reflective assessments, assumptions, and statements on their FBOs' involvement in and stances on refugee advocacy.

In the interview analysis, we pursued a combination of a deductive and inductive approach. Topics for the interviews were derived deductively from the literature review. Question included, first and foremost, the FBOs' contacts with political decision-makers as well as their resources for their political advocacy role in favor of refugees and their (perceived) political impact. During the field research, the interview guide was adapted when other topics turned out to be significantly relevant, too. This held particularly for the fundamental question of the FBOs' political ambitions against the background of their character as religious, local, and internally diverse organizations, respectively.

The transcripts of the expert interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2023). With the help of the software MAXQDA,³ we deductively (that is, developed on the basis of the state of the art) and inductively (that is, directly deriving from the interviews) coded the material, filtering out all statements that referred to the political role of the FBOs, identifying patterns in these, and assigning them to categories. In this process, the interview data were divided into three main categories: The self-perceived role of the FBOs as political actors, their contacts with political decision-makers, and their assessment of their political means and impact. Interview segments quoted in the following sub-sections were translated from German into English.

Self-perception as political actors

Regarding the perceived political role of their own FBO, three different perspectives held by interviewees can be observed: Political reluctance for fundamental reasons, political reluctance out of necessity, and active political commitment. At the same time, the statement reveals divergent definitions of "the political," that is, what activity counts as a political act and where the political sphere starts. Interviewees who define their FBOs as rather unpolitical have a rather narrow concept of the political realm, whereas representatives who do perceive a political role of their organization show an understanding of the term that includes more activities and levels.

Political reluctance out of conviction

Particularly, Catholic representatives tend to describe their FBO as rather non-political. According to a Catholic interviewee, this restraint distinguishes their church from the Protestant counterpart: "I think the Protestant Church is ahead of us in some things, because they go public with statements more regularly, with political statements. So we here, I think, are rather reserved." (ID 12, Cath.)

When explaining this political reluctance, Catholic representatives often refer to fundamental reasons that, in their view, speak against a political involvement of their FBO. On the one hand, they conceive of the work at the local level in favor of refugees as a *social* and not a *political* matter or an area that is "still outside of the political" (ID 04, Cath.): "We here on site rather do the practical things, we try to help and ask

the actors on site for help whenever it is necessary or possible.” (ID 05, Cath.) Instead, interviewees point to higher hierarchies that are seen as responsible when it comes to political involvement, whereas the local FBO is deemed not in charge: “We can only act in our direct environment. The Catholic Church as a whole should speak a serious word.” (ID 08, Cath.) Another Catholic interviewee from the same FBO shares this view when assigning political responsibility to the Church but explicitly excluding his local community in this context: “Of course we as a community see that things have to change [politically], but we as a small community are not required; this is rather done by representatives of the churches that are involved in the respective committees and boards.” (ID 05, Cath.). The significance of higher levels is particularly relevant within Islamic FBOs that generally have more centralized organizational structures than their Christian counterparts. In line with this, an interviewee from a local mosque community points to the FBO’s umbrella organization: “The head office is more active, they cooperate with politics, they have access to federal ministries.” (ID 21, Musl.) A statement of another Islamic representative who is also active on higher levels of his FBO confirms the more political role of the federal organization compared to the local mosque community: “My work is not just limited to the community, but I do other activities, I am politically active, I am chairman of the supervisory board of [my organization] at the federal level.” (ID 20, Musl)

On the other hand, interviewees point to politically divergent views of the church members, which, in their view, makes it advisable for the community level to stay out of politics: “Here on site we don’t do local politics [because] everyone has their own political attitudes or political opinions.” (ID 16, Cath.) This point is also made by Islamic FBOs that refer to the particular diversity of their organizations: “We as a mosque, a community with 30 nations, cannot follow any political directions because we will receive so many opposite views in our community that we couldn’t handle this.” (ID 24, Musl.) Whereas in many FBOs, the organizational level rather stays at the sidelines, political involvement of single members is quite acceptable as a Catholic representative emphasizes: “At least some members are clearly positioned more politically” (ID 18, Cath.).

However, even FBOs that explicitly define themselves as non-political describe situations where they are forced to “act politically”—particularly in refugee policy. A Catholic interviewee mentions the involvement in protests against anti-refugee sentiments upon request of political parties: “The parties that initiated the protests approached us: ‘Listen, [. . .] don’t you want to take part in this That’s a sure thing.’” (ID 05, Cath.) The same argument in favor of political involvement is also made by—otherwise politically reluctant—Islamic FBOs: “If the large parties [. . .] pursue any projects and approach us, they are, of course, pleased if they get positive impulses from the communities.” (ID 25, Musl.)

Political reluctance out of necessity

Islamic FBOs often refrain from political commitment less because of general reservations, but rather due to missing capacities and insufficient organizational standing—particularly when they are still in their set-up phase. An Islamic representative refers to the young age of their FBO when explaining its political reluctance:

“We haven’t had the opportunity yet [...] to act together with politics. I think, at the moment, we might be still too fresh, too young.” (ID 15, Musl.) An Islamic interviewee from another FBO refers to overload that prevents his FBO from being (more) politically involved: “At the moment, we have too many construction sites; therefore, we can’t manage to advance our work with politicians or politics.” (ID 06, Musl.) The point of missing resources is also made by Christian FBOs, as reflected in a statement by a Protestant representative: “I think, in the end it is a question of personnel: How many time to you have to get involved in these processes? And how much desire do you have if it eventually becomes grinding or consuming?” (ID 11, Prot.)

On the other hand, particularly Islamic FBOs that are occasionally dependent on public financial support feel that it might be advisable not to interfere in political debates: “In the end you have to see that we receive financial benefits, for instance, from politics or from the state, the Federal Ministry of the Interior [...] and in a certain respect, one is also obliged to be neutral on many points.” (ID 15, Musl.)

Other interviewees from Islamic FBOs refer to a lack of expertise regarding German politics or simply a missing voting right of themselves or significant parts of the membership base that causes political restraint:

“There are people that are hard to reach. [...] Many are not interested in elections. Perhaps those who have the citizenship.” (ID 31, Musl.)

However, interviewees also point to the future, expecting that interest in German politics might increase within the organization over time: “I think that might change in the future. The third, fourth generation will fix this.” (ID 24, Musl.)

Statements by Islamic representatives indicate that the involvement of their FBOs in politics depends not least on the willingness of political decision-makers to actually include them. An Islamic interviewee complains about “unconscious discrimination” when quoting politicians that, for instance, question the representativeness of their FBO: “Okay, if you act as an Islamic welfare organization, you don’t really represent the whole Islamic community.” (ID 15, Musl.) Against the background of missing resources and political acceptance, Islamic FBOs tend to get politically involved in exceptional situations only, for instance, when they feel that their interference is necessary. This is reflected in statements by Islamic representatives:

“Of course, if there is an emergency [...] we signal to politics: ‘Ok, there is something that doesn’t work well. Could we offer our help?’” (ID 21, Musl.)

“If there is someone coming and expressing thoughts such as ‘All refugees out!’ we shouldn’t let that happen. [So we offer] political activities that the Islamic community can provide, if it can offer some kind of support.” (ID 24, Musl.)

Political involvement out of conviction

Finally, another group of FBOs proactively embraces their political involvement and the political role of their organization. This holds particularly for Protestant FBOs that refer to the fundamental political character of the very field, arguing that refugee work

is inseparable from political involvement: “Refugee work is always political, there’s no other way to do it” (ID 02, Prot.). Representatives from other Protestant FBOs agree when stating that advocacy and aid in favor of refugees is inevitably “a political act” (ID 11, Prot.):

So when I write to a member of parliament because I am in need of help in an individual case, then this is indeed political, isn’t it? (ID 17, Prot.)

[Our] fundraising campaign for [the refugee camp] Moria, for example, is, in my view, a political statement. [...] It is also a political act, in my opinion, to say: ‘We care or see ourselves as responsible for it and cannot bear what is happening there’. (ID 11, Prot.)

There are also Catholic representatives who make the same point, for instance, when describing their efforts to defend certain refugees against uncompromising authorities; however, they still tend to describe their political role that results from this activity in a more reserved way: “Sometimes things are unacceptable within the authorities, something had to happen there. And then you realize that it becomes a little bit political.” (ID 18, Cath.)

Some Protestant representatives refer to their religious convictions as the primary driver when it comes to their political commitment in favor of refugees: “This is how I understand Christianity: We are always political, we are always active in the world and we are committed to helping others.” (ID 27, Prot.). The stronger political self-confidence of Protestant representatives is also reflected in utterances that clearly criticize political decisions in the policy field. This holds, for instance, for the conditions of accommodation of refugees in Germany (“People have to stay 24 months in central accommodation facilities under really difficult circumstances [...] so there is something to be said politically!” ID 02, Prot.) or perceived hardships of the European asylum system (“Because this is the external border situation that we have in the EU, which is also caused by the European migration policy and by the policy of sealing off” (ID 11, Prot.). Other Protestant representatives express the wish that their church might get politically involved more frequently or at least see no reason not to enhance their political commitment:

I think that the Church has taken clear positions, however, I think it is not present enough in the societal debate. (ID 14, Prot.).

I think it is extremely important that there is exchange. Not only politicians among themselves in their rooms, but together with church representatives. Sometimes you learn that such meetings have already taken place, such an exchange, but for me this is actually still too little. (ID 23, Prot.)

There is yet not many political activities, but there is no reason why we shouldn’t do it. (ID 30 Prot.).

To sum up, Protestant FBOs portray themselves as politically active to a greater extent than their Catholic and Islamic counterparts, which express rather political reluctance, be it out of non-political self-perception (as many Catholic FBOs) or out of missing resources or expertise (as many Islamic FBOs). Whereas Catholic and Islamic interviewees referred to political activities of their FBO in exceptional cases only or pointed to the responsibility of higher levels in this context, Protestant representatives tend to see political involvement of their local FBO as a legitimate or even inevitable task, too. Consequently, Protestant FBOs are more willing to speak out and express their views and opinions on refugee politics, even if they risk controversy.

Contacts with the political sphere: (Local) governments, politicians, and parties

Irrespective of a self-perception as politically active or non-political, FBOs of all denominations in this study confirm contacts with political decision-makers such as individual politicians or parties. In this context, statements by interviewees show two important aspects they attach importance to: party political impartiality and personal contacts. Differences can be found, however, with regard to the institutionalization of political contacts: Whereas the Christian FBOs generally have more stable relations, for instance, via established boards such as round tables, Islamic FBOs' contacts with political actors rather depend on sporadic exchange, particularly concerning refugee matters.

Political impartiality versus value orientation

Representatives from FBOs of all denominations included in the study are keen to emphasize their political impartiality, arguing that they have to maintain working relations with all members of (the local) parliament or incumbents, such as mayors, irrespective of their political affiliation, while keeping out of "party politics" themselves:

Well, we try to be totally neutral when it comes to parties. In our municipality, we only deal with the district mayor, because he happens to be the district mayor [...], but we don't want to interfere in parties. (ID 08, Cath.).

As a Protestant pastor I have to be careful, as the representative of the church community, I cannot clearly assign myself to a political direction. (ID 10, Prot.)

I haven't contacted any party yet because I think we have a certain duty of neutrality. [...] But, of course, if I visited, for instance, Mayor XY, he or she will be naturally belong to a party. But it is not the party where I sort of promote myself, but the city administration or the highest level of the city administration. (ID 15, Musl.)

However, statements by FBO representatives also show that this commitment to impartiality potentially conflicts with the value orientation their organizations

emphasize, too. This becomes visible in the limitations interviewees set with regard to possible contact partners: “Therefore, I diplomatically say that we seek close relations with all local politicians and all are cordially welcome *who share our values*.” (ID 10, Prot.) For most FBOs, this appears to hold for the established, so-called mainstream parties, including the Christian Democratic Union (*Christlich Demokratische Union*, CDU), the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD), the Green Party (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*), the Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei*, FDP), and occasionally also The Left (*Die Linke*). In contrast, FBOs explicitly refuse to have relations with political actors of the populist radical right when excluding “populism” (ID 15, Musl.), those with “populist aims” or an “anti-refuge and migration policy” (ID 15, Musl.) or the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) (ID 12, Cath.; ID 28, Prot.; ID 25, Musl.) as potential contacts. However, some Islamic FBOs show principal openness toward exchange with the AfD despite the party’s openly expressed Xenophobic and Islamophobic statements out of belief in the value of dialog as such and the transforming strength of a convincing argument:

Yes, we indeed try to contact the AfD or another party, we try not to shy away from dialog, because [...] conducting open Democratic dialog is our strength, that we may and must conduct dialog and may have different opinions. (ID 06, Musl.).

We’ve had no contact with such parties. However, we were and still are open. Please, come to us. Ask questions. Ask the questions you want. [...] We can discuss until tomorrow. That is not a problem. I also respect the other opinions. Even from the skeptical ones, as long as it doesn’t turn into, let’s say, racism or call to attack. (ID 31, Musl.)

Institutionalized relations versus sporadic contacts

The connections between FBOs and authorities and (representatives from) political parties, respectively, show different degrees of institutionalization, which can be divided into regular and topic-bound contacts. Particularly, Christian FBOs are often involved in established local exchange bodies where they come together with local politicians and with other local civil society organizations to address socio-political issues prevalent in the (local) district or village. Catholic and Protestant representatives refer to boards that meet on a regular basis on different issues, such as the “Social Space Conference” (ID 04, Cath.), the “Round Table ‘Active Together’” (ID 08, Cath.), or, more generally, to “local committees” (ID 29, Prot.). Christian interviewees describe these boards as stable frameworks that give all involved actors the opportunity for a long-term platform of exchange. Within those structures, refugee work is only one topic among others, as a Catholic interviewee explains:

[The contacts are] not specifically because of refugee work. There are good contacts here [...] in the city area to the parties. There are also round tables in our area, where representatives of parties, churches, clubs and associations sit

together and look at what problems exist here in our district. [...] And we are very good and very close to it and also in good and close contact with politics here on site. [It] is also institutionalized, there is a representation of interests, [...], there is a round table. (ID 05, Cath.)

Apart from institutionalized, long-term boards, Christian interviewees also report recently established, more or less consolidated initiatives that address refugee issues specifically including an “Interreligious Walk” (ID 02, Prot.), a “Group on Asylum Policy” (ID 04, Cath.), a “Meeting festival” (ID 16, Cath.) or just “events” (ID 23, Prot.).

Next to these long-term and short-term forms of established boards, Protestant representatives also speak of “networks” (ID 11, Prot.; ID 14 Prot.), a “very close wire” (ID 26, Prot.), a “short wire” (ID 27, Prot.) or “working relations” (ID 30, Prot.) with local political actors that are—despite missing organizational structures—described as stable and trustworthy, too.

In contrast, most Islamic FBOs maintain only sporadic contacts with political actors that are often initiated by the latter, mainly when they see potential for their plans in refugee and integration policy: “Particularly when it comes to the issues of refuge or asylum, we have contacts with the state parliament or the petition committee.” (ID 15, Musl.). Interviewees refer to certain “expectations of the municipality” (ID 25, Musl.), hoping to benefit from the Islamic FBOs’ work: “They say: ‘Look, they take the work off our hands!’” (ID 25, Musl.). In this context, politicians also try to use Islamic FBOs as a tool that helps them to reach immigrant groups otherwise challenging to approach: “There are groups of people that are difficult to reach by politics. Then politics or some politicians spoke to us saying: ‘Yes, we want to reach people. What kind of problems do you have?’” (ID 31, Musl.).

Finally, interviewees of all denominations included in this study emphasize the importance of personal contacts between (members within) the FBOs and individual political actors that often turn out to be more valuable than institutionalized networks or significantly impact the quality of the latter. However, whereas Christian FBOs refer to political contacts from their own locality, again benefitting from their stronger roots within their respective municipality, Islamic FBOs are more dependent on the goodwill of certain politicians, who show certain interest in their work. The examples Islamic interviewees mention in this context imply that this rather holds for politicians who have an Islamic background themselves.

Yes, we have a good wire to our member of parliament in Berlin, he knows our work, he supports it. [...] He is from [this municipality]. (ID 18, Cath.)

Yes, I have good contacts with our former district mayor, he lives in my neighborhood. (ID 22, Cath.)

Here in [our municipality] we have good contacts with the Green Party, that simply developed via persons, that often develops via persons in single locations. (ID 02, Prot.)

It is interesting that people from our neighborhood, people that live here and that are, for instance, committed in the local council or a party, come to us saying: ‘We want to contribute’. (ID 10, Prot.)

I would like to mention a positive example, because this was really good. This member of the national parliament, Filiz Polat from the Green Party [...] was aware of us, took us seriously. (ID 06, Musl.)

Political means and impact

Interviewees make assessments regarding means of FBOs that might also be beneficial for their political goals as well as their organizations’ impact in general. In this context, they discover both specific strengths and weaknesses FBOs have as societal and political actors, respectively. Again, the politically more confident Protestant FBOs are more optimistic than their more skeptical Catholic and Islamic counterparts. However, when it comes to the concrete influence FBOs might have, representatives of all denominations are rather reluctant.

Specific strengths versus particular weaknesses of FBOs

Concerning politically relevant resources and strategies, particularly Protestant FBOs mention a variety of means that can be found in other (non-religious) civil-society organizations, too, and that can be classified as outside lobbying tactics.” These include, for instance, positioning in own publications (ID 03, Prot.; ID 11, Prot.), media appearances (ID 03, Prot.; ID 11, Prot.), events (ID 03, Prot.), donation campaigns (ID 03, Prot.), and civil-society networks (ID 26, Prot.).

Many Protestant interviewees also believe in a (continued) certain standing of their church as an institution in their municipality that also equips it with political importance. An interviewee describes the Protestant Church as an “important, big actor in the city district” (ID 27, Prot.), whereas two representatives from other FBOs speak of their conviction that their church still has particular “weight” (ID 02, Prot.; ID 11, Prot.) in their respective municipality. In their view, this significance of the church as a local player already provides their utterances, activities, or just public appearances with impact that can also be used in favor of refugees. In line with this, a Protestant representative expects that “it has some weight when [...] the church visits a refugee facility, seeking dialog and is eager to hear how the situation is” (ID 02, Prot.), expressing the hope to raise awareness of local politics toward the refugees’ situation in the respective accommodation. Another interviewee believes in the strength of God’s word that might cause people to advocate for refugees: “That might sound weak at first because there is no force behind it, but that is precisely what is specific to the Christian faith, that it works with the means of the word.” (ID 03, Prot.) Furthermore, a unique resource a Protestant representative attests to the churches is their historically rooted expertise in welfare delivery that also strengthens their role in refugee politics: “The competence in this area simply lies with the independent [religious welfare] organizations. Diaconie, refugee counselling, and also Caritas have been working in this area for decades and have really accumulated a lot of competence” (ID 02, Prot.).

In contrast, other interviewees rather perceive specific weaknesses when they assess the means of their respective FBOs. This holds particularly for Catholic and Islamic, but also for some Protestant FBOs. A Catholic interviewee refers to a worsened image of the Church that causes a shortage of young members and, in the end, also impedes its potential influence: “You can see that the Church has got a negative reputation. We have the huge problem that we lack all the young people and those we have run away. In my view, that has changed.” (ID 09, Cath.) The point of an aging membership base is also made by a Protestant representative, who in this context refers to a dilemma that arises when the interests of younger and older members are tried to be reconciled:

The Church has its own problems, it is shrinking, it decreases, it doesn’t find access to the youth somehow, it is overaged, enormously, and that is a huge problem the Church is fighting with and I think if you don’t want to scare off certain older people that have difficulties to open up, you don’t want to tend to a certain direction too much. (ID 14, Prot.).

Problems regarding reputation are also mentioned by Islamic FBOs when they assess their means and impact; however, unlike in the Christian Churches, this does not result in a shrinking membership but rather in a missing political recognition and, as a consequence, a lack of public funding. An Islamic interviewee describes their disappointment with politics “pulling out” and “all of a sudden being reluctant to work with Islamic organizations anymore”: “Interestingly, today in a phone call I heard out of the conversation that they politically clearly decided not to fund a single Islamic federation or organization.” (ID 06, Musl.)

On the other hand, Islamic interviewees also see a unique advantage over Christian FBOs that might also turn out to be a specific political strength: their expertise on and relations with the Islamic population:

Where I see myself as an expert are the topics that have to do with the coexistence of religious communities, when our religion, our culture is somewhere in the focus, when it comes to cultural diversity, to integration, I do believe that we have a high level of expertise in it [. . .] and that we can certainly also give politicians impulses they can use. (ID 25, Musl.)

Lack of influence versus (limited) impact

Despite different perceptions concerning means and resources, interviewees, in the end, only see limited societal impact or political influence of their respective FBOs. However, the assessment at least ranges from “no influence at all” to “concrete positive impact for (mostly) individual refugees.”

Islamic FBOs show themselves to be most pessimistic concerning the societal or political impact of their organizations. An interviewee describes their FBO as a “small, modest cog” (ID 07, Musl.), whereas another denounces any influence, particularly in comparison to Christian FBOs:

We don't have any political influence, that's for sure, but the churches indeed have a very very big impact, and I think that is good and important that the church can try to use its influence to change many things in the background and to have an impact. (ID 06, Musl.)

Other interviewees who utter themselves similarly skeptical regarding the political impact of their FBO show themselves at least more optimistic when it comes to higher organizational levels such as "the bishop" (ID 08, Cath.), "the Catholic Church" (ID 08, Cath.), "Diaconie Germany" (ID 17, Prot.) or the—mosque merger—"Schura" (ID 24, Musl.).

If FBOs mention concrete influence their local communities have been able to exert, they mostly refer to single cases of refugees whose situation they managed to change for the better. A Catholic interviewee depicts how their community, in a joint commitment with the local Protestant Church, was able to successfully prevent the deportation of refugees whose request for asylum was denied by granting so-called "church asylum":

In cooperation with the Protestant Church community which still had capacities for church asylum, some individuals or at least small families were in church asylum for half a year, before this could be solved in favor of the refugees with the help of a lawyer. (ID 18, Cath.)

An Islamic interviewee reports the case of a refugee whose "departure was temporarily stopped" after his FBO "wrote a petition" and "contacted politicians" (ID 15, Musl.), whereas a representative of a Protestant FBO refers to cases of prevented deportations his church was able to achieve arguing that if "local politicians" were contacted "things often work in the background" (ID 01, Prot.).

Regarding a broader political impact that might even result in a new refugee policy, some interviewees at least express the hope of the long-term effects of their work. A Catholic representative argues that their FBO might be able to raise the awareness of decision-makers or the (local) society as a whole regarding grievances and needs in refugee aid, which might cause change for the better in the future:

But of course, we can cause awareness or change of awareness in the population through our actions, so that they at some point perhaps transfer that up so that it reaches the politicians and they can indeed make the big decisions. (ID 05, Cath.)

Finally, Islamic representatives disclose relatively modest goals regarding "political impact" when mentioning cases of politicians who at least showed some appreciation of their FBOs and their commitment to refugee aid. An interviewee mentions a "letter" by a prominent state politician where they "expressed praise for our work" (ID 15, Musl.), whereas another Islamic representative underlines: "I think, politics indeed value our work." (ID 06, Musl.).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper analyzed the political role of Christian and Islamic FBOs in local refugee politics in Germany. On the one hand, our results confirm previous results of studies

focusing particularly on classic immigration countries and, therefore, imply that conditions for FBOs' political advocacy in favor of immigrants are similar across countries. On the other hand, the study also reveals particularities that primarily refer to cross-denominational divergences and that, not least, derive from the specific German context.

More than in previous studies, the empirical data showed the importance of the fundamental question to what extent FBOs actually define themselves as *political* actors at all. The results show that most FBOs do affirm some kind of political role of their organization, particularly in the context of this very policy field of refugee aid. Sometimes, the political involvement in the field is derived from their own views concerning a "good" refugee policy. In most cases, however, local FBOs, first and foremost, speak as participating actors in refugee aid that, consequently, have their own stakes in the field. Therefore, even those FBOs that attach importance to their self-perception of being non-political at some point admit to some kind of political involvement in order to defend their commitment to refugee aid. This holds not least for the local level where church representatives are usually prominent figures and, therefore, popular contact partners of local politics. Furthermore, as soon as FBOs are societally committed in fields such as refugee aid, they cannot avoid approaching political actors and making political demands if they want to represent their clientele's interests efficiently. However, statements made by representatives from FBOs imply that the questions of where the political sphere starts and what activities count as political are far from being clear. Not only due to their work in favor of refugees, FBOs regularly come in contact with representatives from the local administrations that more often than not also happen to be political actors. Furthermore, whereas many FBOs refrain from making precise migration policy demands, most interviewees admit that standing up for a refugee toward local administrative employees is a political act, too. Consequently, the fundamental question of whether or to what extent FBOs are political actors depends not least on the definition of "the political."

Although (local) FBOs indeed play a relevant political role in Germany, our findings confirm certain limitations of this role that previous studies on FBOs in other countries have observed, too: First, they place special emphasis on political neutrality as organizations that not only depend on good relations with different political parties in their municipality but also have a politically diverse membership base. Second, FBOs are aware of the risk of being used by political representatives for their own goals and purposes. In Germany, this holds particularly for Islamic organizations that complain that—otherwise rather reluctant—local politicians only appear to include them if they expect certain benefits, such as access to the Muslim community. Third, the political resources of FBOs include a wider range than those of other societal organizations. Similar to established interest groups, such as unions or corporations, that have access to political arenas and can potentially pursue forms of inside lobbying. Nevertheless, they also have typical assets of civil-society organizations, such as a large membership base or moral authority, and that can be beneficial for outside lobbying. However, the latter, again, does not hold to the same extent for Islamic FBOs, whose activities are in a similar way impeded by a general "demonization of Islam" that Hondagneu-Sotelo (2008, 174) has observed for the USA, too. Therefore,

Islamic FBOs also refrain from referring to theologically or religiously inspired motivations when explaining their commitment in favor of refugees.

Next to these findings that are largely in line with observations made by researchers on FBOs' advocacy role in other countries, this study has also uncovered some particularities. This holds particularly for differences between Catholic and Protestant FBOs. Catholic interviewees to a stronger extent referred to the risks of political activities, whereas their Protestant counterparts showed themselves more confident about their political involvement. This difference implies that the Protestant FBOs more strongly confess to a self-understanding that perceives the continued moral authority of the Church that it should use for the "good cause." In contrast, statements by Catholic representatives reveal more skepticism concerning their Church's reputation, implying that it might be better advised not to interfere in political debates too much—particularly if they are as controversial as refugee policy frequently tends to be. Interestingly, the political ties the Catholic Church used to cultivate with the Christian Democrats are not visible in any statement anymore. Instead, being politically involved without being perceived as partisan is the most critical challenge all FBOs are aware of, be they politically active or reluctant.

Cross-denominational differences of this kind have also been found in studies on civic engagement, implying that Catholics are less inclined to get involved than their Protestant counterparts due to organizational structures of the Catholic Church that are more hierarchical and discourage members from becoming active (Putnam *et al.*, 1994; Traunmüller, 2008). Therefore, our results might imply that the more vertical structures of the Protestant Church encourage local churches to get involved societally and politically, whereas Catholic FBOs abstain in favor of higher hierarchical levels. However, the picture of passive Catholics has not been undisputed. In contrast, in an empirical study, Roßteutscher (2011) found high scores of civic engagement in Catholic communities and concluded that "Catholic [...] organizations almost perfectly correspond to the ideal image of the small, flat, participative organization" (Roßteutscher, 2011). In a more recent study on religious engagement in Latin America, Audette *et al.* (2020) also confirm this result for political commitment when arguing that Catholic societal participation often translates into political participation. Generally, the two forms of engagement do not necessarily have to correlate with each other and may follow different logics of action and prerequisites, although basic motives can overlap.

Other German particularities must be, first and foremost, interpreted against the background of the country's specific relations between religion(s) and state. This holds primarily for clearly visible differences between Christian and Islamic FBOs. Since Islamic FBOs generally have a much less established legal status than their Christian counterparts, they not only lack the resources and contacts for a political role. Politically confident—or even confrontational—appearance is also riskier for them since they still depend much more on political recognition and public funding. Therefore, the political reluctance that can be found in many statements of Islamic representatives derives to a greater extent from necessity than the non-political self-depiction of Christian FBOs shows. The more insecure status of Islamic FBOs also becomes apparent in their statements on impartiality, a principle that, for some interviewees, goes so far as even not to exclude the right-wing populist—and clearly

anti-Muslim—party AfD. The privileged position the Christian churches still enjoy is also reflected in the much stronger institutionalization of their political contacts, for instance, in the form of long-term exchange bodies, whereas the political involvement of Islamic FBOs is much more dependent on political goodwill.

Other findings of our analysis imply that certain particularities of the German *local* level come into play that have already been described in a similar way by former researchers such as Könemann et al., (2015). First, this holds for the rather limited impact many FBOs see for their community on the local level, whereas higher organizational hierarchies are seen as more influential. Second, most representatives refer to the significance of personal contacts that, in the end, appear to be more relevant than the question of their institutionalization. These two factors are even more significant for the activities of Islamic FBOs that were excluded in Könemann et al.'s study: Due to their more hierarchical organizational structure, the level of the local mosque community is even less autonomous than the local Christian church. Second, Islamic FBOs depend to a large extent on contacts to political actors that originally come from their own community. Since Muslims in Germany are still highly underrepresented in political institutions, the lack of stability of these personal contacts becomes a bigger problem for them than for their Catholic and Protestant counterparts. Finally, activities of Islamic FBOs in political advocacy are further complicated by the fact that the Muslim minority in Germany is regularly met with skepticism, if not even hostility, not only by the increasingly successful right-wing populist—and fiercely anti-Islamic—Alternative for Germany. This includes tendencies of “othering” toward the Muslim community that—according to recent surveys—a majority of Germans refuse to accept as a “part of Germany.”⁴

To conclude, the findings of this study indicate that further studies might be well advised to concentrate more thoroughly on country-specific contextual factors that, to a certain extent, are likely to influence the political behavior of FBOs (not only) in refugee politics. Furthermore, more research that examines forms, conditions, motivations, as well as interdependencies of civic and political involvement of FBOs of different denominations appears to be necessary. This also holds for the engagement of religious minorities such as Islamic FBOs, which have been widely neglected by research and often ignored or even obstructed by political actors. Finally, the social and political potential of *local* FBOs deserves more attention from both researchers and political decision-makers.

Financial support. The research presented in this paper has been funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

Competing interests. All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1. Since all thirty interviews were conducted from November 2021 to January 2022, we were unable to include immigration flows and the respective consequences for receiving municipalities and civil-society actors that have arisen since Russia's devastating war of aggression against Ukraine.
2. <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/long-term-solutions/resettlement>.
3. MAXQDA is a software program for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data, text and multimedia analysis.

4. In a survey conducted in 2021 a majority of 64 per cent rejected the statement that “Islam belongs to Germany.” A relative majority of 47 per cent even disagreed with the statement that “Muslims living in Germany belong to the country,” https://www.ifd-allensbach.de/fileadmin/kurzberichte_dokumentationen/November12_Islam_01.pdf.

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Cite this article: Kortmann M, LK Nette, K Krahé, A Unser, AW Klie, and J Bonke (2026). Faith-based organizations as political actors in local refugee politics: Christian and Islamic communities in Germany. *Politics and Religion* 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100376>