Islamophobia and Its Triggers: Muslims as a Threat

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Abstract[2]: Surveys show that Islamophobia is on the rise across Europe. Different studies have tried to understand the reasons behind this growth, pointing at the increasing Muslim presence and the fear that Muslims take over the country, together with political players' interest in constructing the "Muslim problem" or the "Islamic threat," particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This study analyzes some of the commonly referenced explanations for the rise in Islamophobia through survey data collected in Spain. Political and media debates over the integration of Muslims into Western societies appear to contribute most significantly to the rise of Islamophobia; just as the rejection of multiculturalism and cultural intransigence seem to be what most clearly explain the refusal to let Muslims practice their religion. Their predictive effects also exceed what is shown by common sociodemographic variables in the explanation of anti-Muslim attitudes (age, gender, level of education, religious practice, and political ideology).

Keywords: Islamophobia, anti-Muslim racism, religious intolerance, Muslim threat, islamophobic attitudes.

The murder of a sacristan with a machete by a 25-year-old Moroccan (an immigrant with psychiatric problems), and serious injuries to a priest and others in two churches in Algeciras (Spain) on the afternoon of January 25, 2023, prompted this article amid renewed fears of rising Islamophobia in Spain. Although the Muslim Community in Spain quickly released a statement condemning the attack (as did the Episcopal Conference indicating that a community or religion cannot be criminalized), the national leader of the Popular Party said that "for many centuries to come, you will not see a Catholic or Christian, in general, kill in the name of their religion or their beliefs" (EFE Press, 1/26/2023). In the same vein, the leader of the radical right party Vox wrote on twitter (X): "We cannot tolerate Islamism advancing on our soil." These are some of the Islamophobic messages that have been broadcast through different digital and conventional media, whose role in normalizing and disseminating Islamophobic discourses is commonly highlighted (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Anderson et al., 2021; Duderija & Rane, 2019), as well as in creating a negative image of Muslims and Islam (Ramadhan et al., 2025).

Although the rejection of Muslims has a long tradition in Europe as in other Western countries (Wintle, 2016), the latest *European Islamophobia Report* (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2024) shows that Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiments are on the rise, especially following the Hamas

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terrorist attacks on October 7, 2023, and the Gaza war. Reports from countries such as Norway, Spain, and Greece even highlight increased physical and verbal assaults on Muslims. Among the main reasons given to explain the growth of Islamophobia in Europe are the political interest in constructing the "Islamic threat" (Cervi et al., 2021), particularly since 9/11 (Gabsi, 2019; Osman, 2017), and the increased Muslim presence as a result of the so-called "migration crisis of 2015-16." This was described as "the decisive moment in the story of the political exploitation of Islamophobia in the East of the EU" (Kalmar, 2018, p. 390), even though Muslim communities were almost nonexistent (Bell et al., 2021; Pickel & Öztürk, 2018).

Socio-political struggles and conflicts around Muslims are also related to the fear of the religious occupation of social spaces (Najib & Hopkins, 2020). In Islamophobic discourses, Islam is regarded as the negation of Christianity, a religion that oppresses, hates and conspires (Possamai et al., 2016). There are also stereotypes such as fanaticism, intolerance, fundamentalism, or misogyny (Dunn et al., 2016), being Muslims stereotypically framed as culturally inferior, dangerous, and inherently different from non-Muslims (Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018). Such discourses deny Muslims their complex identities, and frame what they are like: "ignorant, violent, terrorists, oppressive (men) or oppressed (women), and a threat to freedom of expression" (Shaker et al., 2023, p. 570).

As stated by Kathawalla et al. (2024, p. 835), the fear of both people (Muslims) and the religion (Islam) is used as a tool by politicians and anti-Muslim groups "to galvanize the community to perpetuate prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory actions with the agenda of eliminating the imagined 'threat' in their lives." This study aims to investigate what affects the growing image of Muslims as a threat in Western societies where Muslims are minorities, after reviewing how Islamophobia is conceptualized and measured in social research. Following this, some of the factors commonly referenced to explain Islamophobia are analyzed to explain the evolution of Islamophobia in Spain, a European country where the Muslim population is still a minority, although it has increased: a total of 2,542,498 registered Muslims as of January 1, 2025, according to the Demographic Study of the Muslim Population carried out by the Andalusian Observatory, dependent on the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE). Although they still represent 5% of the total population, their number has increased by 2.7% compared to the previous year. Hostile messages towards Muslims are also on the rise. According to the latest monthly bulletin monitoring hate speech on social media in August 2025, compiled by the Spanish Observatory of Racism and Xenophobia (OBERAXE), and published on its website, hostile messages towards Muslims increased from 9% in July to 19% in August 2025 (an increase of 10 percentage points in just one month). News such as the ban on Islamic religious celebrations in municipal buildings generated a significant spike in content on August 7, in which Islamophobic expressions and hateful content directed at Muslims were detected.

We focus on the Spanish case, although exclusionary attitudes towards both immigrants and Muslims can be found in virtually every European country. The study by Bell et al., (2021) ranked Spain among the least tolerant countries toward Muslims, along with Austria, Italy or Finland; while Sweden, Norway and the United Kingdom were amongst the most tolerant countries in Western Europe, using data collected by the European Values Study (EVS) from more than 30 European countries during the period 1990 to 2017. Nevertheless, the levels of intolerance were still considerably lower compared to those in Eastern Europe. Generally, Eastern Europe is represented at the high end and Northern Europe at the low end of anti-Muslim sentiment, when concerning immigration, with Hungary and the Czech Republic having the highest levels of anti-Muslim sentiment (Ponce, 2025), despite the lower presence of Muslim populations. Country-level

determinants like Muslim presence or integration policies may influence individuals' levels of anti-Muslim prejudice (Bell et al., 2021; Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2019; Schlueter et al., 2020).

Islamophobia as a controversial concept

Islamophobia is conceptualized as a new word for an old fear (Iqbal, 2010). The term explicitly emerged with the publication of the report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* by the Runnymede Trust (1997). It was defined as "the dread, hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetrated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims" (Runnymede Trust, 1997, p. 7).[3] Since this study, and especially since 2001, the term Islamophobia has been regularly used by the media, the public, NGOs, and international organizations, such as European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in specific reports on the topic.

Alternative terms such as "anti-Muslimism" (Halliday, 1999) or "Muslimphobia" (Erdenir, 2010) have also been suggested, emphasizing aversion to Muslims based on negative stereotypes and prejudice against them (De Koning, 2016). The focus on Muslims does not mean that Islamophobia must be re-described as Muslimphobia or some other such circumlocution (Sayyid, 2018). Debates center on the term itself and whether it refers to religion, ethnicity, or culture. Some authors consider Islamophobia as a form of *religious intolerance*, whose manifestations can be found in historical wars and episodes of genocide (Carr & Haynes, 2015), while others believe that it is based on the racialization of Muslims.

The process of *racialization* entails ascribing sets of characteristics viewed as inherent to members of a group because of their physical or cultural traits. These are not limited to skin tone or pigmentation, but include a myriad of attributes, including cultural traits such as language, clothing, and religious practices (Carr & Haynes, 2015). Islamophobia, thus, emerges as "racial," as a set of ideas and practices that amalgamate all Muslims into one group and the characteristics associated with Muslims: violence, misogyny, political allegiance/disloyalty, incompatibility with Western values. These traits are treated as static and innate (Garner & Selod, 2015). This attitude can be considered a form of racism, in which the constitutive antagonism is directed at manifestations of *Muslimness*: "Islamophobia is anti-Muslim racism" (Elahi & Khan, 2017, p. 1). These manifestations may vary depending on the regional context. According to Ejiofor (2023), the definition of Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism is peculiar to Euro-American experiences of racism whereby immigrant Muslims of Middle Eastern, Asian, and African (non-White) ancestry or phenotype are discriminated against based on their phenotypic and cultural differences. Nevertheless, the absence of the color line in some parts of the non-West does not entail the non-existence of Islamophobia in non-Western societies where Muslims and non-Muslims are Black.

In an update to the concept, Hopkins (2020, p. 585) clarifies that "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness." In the same way, Abbas (2020) states that Islamophobia is a form of cultural and structural racism based on perceptions of an individual or group's *Muslimness*. "The target is not an imagined 'race', but a group perceived as a religious community. It is easier to incite hatred using supposed cultural as opposed to 'racial' characteristics" (Schiffer & Wagner, 2011, p. 79). It is thus difficult to decouple the hate or fear against Muslims from racism against non-European peoples.

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[3] As described in the Runnymede Trust (1997) report, Islamophobia leads to harassment, unfair discrimination, and exclusion from mainstream affairs for Muslims (Kathawalla et al., 2024). On the twentieth anniversary of the landmark report's release, Islamophobia was redefined as "anti-Muslim racism" (Runnymede Trust, 2017).

In sum, Islamophobia is conceptualized both towards people (Muslims) and religion (Islam). As *religious intolerance*, it seems to constitute a social process of racialization based on signs of belonging to the Islamic religion (inherently connected with violence and fanaticism), and whose formats vary by national context and historical period (Hajjat, 2021). It is a form of *cultural racism* based on the racialization of Muslims (Carr & Haynes, 2015; Garner & Selod, 2015) and directed at any "manifestations of Muslimness" (Sayyid, 2018, p. 422), regardless of whether such person hail from same country or other countries.

What affects the growing image of Muslims as a threat

Surveys show that Islamophobia is on the rise across Europe (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2024). Different studies have tried to understand the reasons behind this growth, pointing to the increasingly Muslim presence in the "West" and the fear that Muslims "take over" the country (Lockett, 2015); also, the ever-increasing visibility of Islam in these societies, together with political players' interest in constructing the "Muslim problem" (Hajjat, 2021) or the "Islamic threat" (Allen, 2012). This is particularly the case since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington (Abubakar, 2019; Alshetawi, 2020; Gabsi, 2019), and the subsequent attacks in Europe, such as March 11, 2004, in Madrid[4] and July 7, 2005, in London, among others. Nevertheless, recent findings suggest that the perception of Muslims as a *cultural threat* may generate more anti-Muslim hostility than their association with terrorism. Further, people who see Muslims as culturally distinctive are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward them (Terman, 2017). As stated by Abdelkader (2017, p. 63), "a number of factors contribute to European Islamophobia, including an influx in immigration such as the so-called Syrian refugee crises that has left many Europeans fearful of terrorism and job insecurity." Moreover, "the association of Muslims as a cultural threat may also influence policy debates, such as the recent crisis concerning Syrian refugees" (Terman, 2017, p. 500).

The feeling of *cultural threat* depends on the perceived size[5] of the outgroup and its ethnic and cultural visibility (Cea D'Ancona, 2016, 2018). As a culturally visible and distinct outgroup, immigrants of Turkish, Moroccan or Indonesian origin are perceived as a threat to the established sociocultural order. In this sense, this target group can be described as "dissident": both competing with low-skilled natives for resources and status and threatening the in-group's norms and values (Meuleman et al., 2019). Muslims are seen as threatening and undermining Western values. "They appear as a corrosive influence, refusing to integrate, and undermining national values" (Gabsi, 2019, p. 1). "Such biases are not inconsequential, they often reflect and/or influence laws, policies, and practices. Unfavorable opinions and perceptions may translate into bans on religious attire, fuel opposition to mosque construction projects, and create hostility towards refugees from Muslim majority countries" (Abdelkader, 2017, p. 31). As pointed out by Pickel & Öztürk (2018, p. 172), the so-called refugee crisis turned out to be a window of opportunity for populist leaders. "It allows them to portray the political elites as unwilling to defend 'the people' against an 'invasion of Muslims'."

Political discourse seems to be a definitive key to how the image of Muslims is formed. Series of onslaughts by right-wing nationalist parties against them have resulted in the rise of

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[4] The qualitative research of the MEXEES project (Cea D'Ancona & Valles, 2010) recorded references to the terrorist attacks of September 11 and March 11 as being at the source of distrust towards Muslims and its expansion. Behaviors that were most frequently denounced by those whose aesthetics or clothing identified them as Muslims.

[5] The size of the minority is often grossly overestimated, and these misperceptions are found to play a more important role in increased intolerance than the factual reality (Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2020).

Islamophobia in Europe and North America (Osman, 2017). Muslims have become the ideal type of "other," making islamophobic views so central in today's far-right populist discourse that many scholars have started to use the expression "islamophobic populism" (Hafez, 2017); a form of identity politics and a "programmatic combination of immigration, Islamization and identity" (Betz & Meret, 2009, p. 334), pointing to *multiculturalism* as a threat to the ideal image of homogeneity, purity and authenticity. In the same vein, Sayyid (2018) interprets Islamophobia as the result of the crisis of Europeanness, related to national anxieties regarding the protection of national identities, considered to be endangered in the globalizing world and wrongly attributed to Muslims. Oztig et al. (2020) show how Islamophobia can be used as a mobilization strategy appealing to people who have hostile feelings towards Islam. It functions as an electoral strategy, based on vote-maximization by weakening anti-Islam parties' main opponents. Politicians from right-wing populist parties have capitalized on the public's real or imagined fear of Muslims, by spreading anti-Muslim and anti-Islam narratives, to mobilize the conservative vote (Cervi, 2020; Kathawalla et al., 2024); and the vote for these parties has increased in the last decade. Central to many of these parties is an emphasis on a supposed threat from Muslims and Islam (Brubaker, 2017).

In addition to political discourse, the *mass media* is pointed to as responsible for the growing image of Muslims as a threat. They are said to play a crucial role in the production and reproduction of stereotypes, influencing public opinions regarding different groups and minorities. Acquiring a deeper understanding of media coverage of Muslims and Islam appears to be decisive for understanding the sources of public attitudes towards them (Cervi et al., 2021). In this regard, Islam is frequently depicted in the media, as an archaic, barbarian, violent, and sexist religion, which represents a threat to the values and norms of the liberal-democratic society (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Ragozina, 2020),[6] presenting Muslims as an undifferentiated "other" to Western culture (Sunar, 2017).

Pratt (2016) stresses that a false understanding of Islam is shaped by long-standing bias and fueled by contemporary media representation. Social media –such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube– are everyday sites where Islamophobic sentiment is disseminated across the public sphere (Ekman, 2015). Several correlational and experimental studies demonstrate the impact of negative media portrayals of Muslims on public opinion and negative attitudes towards Muslims (Saleem et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the impact of negative media representations in increasing Islamophobic attitudes and actions appears to be difficult to quantify (O'Donnell et al., 2018).

Evolution of Islamophobia in Spain

As indicated by Open Society Foundations (2019), Islamophobia manifests itself across countries through physical or verbal attacks on property, places of worship, verbal or online threats of violence, vilification, abuse, and policies or legislation that disproportionately affect Muslims and restrict their freedom of religion. Other manifestations include ethnic and religious profiling and police abuse, along with public pronouncements that stigmatize Muslims as a group, disregarding their positive contributions to the countries in which they live.

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[6] By analyzing the European Islamophobia Reports from 2015 to 2023, Ramadhan et al. (2025) show how political strategies and media reporting have further blurred the line between immigration and Islam, perpetuating negative stereotypes about Muslims.

This research does not address the different manifestations of Islamophobia (as a multidimensional construct[7]). Rather, it focuses on Islamophobic attitudes, following the conceptualization of Islamophobia as negative, fear-based attitudes and behaviors toward Islam and Muslims (Bleich, 2011; Helbling & Traunmüller, 2020). Prominent measures reflecting Islamophobia conflate items pertaining to both Islam (religious concept) and Muslims (social group) (Uenal et al., 2021). Although Islamophobia often arises in the context of debates over the construction, location, politics and presence of mosques or religious buildings (Es, 2016; Hopkins, 2020), when measuring this, one must also consider the attitude towards other manifestations of the Muslim religion that arouse misgivings in the population, as well as the attitude or sympathy towards Muslims as people. From this perspective, Islamophobia is not the "result of general xenophobia," but rather a rejection of "religious groups outside the publicly recognized churches" (Yendell & Huber, 2020, p. 6). *Religious intolerance* includes acts of denying the right of people of another religious faith to practice and express their beliefs freely.[8]

There are no nationwide surveys on Islamophobia in Spain. Nevertheless, there are annual surveys on attitudes towards immigration that include specific items on Muslims and the exercise of their religion. These are the annual surveys of attitudes towards immigration that the Spanish Observatory of Racism and Xenophobia (OBERAXE) has commissioned to the Center for Sociological Research (CIS) from 2007 to 2017. This consisted of face-to-face surveys run on a sample of around 2,500 people aged 18 years and over, selected by random sampling, stratified by clusters, with proportional selection of primary sampling units (municipalities) and individuals chosen at random by in-person screening of households.

The latest survey archived in the CIS Data Bank was the Survey of Attitudes towards Immigration (X) (CIS Study No. 3,190) of September 2017: a CAPI survey (via computer-assisted personal interview) of a sample of 2,455 people.[9] This survey analyzed three specific items on Muslims and the practice of their religion: 1) It seems extremely, fairly, hardly or not at all acceptable to you that a student is excluded from a school for wearing the Islamic headscarf; 2) It seems extremely, fairly, hardly or not at all acceptable that people protest against the construction of a mosque in their neighborhood; 3) The specific mention of people of the Muslim religion (Moroccans, Arabs, Muslims, North-Africans, fundamentalists) in the open question "Is there any group of immigrants who you like less or you have less sympathy towards?" This last question is a more direct indicator of Islamophobia, defined as aversion to Muslims based on negative stereotypes and prejudice against Muslims (De Koning, 2016). The first two, by contrast, are more connected with the public believing that the growing presence of visible symbols of Islam (mosques, minarets, headscarves, burqas) contributes to the sense of the *Islamification* of Europe, the clash of civilizations, and the feeling of loss of European identity.

The available data do not enable us to develop a meaningful aggregate index of Islamophobia; however, they are useful as indicators of Islamophobia because they measure overt rejection of people (Muslims), the third indicator ("less sympathy for Muslims"), and the practice of their religion (Islam), the first two indicators ("exclude female pupils with a veil" and "protest against building mosques"). As indicated by Abdelkader (2017, p. 61), "Often, official restrictions

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[7] In the review of the conceptualization and measurement of Islamophobia carried out by Kathawalla et al. (2024), the dimensions were: fear, prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory actions.

[8] Casa Árabe (2009) proposes analyzing what is related to veils and mosques in terms of the "new Muslim visibility." With the change in the migratory cycle, there has been a shift from the "culture of discretion" to attitudes of greater vindication of Muslim identity and culture. This would have fueled xenophobic reactions.

[9] The survey with its results, technical sheet, questionnaire and data file is available (free of charge) at the following link: https://www.cis.es/detalle-ficha-estudio?origen=estudio&idEstudio=14367

on and social hostilities towards religion begin with negative opinions and perceptions that help legitimize discrimination." Negative viewpoints regarding Islam may help account for discriminatory laws and policies prohibiting practices of Islamic faith, such as religious attire or worship. This distinction may also help explain the widely varying experiences of individuals (Muslim women wearing headscarves) and institutions (mosques) that represent or symbolize Islam versus others that do not. On the other hand, as stated by Bleich (2011, p. 1592), "any arguments about Islamophobia that rely on a single survey question should be viewed with skepticism." In his opinion, an extremely direct question (such as asking respondents to rate their level of sympathy or antipathy toward specific groups) is more likely to be a useful indicator than less direct questions (such as, "would you favor a mosque being built in your neighborhood?"). Negative answers may indicate Islamophobia, but they may also reflect concerns with other factors, such as a desire to minimize traffic disruption, for example. Planet (2012) highlights other reasons behind the protests over the construction of a mosque: noise, loss of housing values, or fear that it will attract new Muslim residents. Therefore, the usual survey response to this indirect indicator of Islamophobia should be analyzed jointly with other indicators, as is done in this study.

Assembling multiple, reliable, and consistent indicators undoubtedly provides a more systematic and accurate sense of levels of Islamophobia within a particular society at a specific time. This is not always possible, however, unless a specific survey on Islamophobia is conducted, which is not always feasible. For this reason, we are going to analyze the response to the three indicators described above. As they are present in all the OBERAXE-CIS surveys run to date (in whose design I participated), Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of agreement with the three items between 2007 and 2017.

Figure 1
Agreement with Items in OBERAXE-CIS Surveys
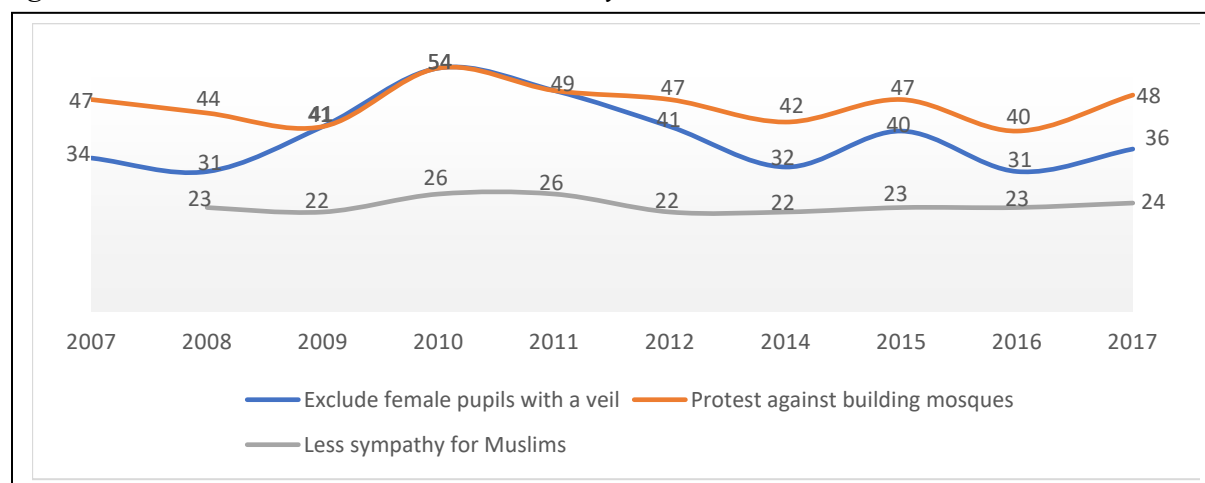
Note. Total percentage of respondents

Figure 1 highlights the general greater acceptance of protest over the construction of a mosque compared to the exclusion of a pupil from school for wearing a veil. The percentage difference in agreement with both items reached 13 points in 2007 and 2008, and 12 points in 2017. Nevertheless, in 2009, 2010 and 2011, the approval rates for the exclusion of a veiled pupil equaled that of the ban on building a mosque. The highest percentage of agreement was reached in 2010 (54%), with an increase of 13 percentage points compared to 2009 (41%) and 5 points compared

to 2011 (41%), when agreement once again began to drift away in both indicators of Islamophobia, reaching a proportion similar to that of 2007 in 2017. In any case, there were high percentages of non-approval of public practice of the Muslim religion, especially when asked about the construction of mosques, which appears to be less socially undesirable than expelling a pupil for wearing a hijab. In contrast, for the indicator of less sympathy towards Muslims (a more direct indicator of Islamophobia), there are hardly any percentage variations in surveys that include that question.

The construction of mosques is often perceived as an attempt at cultural dominance and one that increases the segregation of the Muslim community (Abdelkader, 2017). Similarly, veiled Muslim women are routinely portrayed as oppressed, "culturally dangerous," and "threatening" to the Western way of life and to notions of public safety and security, by virtue of being fully covered when in public (Zempi & Chakraborti, 2014). Several European countries have imposed legal restrictions on religious dress over the past decade, justifying this with their alleged promotion of state secularism, gender equality, public safety, and integration of immigrants. With respect to the *hijab* in public schools, when conflict occurs, opinions are divided between the right to education and religious freedom and, on the other hand, tendencies to prohibit all religious symbols in public schools under the label of liberal values and gender equality. "Muslims who melt in the pot of the country's traditions by abandoning Islam or following a secularized version of Islam are called moderates, while those who practice Islam are stigmatized as fundamentalists" (Khir-Allah, 2021, p. 20).

Whatever this is, the change in the response of the first two indicators is uneven, reaching the highest percentage of agreement in 2010 in the annual series analyzed (Figure 1). The question is what happened on that date. The survey[10] coincided with ongoing political debates on immigration (with corresponding echo in the media) and the loss of *national identity*,[11] or the crisis over *multiculturalism* in Germany, the UK and Holland.[12] It also coincided with the ban on the *burqa* in public places, which began in Belgium (in March 2010). In Spain, Lleida was the first city to ban the *burqa* and *niqab* in public buildings and amenities (May 28, 2010).[13] Other municipalities in Catalonia and Andalusia with a large Muslim population followed suit, although the use of these was unusual in Spain. In 2010, the Spanish newspaper *El País* published 71 articles on the subject, and *La Vanguardia* published 89 on the *burqa* and 41 on the *hijab*. In 2011 and 2012 the topic gradually lost its prominence in political debates and the media (Cea D'Ancona, 2016), and opinions in favor of banning headscarves in schools and the protest against building mosques waned, as shown by Figure 1.

The 2010 date was also highlighted by Acim (2019, p. 35), when he states that "criminal threats against mosques, harassment in schools, and discrimination against Muslims have grown in recent years." And he specifically mentions the "Ground Zero Mosque" episode in 2010, as well as subsequent anti-mosque protests across the USA, that signaled simmering Islamophobia. But there are also other relevant dates in Spanish public opinion, such as 2015 and 2017, when the

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[10] The fieldwork was from September 21 to October 4, 2010, on a sample of 2,800 people with Spanish nationality, aged 18 and over (Attitudes towards Immigration Survey IV. CIS study No. 2,846: https://analisis.cis.es/cisdb.jsp?ESTUDIO=2846)

[11] French President, Sarkozy, contributed to the debate with a platform (published on December 8, 2009, in *Le Monde*) on national identity and the role of Islam in France.

[12] With headlines like "Merkel proclaims the failure of the cultural diversity model in Germany" (*El País*, 24/10/10). Merkel's declaration was followed by similar statements by several other European prime ministers, such as Aznar in Spain or Cameron in the UK.

[13] The Supreme Court cancelled this prohibition in a ruling of February 14, 2013, declaring it illegal. The main argument was that the Town Council did not possess powers to restrict a fundamental right: religious freedom.

agreement to exclude veiled students from schools and the protest against the construction of mosques reached high percentages: 47% and 48% in the case of the protest against building mosques and 40% and 36% in the case of the expulsion of a student for wearing the *hijab*, and this after years of decline such as in 2009, 2014 and 2016 (Figure 1).

The 2015 survey coincides with the "*Syrian refugee crisis*," and the 2017 survey with the *terrorist attacks* in Barcelona. The dates of the fieldwork for both surveys extended from November 19 to December 1, 2015, totaling a sample of 2,470 respondents (Survey: Attitudes towards Immigration VIII. CIS Study No. 3,119), and from September 21 to October 1, 2017, on a sample of 2,455 people (Survey: Attitudes towards Immigration X. CIS Study No. 3,190). The dates of the survey fieldwork are an important consideration in contextualizing the survey data.

If in 2010 news related to the crisis of *multiculturalism* and the prohibition of the *burqa* in public spaces dominated, in 2015 the arrival and distribution of Syrian refugees over different European countries focused the attention of the media. The newspaper *El País* published a total of 43 articles on the arrival of Syrian refugees from May 16 to December 1, 2015, when the fieldwork for the survey concluded. Some press headlines were: "350,000 migrants have crossed the Mediterranean so far this year. The figure is 60% of that registered for all of 2014" (*El País,* 9/2/2015); "Misgivings are growing in Germany towards newcomers" (*El País,* 9/3/2015); "Cañizares accuses the refugees of being the 'Trojan horse' of Europe. 'Is this invasion of emigrants all above board?' asks the Archbishop of Valencia. Where will Europe be in a few years?" (*El País*, 10/14/2015); or "Sweden imposes border controls due to the migration crisis" (*El País,* 11/12/2015).

In 2017, the news that focused the media's attention was *Islamist attacks*, which also contributed to the "Muslim problem" (Hajjat, 2021), or the "Islamic threat" (Allen, 2012). Specifically, the terrorist attack in Barcelona on August 18, when a van drove straight into a crowd on La Rambla causing at least 13 deaths (also three deaths in Cambrills). Threatening graffiti appeared and smoke canisters were set off against the Muslim community in different cities of Andalusia (Seville, Granada...), and in other Spanish cities such as Logroño. Even though Catalan Muslims marched on La Rambla against terrorism (together with representatives of all the political parties with representation in the Catalonian Parliament except the Popular Party), some press headlines read: "Islamophobia is unleashed on the networks and reaches the street after the attacks. Hatred of Islam spreads on the Internet. Mosques and Muslim have been attacked" *(El País,* 8/23/2017); "The attack on La Rambla reopens the controversy over mosques" (*El Mundo,* 8/24/2017); "Islamophobic attack in Usera. Several young people attack a Muslim woman in a Madrid neighborhood while the City Council requests the removal of banners hung out against Muslims" (*El País,* 8/24/2017); or "We are Muslims, not terrorists" (*El Mundo,* 8/26/2017).

Two months before the terrorist attacks in Catalonia, the Islamophobic attack on June 19 against a mosque in Finsbury Park (London), and the arrest of a 47-year-old British man as a possible perpetrator, made headlines. This was an attack that was also followed by the externalization of the most manifest Islamophobia: "Islamophobia shakes multicultural London. The recent attack next to the Finsbury Park Mosque reveals a rise in attacks against Muslims" (*El País,* 6/25/2017). So was the rise of far-right political groups in countries like Germany: "The far-right AfD says that Islam is a real threat to peace" (*El Mundo,* 9/18/2017); along with news regarding the growing presence of Muslim refugees in Europe: "Europe received 52% of the 2.2 million asylum requests from 2015-2016 pending resolution, according to a Pew report" (*El País,* 9/21/2017).

The rejection of public practice of the Muslim religion

After reviewing news that captured the attention of the media in the weeks prior to the fieldwork for the surveys that registered a greater rejection of the public practice of the Muslim religion, we proceed to analyze the sociodemographic profile of the people who most externalized this rejection in surveys. Previous studies of anti-Muslim attitudes showed that poorly educated,[14] unemployed men and the elderly were generally more prone to hostility towards Muslims (Ogan et al., 2014; Pickel & Öztürk, 2018). On the other hand, women and younger people were expected to be more accepting of Muslims. However, the mentality component must also be considered, especially the degree of religiosity.

European politicians regularly stress the "Christian heritage" of their nations to justify their refusal to host Muslim refugees. As Muslim integration is turning out to be complicated in societies with a Christian heritage (Adida et al., 2016), one might ask if and how religiosity is related to anti-Muslim attitudes. Higher levels of religiosity, especially among Christian Fundamentalists, have been associated with greater prejudice toward Muslims specifically (Doebler, 2014; Fetzer & Soper, 2003), and toward other minority groups such as homosexuals, feminists, immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities (Banyasz et al., 2016; Koopmans, 2015; McDaniel et al., 2011; Scheepers et al., 2002). Frequency of church attendance is also positively correlated with prejudices and anti-Muslim attitudes (Ogan et al., 2014; Scheepers et al., 2002). As stated by Fetzer & Soper (2003, p. 250), "the religious and political divide is not between Christianity and Islam but rather between 'culturally conservative' religionists, and 'culturally liberal' secularists." Similarly, predictors of anti-Muslim attitudes include being politically more conservative (Ogan et al. 2014). Outgroup attitudes seem to be closely associated with religiousness and being ideologically to the right (Cea D'Ancona, 2018; McDaniel et al., 2011). Those on the conservative side of the political and religious spectrum are more likely to identify more strongly with the nation they live in and to reject immigrants.

There are other variables that are related to Islamophobic attitudes, such as a strong *national identity* (Morrison et al., 2010) and having direct contact with Muslims, according to *intergroup* contact theory (Pettigrew et al., 2011; Pickel & Öztürk, 2018; Ponce, 2025), which suggests that *contact* between ingroup and outgroup members can lead to improved intergroup perceptions and relations. As these variables are not included in the 2017 survey or in previous ones, their predictive effects cannot be analyzed. On the other hand, possible predictive effects of indicators of acceptance of *multiculturalism* can be verified. These correspond to the following survey questions: "When allowing a foreigner to come to Spain, how important do you think it is that he/she should be from a country with a Christian tradition? And, on a scale of 0 (not at all important) to 10 (very important)"; "How important do you think it is that he/she should adapt to the country's way of life?" Also: "on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'very negative' and 10 'very positive', rate the fact that Spanish society is made up of people of different religions." The effects of *cultural intransigence*, which groups agreement with two items, can also be verified: "Immigrants should only be allowed to maintain those aspects of their culture that do not perturb the rest of the Spaniards," and "Immigrants should forget their culture and customs and adapt to Spanish ones."

Likewise, we want to test the predictive effect of more direct indicators of Islamophobia: the specific mention of Muslims in the open question "Is there any group of immigrants who you

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[14] Fetzer & Soper (2003), as well as the PEW Research Center (2010), identify higher education as a mitigating factor in negative attitudes toward Muslims, more than specific social class, gender, or religious minority status.

least like, or you have less sympathy towards?"; and the degree of self-declared racism in the question "And on the racism scale, where would you rank, 0 being 'not racist at all' and 10 being 'very racist'?" The predictive effects of these six variables were analyzed together with those due to the eight sociodemographic variables mentioned above (gender, age, level of education, degree of religiosity, ideological self-positioning to the right, personal economic situation, being unemployed or not, and income), along with the degree of trust in people (on a scale of 0 to 10).

We performed iterative sequential discriminant and binary logistic regression analyses because both multivariable techniques are suitable for predicting a single categorical dependent variable. The aim was to check whether, using both analytical techniques, similar predictive models could be obtained (made up of the same independent variables and with similar statistical relevance), achieving greater statistical validity. Through discriminant analysis, our aim was to obtain the linear combination of independent variables (canonical discriminant function) that maximizes the differences between those who agreed and those who did not with each of the statements. Using logistic regression analysis, we sought the independent variables that best explain the probability of identifying with these statements or not. The analyses were carried out in the last two surveys to verify convergences and divergences in years of greater externalization of Islamophobia (2017) and lesser (2016), as shown in Figure 1. They were restricted to the two indicators that showed variation from 2007 to 2017: "protests against building mosques" and "excluding female pupils with a veil." Table 1 describes the models obtained for both dichotomous dependent variables: agreement with the protest against building mosques (Y=1) and non-agreement (Y=0) and, in addition, for excluding veiled pupils. The variables were ordered according to their joint discriminant effect, measured by the structure coefficient, which expresses the bivariate correlation of the independent variable with the discriminant function. Its effect is significant when its value is $\geq \pm 0.30$ and is not affected by the interrelationships of the independent variables, in addition to neutralizing the effect of variables with heterogeneous variances. This is not extensible to the logistic regression coefficients, even applying probability increments,[15] which facilitate the interpretation of the predictive effects in percentage terms. For this reason, it is necessary to supplement logistic regression analysis with discriminant analysis, if we want to measure more precisely the predictive effects of variables in different measurement units and unequal variances, as in this case.

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[15] Each logistic regression coefficient (β) is multiplied by the mean of the variable, and the exponent of the product is calculated to apply the formula defined by McFadden in 1974, based on the logistic function. For more information see Cea D'Ancona (2002).

Table 1

Explanatory variables of rejecting the practice of the Muslim religion

Discriminant analysis			Logistic regression analysis				
Variables	F	Structure coefficient	Variables	B Coefficient	Standard Error	e^B	% Increased probability
Building mosques **2017**							
Positivity towards people of different religions	68.49	-0.688	Positivity towards people of different religions	-0.137	0.037	0.872	-2.97
Cultural intransigence	49.09	0.627	Cultural intransigence	0.773	0.197	2.167	18.28
Self-declared racism	31.05	0.542	Self-declared racism	0.119	0.040	1.126	2.90
Trust in people	26.70	-0.432	Trust in people	-0.129	0.044	0.879	-2.88
Ideologically to the right	37.66	0.423	Ideologically to the right	0.130	0.046	1.138	2.94
Adapting to the country's way of life	23.90	0.421	Adapting to the country's way of life	0.131	0.045	1.140	2.49
2016							
Positivity towards people of different religions	131.76	-0.802	Positivity towards people of different religions	-0.267	0.041	0.766	-3.77
Self-declared racism	89.36	0.671	Self-declared racism	0.253	0.044	1.287	5.84
Cultural intransigence	63.88	0.439	Cultural intransigence	0.554	0.193	1.740	13.48
Adapting to the country's way of life	49.66	0.326	Adapting to the country's way of life	0.124	0.049	1.132	2.44
Level of education	40.73	-0.243	Level of education	-0.117	0.059	0.889	-2.79
Veiled pupils **2017**							
Cultural intransigence	85.54	0.715	Cultural intransigence	1.162	0.208	3.197	28.10
Self-declared racism	58.40	0.560	Self-declared racism	0.160	0.040	1.174	3.31
Positivity towards people of different religions	38.67	-0.550	Positivity towards people of different religions	-0.075	0.038	0.928	-1.56
Adapting to the country's way of life	48.41	0.500	Adapting to the country's way of life	0.217	0.052	1.242	5.00
Antipathy towards Muslims	27.67	0.355	Antipathy towards Muslims	0.443	0.207	1.557	4.29
Age	32.04	0.300	Age	0.015	0.006	1.015	0.37

Discriminant analysis			Logistic regression analysis				
Variables	F	Structure coefficient	Variables	B Coefficient	Standard Error	e^B	% Increased probability
2016							
Positivity towards people of different religions	77.44	-0.815	Positivity towards people of different religions	-0.222	0.037	0.801	-5.44
Self-declared racism	52.18	0.703	Self-declared racism	0.178	0.041	1.195	3.62
Adapting to the country's way of life	38.74	0.427	Adapting to the country's way of life	0.168	0.051	1.183	4.10

	Canonical correlation	χ^2	% correctly classified cases		R^2 Nagelkerke	χ^2	% cases correctly classified
			Original sample	Cross validation			
Building mosques							
2017	0.442	128.83	72.1	71.0	0.259	129.42	69.4
2016	0.487	177.77	73.0	72.8	0.314	175.69	72.4
Veiled pupils							
2017	0.462	147.42	72.8	72.1	0.289	149.39	72.0
2016	0.385	107.22	73.1	72.8	0.202	105.25	71.0

All F, β, and χ^2 values have full statistical significance (ρ=0,000).

Of the 15 independent variables introduced, only six showed statistically significant predictive effects, as in the case of the 2017 survey; in the 2016 survey these were reduced to five, when asked about protesting against building mosques, with three questions about excluding veiled pupils. Be that as it may, in both cases the same three variables made up the predictive models obtained by both multivariate techniques, although with different effects. These were two indicators of acceptance of multiculturalism ("Positivity towards people of different religions" and "Adapting to the country's way of life"), together with the degree of self-declared racism. These were precisely the only three variables that made up the predictive discriminant and logistic regression models corresponding to the exclusion of veiled pupils in the 2016 survey. In the 2017 survey, the variable "cultural intransigence" (or defense of the assimilationist model) was added and with the highest structure coefficient (0.715), indicating that cultural intransigence was the variable that most discriminated approval from disapproval of the exclusion of veiled pupils. The last two variables that made up the discriminant function and the logistic regression model were "Antipathy towards Muslims" (0.355) and "Age" (0.300), and this was in the expected direction of greater approval of the expulsion of veiled female pupils, as antipathy towards Muslims, along with the age of respondents increase. The same was shown by the logistic regression model: each increase in one year of age increased the probability of accepting expulsion by 0.37%, with the effect of the other independent variables remaining constant. However, this was in the 2017 survey; in the 2016 survey there were no significant sociodemographic variables in the predictive models.

Similar models were obtained in the prediction of the acceptance of protest against constructing a mosque (Y=1) and non-acceptance (Y=0). In this case, the statistical models were integrated by the same predictor variables related to the acceptance of *multiculturalism*, with a greater prominence of the assessment given to the fact that Spanish society is made up of people of different religions, and in a negative sense in both surveys. This was followed by "cultural

intransigence," "self-declared racism," and "the importance of adapting to the country's way of life," in both surveys. On the other hand, the sociodemographic variables differed in both surveys, but in the expected direction. The degree of "trust in people" and the ideological self-positioning towards the right discriminated those who approved of protest (Y=1) from those who disapproved of it (Y=0) in 2017. In the 2016 survey, the respondent's level of education was the only sociodemographic variable with a statistically significant predictive effect, with lower approval in people with a higher level of education. Each increase in one unit of level of education decreased the probability of approving protest by 2.79% (logistic regression model).

All predictive models were statistically significant, according to the χ^2 test, along with the percentages of correctly classified cases -even after cross-validation- and the proportion of variance explained (canonical correlation and R^2 Nagelkerke) was adequate, as can also be seen in Table 1. Therefore, it could be concluded that the rejection of the public practice of the Muslim religion was mainly explained by indicators related to the acceptance of *multiculturalism*: not agreeing that "Spanish society is made up of people of different religions" and, instead, arguing that "Immigrants should only be allowed to maintain those aspects of their culture that do not perturb the rest of the Spaniards" (cultural intransigence) and that they should adapt to the country's way of life (Spanish culture and customs). These three variables were key in explaining the rejection of the public practice of Islam, along with self-identification at high levels on the racism scale. On the contrary, the sociodemographic variables level of education, ideological self-positioning to the right, age and degree of trust in people only integrated one of the explanatory models and in the sense observed in previous studies (Helbling & Traunmüller, 2020; Ogan et al., 2014; Pickel & Öztürk, 2018), but not religiosity, whose predictive effect was not statistically significant in any of the explanatory models. Rejection was more pronounced among conservative, older, distrustful, and less educated people.

Conclusions

Although the rejection of Muslims has a long tradition in Western countries, Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiments are on the rise (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2024; Bell et al., 2021). This research has analyzed some of the factors commonly referenced to explain the growing image of Muslims as a threat in Western societies, where they are minorities, after reviewing how Islamophobia is conceptualized and measured in social research. As a form of "religious intolerance" (Carr & Haynes, 2015; Hajjat, 2021) or "anti-Muslim racism" (Ejiofor, 2023), directed at any "manifestations of Muslimness" (Sayyid, 2018), we have focused on the specific evolution of Islamophobia in Spain, a country ranked among the least tolerant toward Muslims, albeit still far behind Eastern European countries (Bell et al., 2021).

As *religious intolerance* includes acts of denying the right of people of another religious faith to practice and express their beliefs freely, islamophobic attitudes have been analyzed mainly through two of the usual indicators in surveys: "Acceptance of protest against the construction of mosques" and "Acceptance of the exclusion of veiled pupils." Both indicators are related to the public believing that the growing presence of visible symbols of Islam (mosques, minarets, headscarves, burqas) contributes to the sense of the Islamification of Europe, the clash of civilizations, and the feeling of loss of European identity. The analysis of their evolution in nationwide surveys carried out from 2007 to 2017 first highlighted the greater acceptance of the protest over the construction of a mosque compared to the exclusion of a pupil from school for wearing a veil: the percentage difference in agreement with both items reached 13 points in 2007 and 2008, and 12 points in 2017. Furthermore, both indicators showed appreciable increases on

three specific dates: 2010, 2015 and 2017. More particularly, in 2010, reaching the maximum proportion of agreement of 54% in both indicators. On this occasion, the rise in Islamophobia coincided with news and political debates about national identity, the crisis over multiculturalism in Europe, and the ban on the *burqa* in public places. In 2015 the slight increase in both indicators coincided with the "Syrian refugee crisis," the decisive moment of the political exploitation of Islamophobia being a window of opportunity for populist leaders (Abdelkader, 2017; Kalmar, 2018; Terman, 2017). "It allows them to portray the political elites as unwilling to defend 'the people' against an 'invasion of Muslims'" (Pickel & Öztürk, 2018, p. 172). In 2017, its increase coincided with news about Islamist attacks (in Barcelona and London), another major threat that increases Islamophobia (Cervi et al., 2021; Gabsi, 2019; Osman, 2017). In any case, newspaper headlines that have helped to illustrate the political-media context prior to the fieldwork of the surveys analyzed. They provide plausible explanations (not causal conclusions) for changes in public opinion and within the limits of this research.

Although the latest news about terrorist attacks could have contributed to enhancing the perception of threat, the "Muslim problem" (Hajjat, 2021) or the "Islamic threat" (Allen, 2012), the survey data analyzed point to the possible greater impact of the political and media debates on the integration problems of Muslims in Western societies on the desire to curb the practice of their religion; the fear that Muslims (perceived as a "cultural threat" to fictitious Western cultural homogeneity) will take over the country (Lockett, 2015). Therefore, it is not surprising that indicators of acceptance of *multiculturalism* ("Positivity towards people of different religions" and "Adapting to the country's way of life"), together with "cultural intransigence," showed a greater effect on the rejection of the practice of the Muslim religion in recent periods of greatest (2017) and least (2016) Islamophobia, according to the discriminant and logistic regression models obtained. Their predictive effect exceeded that of the common sociodemographic variables in the explanation of anti-Muslim attitudes, such as age, gender, level of education, religious practice, and political ideology. This last variable (being ideologically to the right or being politically more conservative) took precedence over the degree of religiosity (Ogan et al., 2014; Scheepers et al., 2002) in the explanation of the rejection of the practice of the Muslim religion, whose effect had no statistical significance in any of the predictive models obtained in this research. Rejection was more expressed among people with a lower level of education, conservatives, older and who distrust other people. At least that is what the survey data showed when Islamophobia was measured as religious intolerance, and not so much when measured as sympathy towards Muslims (a more direct islamophobia indicator and susceptible to *social desirability* bias).

As the current research is correlational, the direction of causality cannot be conclusively established. The analyses were based on non-experimental survey data, although in different time points. Nevertheless, there is a sound rationale, supported by theories and research behind the statistical models obtained, whose predictive effectiveness has been verified applying two multivariate analytical techniques. Added to this is another important limitation: the available data did not enable us to develop a meaningful aggregate index of Islamophobia. Assembling multiple, reliable, and consistent indicators undoubtedly provides a more systematic and accurate sense of levels of Islamophobia within a particular society at a specific time. This would require nationwide surveys on Islamophobia, which was not possible for this research. Despite this, having surveys on attitudes towards immigration with the same questionnaire from 2007 to 2017 has allowed us to track the evolution of three indicators of Islamophobia during that period and to discover possible influences of political discourse, and its reflection in the media, on the increasing perception of

Muslims as a threat in societies such as Spain, where they are still a minority. That is the main contribution of this research.

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