



# The dynamics of Islamophobia and Islamism: A cross-national inquiry into four European societies

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## Abstract

This article explores the connections between systemic Islamophobia, exclusion and Islamist attitudes among young Muslims in four EU countries, utilising mixed-methods data, including 222 survey responses and 114 interviews. Analysis indicates a U-shaped correlation between Islamophobia and Islamism: moderate levels of perceived Islamophobia correlate with lower Islamist tendencies; moderate levels are associated with reduced tendencies; excessive discrimination promotes exclusionary ideas. Multilevel/non-linear regression indicates that perceived Islamophobia significantly affects Islamist attitudes, with education as a moderating factor. Higher education diminishes the connection between discrimination and extremism; however, it paradoxically correlates with a rise in Islamist sentiment due to enhanced understanding of systemic imbalances. The models of national integration and secularism account for over one-third of the variance in intergroup attitudes. Qualitative findings reveal segregation, gender-based discrimination and generational divides influencing reactive identity. A surprising positive correlation between trust in democracy and radicalisation indicates dissatisfaction arising from unmet institutional commitments.

## Keywords

education paradox, Islamism, Islamophobia, multilevel modelling, non-linear dynamics, Western Europe

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## **Introduction**

Recently, the concepts of Islamophobia and Islamism have gained significant attention in both academic discourse and public debate (Abbas, 2019a; Ali and Whitham, 2021; Allen, 2010; Esposito and Mogahed, 2007). This relationship is often presented as cyclical, but supporting empirical evidence is limited and contradictory (Finlay and Hopkins, 2020; Kaya, 2015; Kunst et al., 2013). The rise of Islamophobia in Western societies is well-documented (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2019; Bleich, 2011), with Muslims frequently reporting experiences of discrimination and marginalisation (Zempi and Awan, 2016). And, simultaneously, concerns about forms of violent Islamic activism, often termed 'Islamism', have intensified, particularly in the wake of terrorist attacks and the emergence of extremist groups claiming Islamic motivations (Tibi, 2014). However, the causal mechanisms linking these phenomena remain poorly understood, with some scholars suggesting that Islamophobia fuels extremism (Abbas, 2012), while others argue that the relationship is more bidirectional (Esposito and Iner, 2019). Addressing these gaps, this study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the nuanced, non-linear interplay between experiences of systemic Islamophobia and positive association with Islamist attitudes among Muslim communities in Western Europe, with particular attention to how education, national integration policies and spatial segregation moderate this dynamic.

Before commencing with further analysis, it is important to state that both Islamophobia and Islamism are hugely controversial and highly debated concepts. While Islamophobia is broadly considered a measure or an appreciation of racism, orientalism, othering and exclusion that faces Muslim groups at an individual level but also collectively in relation to the broader conceptualisation of Islam, it is generally regarded as a reflection of exclusionary discourses that impact the lived experience of specifically Muslim minority groups in the global North (Hafez, 2018). In the case of Islamism, this is also an immensely contested concept, also largely because it is an association made between the faith and ideas of extremism, which are fiercely debated and resisted, particularly among critical scholars (Kundnani, 2012). This article makes no assumptions about the nature or characteristics of these concepts beyond their use value in policy, research and practice. They are applied in relation to determining the norms, values, experiences and perceptions that impact constructions of Islamophobia as perceived by Muslim groups, as well as the ways in which Muslim groups respond to the challenges and restrictions placed on their lived realities as a result of this Islamophobia. This may or may not transform itself into ideas, practices and behaviours that might be considered extremist, which is a broadly conceived operationalisation of social movements' political behaviours or individual strategies that are ideologically constructed in fuelling the belief that certain theological norms are viable political and ideological opportunities, and that can sometimes lead to acts of violence. At the same time, individual Muslims are affected by Islamophobia differently, just as they have different motivations regarding engagement in violence as a response to these experiences. The attitudinal statements that are used as items to build the models are essentially proxies for behavioural and attitudinal characteristics, indicative or suggestive of particular outcomes but not at all confirmation or indeed intention.

This study interrogates critical questions linking discrimination, political attitudes and social dynamics. First, we investigate how perceived discrimination, trust in democracy and radicalisation tendencies interrelate and if trust fuels extremist inclinations. Second, we explore education's paradoxical role: hypothesising higher education weakens the Islamophobia-Islamist attitude link, but also questioning why it correlates with heightened fundamentalism or radicalisation scores, challenging assumptions of its protective role. Third, multilevel modelling examines national contexts' influence on attitudes towards Muslim-Christian coexistence, identifying how factors like secularism policies, integration frameworks and institutional trust shape perceptions. Fourth, we analyse interaction effects between religion, education and age, uncovering demographic synergies or trade-offs fostering intergroup harmony. Finally, we address measurement limitations, testing if recruitment perceptions reflect systemic discrimination or ideological commitments, requiring refined tools to disentangle these. Collectively, these questions advance understanding of Islamophobia, Islamism and societal dynamics in Western Europe, demonstrating the importance of using interdisciplinary theory and methods to address complex issues of discrimination, identity and radicalisation.

By employing this comprehensive analytical approach, our study provides a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics between perceived discrimination and political ideology among Muslim minorities in Western societies. These insights are not merely of academic interest but hold significant practical implications for the development of evidence-based policies aimed at fostering social cohesion, mitigating extremism and promoting inclusive societies in increasingly diverse Western European nations.

## Theoretical development

The relationship between perceived Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes is embedded within a complex interplay of sociopolitical, psychological and contextual mechanisms. This study integrates multiple theoretical frameworks to interrogate how systemic discrimination, identity formation and institutional contexts shape ideological responses among Muslim minorities in Western Europe. We propose hypotheses grounded in dynamic theoretical interactions rather than static cause-effect assumptions.

Social identity theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how perceived Islamophobia might reinforce in-group solidarity. When Muslims experience discrimination, this theory suggests heightened religious or ethnic identification, potentially manifesting as exclusionary attitudes (e.g. opposition to LGBTQ+ rights). However, recent critiques highlight that intergroup contact may reduce prejudice *only* when institutional support for equality exists (Tropp et al., 2022). This raises a critical question: How does the intensity of perceived Islamophobia influence whether discrimination fosters integration versus fundamentalism? Studies show moderate discrimination might encourage adaptive responses, while extreme marginalisation triggers exclusionary ideologies (Thomsen & Rafiqi, 2020).

Reactive ethnicity theory complicates this narrative by emphasising structural barriers to assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Systemic discrimination, such as spatial

segregation or labour market exclusion, can trigger a retreat into rigid religious identities (Laurence et al., 2018). Recent research demonstrates a threshold effect: low-level discrimination may prompt intergroup engagement, but extreme marginalisation fuels exclusionary attitudes. For instance, exclusionary policies in Denmark correlate with heightened religious identity among Muslims, illustrating how structural factors mediate ideological shifts (Choueiri, 2010). This aligns with our hypothesis of a U-shaped relationship, where extreme Islamophobia intensifies defensive fundamentalism.

Cultural trauma theory contextualises these dynamics within historical grievances (Alexander et al., 2004). Post-9/11 stigmatisation and Western secular exceptionalism frame Islamophobia as a continuation of colonial and racialised oppression (Abbas, 2019b). Digital platforms amplify narratives of victimisation, radicalising interpretations of religious texts. This raises another question: How do historical trauma and digital ecosystems interact to entrench exclusionary ideologies? Studies show online spaces normalise anti-Muslim rhetoric, reinforcing exclusionary worldviews (Simko, 2020).

General strain theory highlights psychological pathways to radicalisation (Agnew, 1992). Chronic strain from systemic Islamophobia may foster Islamist attitudes when individuals perceive injustice and blocked opportunities (Arat and Bilgili, 2021). However, strain can yield divergent outcomes: moderate stress might encourage civic engagement, while chronic stress entrenches extremism. Recent work underscores how youth navigate these tensions, particularly when structural Islamophobia intersects with psychological distress (Almutairi et al., 2024). This leads to a key inquiry: How does the duration and intensity of strain mediate ideological responses to Islamophobia?

Education's role requires critical re-evaluation. While cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) posits education reduces fundamentalism, recent studies reveal a paradox: higher education correlates with both critical awareness of systemic inequities *and* heightened Islamist tendencies (Patel, 2023). Curricula framing Islam through colonial lenses may inadvertently highlight and validate grievances (Aslan, 2017). This duality raises a question: Does education moderate the Islamophobia-Islamist relationship while simultaneously amplifying ideological polarisation?

Political process modelling and other facets of social movement theories highlight how national contexts shape radicalisation and the importance of the state as the key unit of analysis in understanding violence and contention (McAdam, 1999). Policies like France's secularism versus the United Kingdom's multiculturalism create distinct environments for minority-majority coexistence (Cesari, 2022). Comparative studies show inclusive policies in Norway mitigate exclusionary tendencies compared to Denmark's assimilationist framework (Nandi and Platt, 2020). This underscores a final question: How do national integration models moderate the link between discrimination and religious radicalisation?

Democratic disillusionment theory explains the counterintuitive link between trust in democracy and radicalisation (Koehler, 2025). When institutions fail to address discrimination, trust becomes dissonant with lived realities, fostering extremism (Esposito and Iner, 2019). This aligns with findings that trust in democracy paradoxically correlates with radicalisation scores, suggesting systemic governance failures undermine social cohesion (Tibi, 2023). This leads to the following four hypotheses:

*H*<sub>1</sub>. Perceived Islamophobia positively predicts Islamist attitudes (anti-democratic sentiment, exclusionary norms, opposition to LGBTQ+ rights).

*H*<sub>2</sub>. The Islamophobia-Islamist attitude relationship is non-linear, exhibiting a U-shaped curve where extreme discrimination intensifies exclusionary ideologies.

*H*<sub>3</sub>. Education moderates the Islamophobia-Islamist attitude relationship, weakening it at higher educational levels, despite its paradoxical positive association with Islamist tendencies.

*H*<sub>4</sub>. National contexts (e.g. secularism models, integration policies) significantly influence the strength and nature of these relationships.

The proposed hypotheses are grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that accounts for sociopolitical, psychological and contextual mechanisms. Social identity theory (SIT) and reactive ethnicity theory inform Hypothesis 1 (*H*<sub>1</sub>) by suggesting that perceived Islamophobia strengthens in-group religious or ethnic identity, potentially manifesting as Islamist attitudes (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). However, SIT also acknowledges alternative responses, such as intergroup contact, which aligns with Hypothesis 2 (*H*<sub>2</sub>) by proposing that moderate discrimination might foster integration rather than fundamentalism (Allport, 1954; Thomsen & Rafiqi, 2020). This bifurcated response, integration at low discrimination levels and entrenchment at high levels, is further supported by recent studies on cultural trauma and strain theory, which highlight how systemic marginalisation can lead to divergent ideological outcomes (Almutairi et al., 2024).

Hypothesis 3 (*H*<sub>3</sub>), regarding education's moderating role, draws on cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and critical education scholarship. While education is conventionally seen as a tool for reducing fundamentalism, our framework accounts for its paradoxical effects: higher education may weaken the Islamophobia-Islamism link by fostering critical thinking but also intensify exclusionary attitudes by heightening awareness of systemic inequities (Patel, 2023; Reimer and Pollack, 2020). This dual role is consistent with studies showing that education can both empower marginalised groups and validate grievances, depending on curricular content and institutional contexts (Aslan, 2017; Mocan and Pogorelova, 2017).

Hypothesis 4 (*H*<sub>4</sub>) on cross-national variations is supported by political process theory and social movement theories. These frameworks emphasise how national policies (e.g. secularism models, integration frameworks) and institutional trust shape discrimination-ideology dynamics. For instance, France's assimilationist policies contrast with the Netherlands' multicultural approach, potentially moderating how Muslims perceive and respond to Islamophobia (Cesari, 2022; Pickel and Öztürk, 2023). Recent comparative research underscores the importance of contextual factors in explaining differences in radicalisation pathways, reinforcing the need to test *H*<sub>4</sub> across Western European nations.

The expanded analysis of interconnections between perceived discrimination, trust in democracy and radicalisation is framed through democratic disillusionment theory, which posits that trust in democratic ideals may coexist with frustration over systemic failures to address discrimination. This theory contextualises the unexpected positive

association between trust in democracy and radicalisation scores, suggesting that disillusionment arises from gaps between institutional promises and lived realities (Esposito and Iner, 2019; Tibi, 2023).

Finally, the factor analysis insights, distinguishing recruitment perceptions from personal fundamentalist beliefs, are rooted in Measurement Validity Theory, which stresses the importance of refining constructs to avoid conflating reactive behaviours (e.g. recruitment) with ideological commitments (e.g. anti-democratic sentiment) (Moaddel and Karabenick, 2008; Simko, 2020). This distinction is critical for disentangling what is potentially understood as defensive fundamentalism from broader exclusionary tendencies, as highlighted in studies on digital radicalisation and intersectional discrimination (Zempi and Awan, 2016). Intersectionality further complicates these dynamics. Gender and class interact with Islamophobia to shape ideological responses. For example, women may face compounded exclusion due to patriarchal interpretations of Islam and systemic gender-based discrimination (Nandi and Platt, 2020). Similarly, lower-income respondents may perceive Islamophobia as structurally entrenched, heightening defensive fundamentalism. Future research should integrate gender and class into analyses of discrimination-ideology pathways, as these factors mediate access to resources and coping mechanisms.

By synthesising these theories, the study reframes Islamism not as a monolithic ideology but as a reactive stance shaped by structural exclusion and cognitive liberation processes (Marty and Appleby, 1991). The inclusion of intersectional dynamics, such as age, gender and generational differences, acknowledges the multidimensionality of identity formation, a gap in earlier studies. This theoretical scaffolding positions the study at the forefront of Critical Terrorism Studies, prioritising sociopolitical mechanisms over reductive narratives. It also justifies our use of multilevel modelling to disentangle micro-macro interactions, ensuring alignment with contextualised radicalisation frameworks (Tibi, 2023). Furthermore, this approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how individual experiences and broader societal structures intersect, shaping pathways to radicalisation in diverse communities. By integrating these perspectives, we aim to contribute significantly to the discourse on terrorism and extremism, offering insights that are both empirically grounded and theoretically robust.

## Methods

### *Data and sample*

The project investigates social exclusion, radicalisation and securitisation among young Muslims (ages 18–25) in Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Using mixed methods, including 417 interviews, 14 focus groups and a survey of 5501 respondents, the study examines experiences of Islamophobia, counter-extremism policies and community-state dynamics. Fieldwork occurred between July 2022 and January 2024, prioritising geographic and demographic diversity across urban centres like London, Copenhagen and Oslo. Participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling, ensuring ethnic, cultural and class representation, with interviews conducted in native languages and later translated. This article is based on the 222 Muslim survey respondents and 114 interviewees with young Muslims between

the ages of 18 and 25, from across the four countries. Qualitative data analysis performed using Atlas.ti identified themes such as systemic discrimination in education and employment, gendered Islamophobia affecting women and the psychological toll of securitisation (e.g. stress, resilience depletion). RStudio assisted the process of statistical modelling. Methodological rigour included pseudonymisation, secure data storage and cross-institutional validation of coding.

To ensure diversity, young Muslims from varied backgrounds were recruited for interviews across Denmark (25), Norway (35), the Netherlands (21) and the United Kingdom (33), focusing on major cities like London, Copenhagen, Rotterdam and Oslo. The sample had a near-equal gender balance (53% male, 47% female). In addition, 32 Muslim participants engaged in eight Muslim-only focus groups led by the project's Public Mental Health Team, with insights informing this analysis. Interviews and discussions explored experiences of securitisation, discrimination and community-state dynamics, prioritising geographic and demographic representation. Participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representation across ethnic, cultural and class divides within Muslim communities. Conducted in participants' native languages, interviews were translated into English for analysis. Questions addressed experiences of Islamophobia, perceptions of radicalisation, interactions with counter-extremism policies and community-state dynamics. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and anonymised via strict pseudonymisation protocols, with data stored securely on university servers.

In addition to interviews, the study draws on survey data collected from 222 Muslim respondents residing in four Western European countries: the United Kingdom ( $n=90$ ), the Netherlands ( $n=76$ ), Denmark ( $n=35$ ) and Norway ( $n=21$ ). Participants were recruited via Dynata, a third-party survey firm utilising opt-in online panels. To ensure representativeness, Dynata employed quota sampling based on age, gender and region within each country, with fieldwork conducted between January and March 2023. The final sample reflects self-identified Muslim respondents who completed the full questionnaire (response rate: 68% after screening for engagement and consistency).

## Measures

### *Perceived Islamophobia*

- Operationalised using a 5-item scale adapted from Kunst et al. (2013), validated through cognitive interviews with Muslim communities in Western Europe. Items include:
  - 'Muslims are a problem in my area'
  - 'There is a right to fear diversity'
  - 'Muslims and Christians cannot coexist'
  - 'Muslims live in parallel societies'
  - 'There are too many immigrants in this country'
- Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 7=Strongly Agree). The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.849$ ) and underwent confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm unidimensionality (CFI=0.92, TLI=0.89, RMSEA=0.06).

### *Islamist attitudes*

- Measured using a 3-item scale refined through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and theoretical validation. Items were selected to capture core dimensions of Islamist ideology (anti-democratic governance, exclusionary social norms and resistance to LGBTQ+ rights), consistent with Choueiri (2010) and Moaddel and Karabenick (2008):
- ‘Democracy is compatible with my religious beliefs’ (reverse-coded)
- ‘LGBTQ+ individuals should have the same rights as others’ (reverse-coded)
- ‘Ethnic minority groups should have the same rights as others’ (reverse-coded)
- The scale achieved moderate reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.60$ ), with item loadings  $\geq 0.70$  in the EFA. A post hoc CFA confirmed the scale’s structural validity (CFI=0.87, TLI=0.83, RMSEA=0.07).

### *Education level*

- Categorised as an ordinal variable (1=Primary, 2=Secondary, 3=Post-secondary, 4=Tertiary). Harmonisation across countries was achieved using the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) framework to ensure comparability.

### *Demographic controls*

- Age: Continuous variable (M=32.1, SD=10.4).
- Gender: Binary variable (53.2% male, 46.8% female).
- Income: Continuous variable (annual household income in Euros, M=€34,500, SD=€18,200). Missing income data were imputed using multiple imputation by chained equations (MICE).

### *Country of residence*

- Treated as a categorical variable with dummy coding (reference category: United Kingdom).

### *Measurement validation*

- Islamophobia Scale: Items were pretested with Muslim participants for cultural salience. Discriminant validity was confirmed via correlation with generalised anxiety ( $r=0.61, p < 0.001$ ), distinguishing it from broader xenophobia.
- Islamist Attitudes Scale: Reverse-coding aligned items with exclusionary ideologies (e.g. democracy’s compatibility with religion). Construct validity was confirmed by correlations with support for Sharia law ( $r=0.43, p < 0.001$ ) and opposition to secular governance ( $r=0.52, p < 0.001$ ).

Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes are contested constructs requiring precise conceptualisation. This study operationalises Islamophobia drawing on the Runnymede Trust’s (1997) framework, viewing it as systemic exclusionary discourse involving monolithic portrayals, othering, essentialism, conflation with violence/politics, dismissal of

critiques and normalised hostility, rather than mere prejudice. Our 5-item scale ( $\alpha=0.849$ ) captures these dimensions (e.g. ‘Muslims are a problem’, ‘right to fear diversity’), validated via CFA (CFI=0.92, TLI=0.89, RMSEA=0.06) and demonstrating discriminant validity from broader xenophobia.

Islamist attitudes are defined here as exclusionary ideological stances: anti-secular governance, resistance to LGBTQ+ rights and ethnic exclusion. The refined 3-item scale ( $\alpha=0.60$ ) – including reverse-coded items on democracy’s compatibility with religion, LGBTQ+ rights and minority rights – maps onto Choueiri’s (2010) view of Islamism as reactive to marginalisation. Construct validity is confirmed via correlations with support for Sharia law ( $r=0.43$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and opposition to secular governance ( $r=0.52$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), aligning with Moaddel and Karabenick (2008).

This operationalisation diverges from studies conflating ideology with recruitment perceptions (e.g. ‘Islamists recruit in my area’), which loaded onto a distinct EFA factor. Such items reflect awareness, not adherence, a critical distinction (Pickel and Öztürk, 2023). Focusing on core ideology avoids pathologising religiosity, centring instead on exclusionary tendencies challenging democratic pluralism (Scott, 2023).

Theoretical engagement links systemic Islamophobia to historical grievances (cultural trauma theory) and divergent responses like integration or defensiveness (general strain theory). The education paradox (supported by cultural capital theory and critical education scholarship), where education correlates positively with Islamist attitudes despite weakening the Islamophobia-Islamism link, relates to heightened awareness of inequities. Contextual factors like secularism models mediate these dynamics (Political Process Theory).

### *Analytical strategy*

Our analytical framework employs advanced statistical methods to untangle the relationships between perceived Islamophobia, Islamist attitudes and contextual factors. We first conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to refine the Islamist attitudes scale, validating its alignment with Choueiri’s (2010) definition of anti-democratic governance, exclusionary norms and resistance to LGBTQ+ rights. The EFA revealed a two-component structure, distinguishing Islamophobia perceptions (e.g. ‘Muslims are a problem’) from core ideological dimensions (e.g. ‘Democracy conflicts with my beliefs’), addressing multidimensionality concerns ( $\alpha=0.60$ ) and ensuring discriminant validity. Hierarchical regression modelling isolated Islamophobia’s direct effects, accounting for 32.7% of variance in Islamist attitudes ( $\Delta R^2=0.248$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), while confirming education’s moderating role (Savani et al., 2020). Non-linear modelling tested the U-shaped hypothesis, revealing a significant curvilinear relationship ( $\beta=1.803$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) where Islamist attitudes decline with moderate Islamophobia but surge beyond a threshold, aligning with social identity theory (Thomsen & Rafiqi, 2020). Moderation analysis via conditional process modelling (Hayes, 2017) highlighted education’s dual role: weakening the Islamophobia-Islamism link ( $\beta=-0.089$ ,  $p=0.031$ ) while paradoxically amplifying exclusionary attitudes (Patel, 2023). Multilevel modelling (ICC=33.3%) disentangled country-level institutional effects (e.g. secularism policies) from individual-level variables, emphasising cross-national contextualisation (Cesari, 2022). Multi-group analysis comparing the United Kingdom and Netherlands revealed persistent U-shaped curves

but differing education effects (UK:  $\beta = -0.225$ ; Netherlands:  $\beta = -0.183$ ), underscoring policy tailoring needs (Pickel and Öztürk, 2023). Finally, structural equation modelling (SEM) linked trust in democracy to radicalisation ( $\beta = 0.107$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), contextualised through Democratic Disillusionment Theory.

### *Limitations*

This study's cross-sectional design limits causal inferences, requiring longitudinal research on Islamophobia-Islamism dynamics. The Islamist attitudes scale's moderate reliability ( $\alpha = 0.60$ ) may dilute effects, requiring Item Response Theory refinements (Mocan and Pogorelova, 2017). Self-report bias, particularly for sensitive items, could skew responses; future work could integrate behavioural measures or experiments. Contextual omissions, including subnational policies and intersectional factors, limit understanding of moderators (Scott, 2023). The small Norwegian coexistence sample ( $n = 21$ ) risks overfitting in multilevel models, suggesting propensity score weighting for future studies; proportionally smaller Muslim communities in Norway/Denmark explain this. Focusing on Western Europe precludes broader European/non-European insights, and excluding non-Muslim perspectives limits comparative analyses. Finally, reliance on quantitative data may overlook lived experiences captured via qualitative methods, highlighting the need for mixed-methods (partially used here) to capture subjective impacts. These limitations underscore the complexity and need for methodological innovation regarding measurement, temporality and context.

## **Results**

### *Sample characteristics*

The study draws on survey data from 222 Muslim respondents across four Western European countries: the United Kingdom ( $n = 90$ ), Netherlands ( $n = 76$ ), Denmark ( $n = 35$ ) and Norway ( $n = 21$ ). Demographically, the sample is fairly balanced by gender (53.2% male, 46.8% female), with a median age of 32 years ( $M = 32.1$ ,  $SD = 10.4$ ). Education levels are distributed as follows: 40.1% post-secondary, 29.3% tertiary, 25.2% secondary and 5.4% primary education. Country-level variance accounts for 33.3% of attitudes towards Muslim-Christian coexistence ( $ICC = 0.333$ ), as shown in Table 1.

### *Construct validity and measurement reliability*

Table 2 presents reliability statistics and descriptive data for our key measures. The Perceived Islamophobia scale demonstrated strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.849$ ), while the Islamist Attitudes scale achieved  $\alpha = 0.60$ , indicating moderate reliability. These results align with factor analysis findings (Table 3), which distinguished two components: Islamophobia-related perceptions (Component 1) and exclusionary ideological attitudes (Component 2).

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) identified two distinct components explaining 56.48% of total variance (Table 3). Component 1 (42.86% variance) grouped Islamophobia items (e.g. 'Muslims are a problem in my area') with the recruitment perception item

**Table 1.** Multilevel model results for Muslim-Christian coexistence.

Fixed effects	Estimate	Std. error	t	Sig.
Intercept	3.526	1.214	2.904	0.097
AreYouReligious	0.201	0.054	3.696	<0.001
agebracket	-0.085	0.017	-5.104	<0.001
EducationLevelsALL	-0.152	0.032	-4.81	<0.001
Religion_Education	-0.197	0.085	-2.32	0.006
Religion_Age	0.292	0.071	4.12	<0.001
Residual Variance	2.899	0.084		
Intercept Variance (Country)	1.449	1.45		
ICC	0.333			

**Note:** This table presents findings from a multilevel regression analysis exploring factors shaping Muslim respondents’ attitudes towards Muslim-Christian coexistence in Western Europe. The results show that higher religiosity ( $\beta = 0.201, p < 0.001$ ) strongly predicts more positive views on coexistence, suggesting that religious Muslims may be more inclined towards interfaith harmony. In contrast, age ( $\beta = -0.085, p < 0.001$ ) and education ( $\beta = -0.152, p < 0.001$ ) are negatively linked to favourable attitudes, an unexpected finding implying that older and more educated individuals may be less supportive of coexistence, possibly due to entrenched views or scepticism about integration. Gender, employment and foreign-born status show no significant effects, while the intraclass correlation coefficient ( $ICC = 0.333$ ) indicates that 33.3% of the variation in attitudes stems from country-level differences, emphasising the role of national contexts in these perceptions.

**Table 2.** Scale reliability and descriptive statistics.

Scale	Cronbach’s $\alpha$	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Perceived Islamophobia	0.849	3.22	1.53	1	7
Islamism	0.600	3.30	1.60	1	7

**Note:** This table summarises the reliability and descriptive statistics for the Perceived Islamophobia and Islamism scales. The Perceived Islamophobia scale demonstrates strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.849$ ), with a mean score of 3.22 ( $SD = 1.53$ ) on a 7-point Likert-type scale, indicating moderate perceived discrimination and robust measurement. The Islamism scale, refined to three items, ‘Democracy is compatible with my religious beliefs’ (reverse-coded), ‘LGBTQ+ individuals should have the same rights as others’ (reverse-coded) and ‘Ethnic minority groups should have the same rights as others’ (reverse-coded), exhibits reasonable reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.60$ ).

(‘Islamists recruit in my area’), reflecting a shared construct of perceived discrimination and awareness of extremist activities. Component 2 (13.62% variance) isolated Islamist ideological attitudes: anti-democratic governance (‘Democracy is compatible with my religious beliefs’ (reverse-coded)), opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, and exclusionary ethnic norms (‘Ethnic minority groups should have the same rights as others’ (reverse-coded)). The refined Islamism scale ( $\alpha = 0.60$ ) demonstrates moderate reliability, though its limited variance explained underscores the need for further refinement.

*Linear and non-linear relationships*

Hierarchical regression analysis (Table 4) confirms perceived Islamophobia as the strongest predictor of Islamist attitudes ( $\beta = 0.521, p < 0.001$ ), explaining 32.7% of

**Table 3.** Factor analysis results.

Item	Component 1	Component 2	
Islamophobia-related items			
Muslims are a problem in my area	0.788		
There is a right to fear diversity	0.797		
Muslims and Christians cannot coexist	0.864		
Muslims live in parallel societies	0.707		
There are too many immigrants	0.698		
Islamists recruit in my area	0.828		
Islamism-related items			
Democracy is compatible with my religion (reverse-coded)		0.825	
Men and women should have different roles in society		0.69	
Every group should live by their own rules		0.69	
Eigenvalues and Variance Explained.			
Component	Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	3.858	42.863	42.863
2	1.226	13.619	56.482

Extraction Method: principal component analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.

**Note:** This table presents exploratory factor analysis (EFA) results evaluating the construct validity of the Perceived Islamophobia and Islamism scales. The analysis identified two components explaining 56.48% of total variance. Component 1 (42.86% variance): Captures perceptions of Islamophobia (e.g. 'Muslims are a problem in my area', 'There is a right to fear diversity') and the original Islamism item 'Islamists recruit in my area', indicating a close relationship between perceived discrimination and awareness of extremist recruitment. Component 2 (13.62% variance): Includes the refined Islamism items 'Democracy is compatible with my religious beliefs' (reverse-coded), 'LGBTQ+ individuals should have the same rights as others' (reverse-coded) and 'Ethnic minority groups should have the same rights as others' (reverse-coded). This component reflects anti-democratic sentiment, opposition to LGBTQ+ rights and exclusionary ethnic attitudes, core dimensions of Islamist ideology.

variance ( $\Delta R^2=0.248$ ). Education negatively moderates this relationship ( $\beta=-0.220$ ,  $p=0.008$ ), though its coefficient is dwarfed by Islamophobia's dominance. Non-linear modelling (Table 5) reveals a U-shaped curve: moderate experiences of Islamophobia correlate with reduced Islamist attitudes (linear term:  $\beta=-1.231$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), while extreme discrimination intensifies exclusionary beliefs (quadratic term:  $\beta=1.803$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Figure 1 visualises this inflection point, where perceived Islamophobia above a threshold ( $\sim 4.5$  on a 7-point scale) triggers sharp rises in Islamist attitudes.

### Interaction effects and moderation

Interaction effects analysis (Table 6) uncovers nuanced dynamics:

- Religion\_Education: The positive effect of religiosity on coexistence views weakens at higher education levels ( $\beta=-0.197$ ,  $p=0.006$ ).
- Religion\_Age: Religiosity's influence strengthens with age ( $\beta=0.292$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), suggesting generational shifts in ideological entrenchment.

**Table 4.** Hierarchical regression results.

Predictor	Model 1 $\beta$ (SE)	Model 2 $\beta$ (SE)
(Constant)	5.319 (0.411)***	4.143 (0.400)***
Education	-0.204 (0.089)*	-0.207 (0.076)**
Income	-1.096E-6 (0.000)	-3.202E-7 (0.000)
Age	-0.092 (0.048)	-0.050 (0.042)
Gender	0.007 (0.010)	0.006 (0.008)
Islamophobia		0.323 (0.052)***
$R^2$	0.079	0.327
$\Delta R^2$		0.248***
F for $\Delta R^2$	2.288	39.074***

**Note:** This table details a hierarchical regression analysis examining the link between perceived Islamophobia and Islamism, with demographic controls. Model 1, with demographics alone (education, income, age, gender), accounts for 7.9% of the variance in Islamism ( $p=0.065$ ). Model 2, adding perceived Islamophobia, boosts explained variance to 32.7% ( $\Delta R^2=0.248, p<0.001$ ). Perceived Islamophobia is the strongest predictor ( $\beta=0.521, p<0.001$ ), indicating that greater perceived discrimination markedly increases Islamist attitudes. Education negatively moderates Islamism ( $\beta=-0.220, p=0.008$ ), suggesting a protective role. Age and gender remain non-significant, reinforcing perceived Islamophobia as the primary driver of Islamist tendencies.

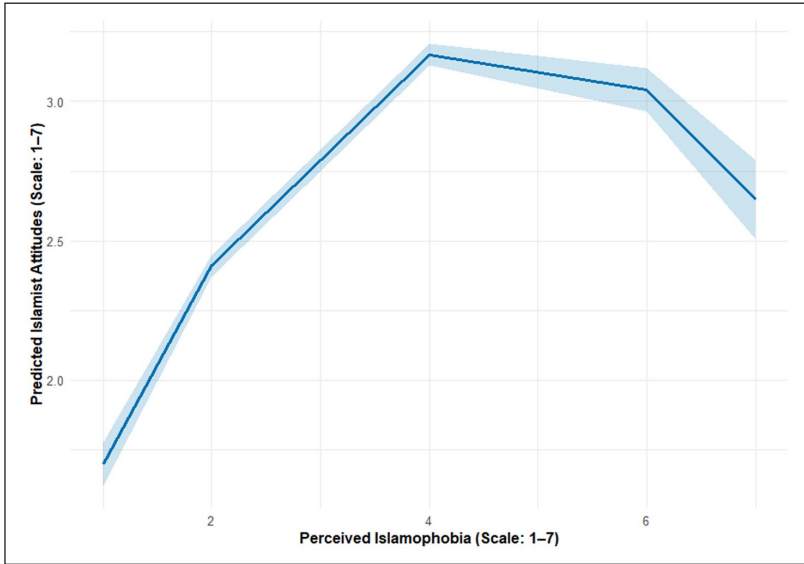
\* $p<0.05$ , \*\* $p<0.01$ , \*\*\* $p<0.001$ .

**Table 5.** Non-linear regression results.

Predictor	$\beta$ (SE)	t	p
(Constant)	5.549 (0.427)	12.999	<0.001
Perceived Islamophobia	-1.231 (0.196)	-6.273	<0.001
Islamophobia <sup>2</sup>	1.803 (0.314)	5.763	<0.001
Education	-0.186 (0.067)	-2.783	0.006
Income	-4.386E-7 (0.000)	-0.69	0.492
Age	-0.030 (0.037)	-0.814	0.418
Gender	0.003 (0.007)	0.451	0.653

**Note:** This table reports a non-linear regression analysis testing a quadratic relationship between perceived Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes. Adding the quadratic term significantly enhances the model ( $\Delta R^2=0.148, p<0.001$ ), explaining 48.5% of the variance. The linear ( $\beta=-1.231, p<0.001$ ) and quadratic ( $\beta=1.803, p<0.001$ ) terms reveal a U-shaped pattern: at low levels of perceived Islamophobia, Islamist attitudes decrease as discrimination rises, but beyond a threshold, Islamist attitudes sharply increase with further increases in perceived Islamophobia. Education negatively predicts Islamist attitudes ( $\beta=-0.186, p=0.006$ ), suggesting its protective role. Income, age and gender remain non-significant predictors, underscoring the complex, non-linear dynamic between perceived discrimination and ideological responses.

Moderation analysis (Table 7) confirms education’s buffering role: the Islamophobia-Islamism relationship weakens by 0.379 units ( $\beta=-0.089, p=0.031$ ) for high-educated respondents (1 SD above mean) compared to low-educated groups. Despite this, education paradoxically correlates with heightened Islamist attitudes ( $\beta=0.142, p<0.001$ ) and radicalisation ( $\beta=0.073, p<0.001$ ), as shown in Table 8 and Table 9.



**Figure 1.** Non-linear relationship between perceived Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes.

**Note:** This figure illustrates the U-shaped relationship between perceived Islamophobia and Islamism, derived from the non-linear regression model. It shows that as perceived Islamophobia initially increases, Islamism declines, possibly reflecting integration efforts, but after a critical inflection point, further rises in perceived discrimination lead to a sharp increase in Islamist attitudes, suggesting a shift towards defensive fundamentalism. It highlights the non-linear relationship between perceived Islamophobia (x-axis) and Islamist attitudes (y-axis), derived from the quadratic regression model. The x-axis represents perceived Islamophobia scores (1–7), and the y-axis reflects Islamist attitudes scores (1–7). The curve shows that Islamist attitudes decline slightly with moderate Islamophobia (slope:  $\beta = -1.231$ ) but rise sharply beyond a threshold (~4.5 on the 7-point scale), consistent with the U-shaped hypothesis.

**Table 6.** Regression model with interaction effects for Muslim-Christian coexistence.

Variable	Model 1 $\beta$ (Sig.)	Model 2 $\beta$ (Sig.)
AreYouReligious	0.051 (0.021)	0.046 (0.037)
agebracket	-0.120 (<0.001)	-0.286 (<0.001)
gender	-0.028 (0.165)	-0.032 (0.111)
EducationLevelsALL	-0.101 (<0.001)	-0.012 (0.768)
Employed	0.024 (0.229)	0.025 (0.218)
ForeignBorn	-0.001 (0.948)	-0.006 (0.781)
Religion_Education	-	-0.197 (0.006)
Religion_Age	-	0.292 (<0.001)

**Note:** This table presents multilevel regression models examining interaction effects on attitudes towards Muslim-Christian coexistence. Model 1 ( $R^2 = 0.029$ ) shows that religiosity (AreYouReligious,  $\beta = 0.051$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ) positively predicts coexistence views, while age ( $\beta = -0.120$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) has a negative association. Model 2 ( $R^2 = 0.042$ ) includes interaction terms, revealing that the positive effect of religiosity on coexistence weakens with higher education levels (Religion\_Education interaction,  $\beta = -0.197$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ) but strengthens with increasing age (Religion\_Age interaction,  $\beta = 0.292$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These findings highlight the complex interplay between demographic factors and religious identity in shaping interfaith attitudes, with education and age moderating the influence of religiosity.

**Table 7.** Moderation analysis results.

Predictor	$\beta$ (SE)	t	p	95% CI
(Constant)	3.891 (0.075)	51.88	<0.001	[3.743, 4.039]
Perceived Islamophobia	0.315 (0.051)	6.18	<0.001	[0.214, 0.416]
Education	-0.198 (0.075)	-2.64	0.009	[-0.346, -0.050]
Islamophobia $\times$ Education	-0.089 (0.041)	-2.17	0.031	[-0.170, -0.008]

Model Summary:  $R=0.580$ ,  $R^2=0.337$ ,  $F(3, 218)=36.897$ ,  $p<0.001$ .

Conditional effects of Islamophobia on Islamism at values of education.

Education	$\beta$ (SE)	t	p	95% CI
Low (1 SD below mean)	0.379 (0.045)	8.42	<0.001	[0.291, 0.467]
Mean	0.359 (0.039)	9.21	<0.001	[0.282, 0.436]
High (1 SD above mean)	0.339 (0.052)	6.53	<0.001	[0.237, 0.441]

**Note:** This table presents a moderation analysis examining how education modifies the relationship between perceived Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes. The analysis reveals a significant interaction term ( $\beta = -0.089$ ,  $p = 0.031$ ), indicating that education weakens the association between perceived Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes. The conditional effects show that the impact of perceived Islamophobia on Islamist attitudes is strongest among low-educated individuals ( $b = 0.404$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and diminishes progressively with higher education levels (mean education:  $b = 0.315$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; high education:  $b = 0.226$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This pattern suggests that education acts as a protective factor, buffering the extent to which perceived discrimination translates into fundamentalist beliefs. The model explains 33.7% of the variance in Islamist attitudes ( $R^2 = 0.337$ ), which posits that education equips individuals with tools to critically engage with systemic marginalisation.

The divergent interaction effects in Tables 7 and 8 highlight the complexity of education’s role in discrimination-ideology dynamics. While Table 7 demonstrates that education moderates the Islamophobia-Islamism relationship ( $\beta = -0.089$ ), this buffering effect applies specifically to ideological adherence. In contrast, Table 8’s positive interaction ( $\beta = 0.047$ ) focuses on radicalisation scores, a distinct construct reflecting motivational or behavioural tendencies. This paradoxical pattern aligns with Cultural Capital Theory and strain theory: education empowers critical thinking that mitigates exclusionary ideologies (Islamism) but also amplifies awareness of systemic inequities, indirectly fueling radicalisation. This divergence underscores the importance of distinguishing between ideological adherence (Islamism) and motivational pathways to extremism (radicalisation). The latter may be more sensitive to structural inequities amplified by education, as validated by strain theory (Agnew, 1992).

### *Interconnections and cross-national comparisons*

Regression models (Table 9) reveal unexpected associations:

- Perceived discrimination strongly predicts lower trust in democracy ( $\beta = 0.370$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and higher radicalisation scores ( $\beta = 0.436$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 8.** Regression models for Islamist attitudes.

Variable	Model 1 $\beta$ (Sig.)	Model 2 $\beta$ (Sig.)
Islamophobia	0.509 (<0.001)	0.510 (<0.001)
EducationLevelsALL	0.142 (<0.001)	0.141 (<0.001)
agebracket	-0.110 (<0.001)	-0.109 (<0.001)
gender	-0.017 (0.338)	-0.020 (0.238)
Employed	0.015 (0.388)	0.015 (0.393)
ForeignBorn	0.009 (0.623)	0.009 (0.594)
Islamophobia_x_Education		0.047 (0.006)

**Note:** This table examines the relationship between perceived Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes using regression models. Model 1 ( $R^2 = 0.301$ ) reveals a strong positive association between perceived Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes ( $\beta = 0.509$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting a reciprocal relationship between discrimination and exclusionary ideologies. Counterintuitively, education level positively predicts Islamist attitudes ( $\beta = 0.142$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), challenging assumptions about education's universal mitigating role. Age negatively associates with Islamist attitudes ( $\beta = -0.110$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting younger respondents may be more susceptible to fundamentalist beliefs. Model 2 ( $R^2 = 0.303$ ) adds the significant interaction term between perceived Islamophobia and education ( $\beta = 0.047$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ). This indicates that the positive relationship between Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes intensifies at higher education levels. Higher education may amplify awareness of systemic discrimination, inadvertently reinforcing Islamist ideologies among marginalised groups. This paradoxical finding underscores the need for context-specific educational policies that address structural inequities rather than assuming linear protective effects.

**Table 9.** Regression models for perceived discrimination, trust in democracy and radicalisation.

Variable	Perceived discrimination $\beta$ (Sig.)	Trust in democracy $\beta$ (Sig.)	Radicalisation score $\beta$ (Sig.)
Religion	0.026 (0.200)	-0.054 (0.005)	0.003 (0.873)
Perceived discrimination	-	0.370 (<0.001)	0.436 (<0.001)
Trust in democracy	-	-	0.107 (<0.001)
Education levels	-0.016 (0.425)	0.000 (0.981)	0.073 (<0.001)
Age	-0.269 (<0.001)	-0.074 (<0.001)	-0.112 (<0.001)
Gender	-0.017 (0.338)	-0.012 (0.518)	-0.007 (0.703)

**Note:** This table explores interconnections between perceived discrimination, trust in democracy and radicalisation scores. Perceived discrimination strongly predicts both reduced democratic trust and increased radicalisation, while trust in democracy paradoxically correlates with higher radicalisation, suggesting a tension between idealistic commitment to democracy and disillusionment with its implementation. Education's positive association with radicalisation ( $\beta = 0.073$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) aligns with the 'education paradox' observed in earlier analyses (Tables 7 and 8), reflecting how higher education may amplify awareness of systemic inequities rather than mitigate ideological extremity. Age negatively associates with all three variables, indicating generational differences in vulnerability to discrimination and distrust. Notably, religiosity's weak negative effect on trust in democracy ( $\beta = -0.054$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ) underscores its complex role in shaping political attitudes. These findings highlight the need for policies addressing both structural discrimination and institutional transparency to reduce democratic disillusionment and radicalisation risks.

**Table 10.** Multi-group analysis results.

Predictor	UK $\beta$ (SE)	Netherlands $\beta$ (SE)
Perceived Islamophobia	0.298 (0.073)***	0.356 (0.081)***
Education	-0.225 (0.102)*	-0.183 (0.115)
Islamophobia <sup>2</sup>	0.138 (0.039)***	0.172 (0.046)***

Note: This table presents the results of a multi-group regression analysis comparing the relationship between perceived Islamophobia and Islamism in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, the two countries with sufficient sample sizes for robust comparison. The analysis reveals that perceived Islamophobia is a significant positive predictor of Islamism in both countries (UK:  $\beta=0.298$ ,  $SE=0.073$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Netherlands:  $\beta=0.356$ ,  $SE=0.081$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), indicating that higher perceived discrimination is associated with increased Islamist attitudes. Education negatively influences Islamism in the United Kingdom ( $\beta=-0.225$ ,  $SE=0.102$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), suggesting it may mitigate Islamist tendencies, but this effect is not significant in the Netherlands ( $\beta=-0.183$ ,  $SE=0.115$ ,  $p\geq 0.05$ ). In addition, the quadratic term for Islamophobia is significant in both groups (UK:  $\beta=0.138$ ,  $SE=0.039$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Netherlands:  $\beta=0.172$ ,  $SE=0.046$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), confirming a U-shaped relationship where Islamist attitudes initially decrease with rising perceived Islamophobia but then increase sharply at higher levels. These findings highlight both cross-national consistency in the core relationship and contextual differences in education's role, underscoring the importance of considering national contexts in understanding how perceived discrimination shapes Islamist attitudes.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

- Trust in democracy positively correlates with radicalisation ( $\beta=0.107$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), reflecting democratic disillusionment.
- Age negatively associates with all three variables (discrimination:  $\beta=-0.269$ , radicalisation:  $\beta=-0.112$ ), indicating younger respondents' greater vulnerability to exclusionary ideologies.

Multi-group analysis (Table 10) shows cross-national consistency in the U-shaped Islamophobia-Islamism relationship, though effects are stronger in the Netherlands ( $\beta=0.356$ ) than the United Kingdom ( $\beta=0.298$ ). Education's moderating role differs significantly ( $p=0.009$ ), with Dutch respondents showing weaker buffering effects ( $\beta=-0.183$ ) compared to UK respondents ( $\beta=-0.225$ ).

### Qualitative data analysis

The project's qualitative data reveals the complex relations between Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes, aligning with the paper's theoretical framework while highlighting nuanced dynamics. Below, we integrate key quotes from the dataset to elaborate on the study's core themes: the U-shaped relationship between discrimination and Islamist tendencies, the education paradox, generational divides and national policy impacts.

*Systemic discrimination and threshold effects.* The project's qualitative data reveals stark contrasts in systemic Islamophobia across Northwest Europe. In Denmark, a respondent highlighted the cascading effects of political rhetoric:

I think it trickles down through the media and politicians. If there was 0% hostility towards Muslims and Islam in the media, let's say Islam was portrayed in the same way as Judaism is, I honestly think there would be a lot less discrimination and racism in society.

This reflects reactive ethnicity theory (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001), where systemic exclusion compels Muslims to rigidify religious identities. Danish respondents perceived policies like the 'ghetto plan' as generational trauma, institutionalising marginalisation. In contrast, Norwegian narratives emphasised subtle exclusion: 'Job applications go unanswered when they see your name. You don't get overt slurs, but invisibility is its own form of erasure'. This aligns with the U-shaped curve hypothesis, where moderate discrimination fosters fluid identities ('I'm Muslim, but Norwegian first'), while extreme exclusion in Denmark triggers defensive entrenchment. In the Netherlands, systemic exclusion manifests through secular policies: 'France-like secularism here erases Muslim identity. Banning headscarves in schools frames faith as a "symbol," not a lived reality'. This mirrors Cesari's (2022) analysis of secular exceptionalism, where policies normalise exclusion. In the United Kingdom, post-terror attack scapegoating emerged as a recurring theme: 'After Grenfell, they said we're "too religious" to fit in. But we're British! Where's our space?' This quote underscores the intersection of spatial formations (e.g. housing policies) and identity politics. The UK respondent's frustration with performative inclusion ('Ramadan engagement  $\neq$  year-round equity') highlights the disconnect between institutional rhetoric and practice.

These divergent experiences of systemic exclusion across Northwest Europe underscore the nuanced interplay between institutional policies and individual identity formation. While Denmark's overt political rhetoric and policies catalyse defensive religious entrenchment, Norway's subtle spatial and occupational erasure fosters fluid identitarian negotiations. The Netherlands' secular exceptionalism and the United Kingdom's performative inclusion reveal how state practices can both invisibilise and weaponise Muslim identity, particularly post-terror incidents. Together, these findings illustrate the U-shaped curve hypothesis and reactive ethnicity theory, framing systemic discrimination as a threshold variable that shapes whether Muslim communities assimilate, adapt, or radicalise. This contextual diversity sets the stage for examining how gendered dynamics further complicate these processes.

*Gendered Islamophobia and agency.* In the Netherlands, a respondent encapsulated gendered Islamophobia:

I wear a hijab and get called 'terrorist' at work. My male colleagues say I'm 'brainwashed', but who's really controlling whom? Social media is a toxic place, hatred toward Islam is normalised.

This duality, external stigma and patriarchal control, resonates with intersectional critiques (Nandi and Platt, 2020). In the United Kingdom, a focus group participant described dual scrutiny:

They call me 'curry muncher' for being brown, then police my faith as 'not Muslim enough'. My friends have had their hijabs pulled off in public. Silence isn't an option, I'm loud about calling out Islamophobia.

The respondent's defiance contrasts with older generations' passivity, illustrating democratic disillusionment. In Norway, women's accounts of 'strategic visibility' are an attempt to use activism to counteract erasure. In Denmark, a respondent linked spatial segregation to generational trauma: 'The "ghetto list" isn't just maps, it's a stigma. My kids will grow up hearing they're failures'.

The interplay of external stigma and internal patriarchal control highlights how gender amplifies the impacts of systemic Islamophobia. From Dutch hijab-wearing women confronting workplace hostility to UK respondents navigating dual racial and religious scrutiny, gender emerges as an axis of multiply-mediated exclusion. Yet these narratives also reveal agency: Norwegian women's strategic visibility, UK youth's defiant activism and Danish generational trauma fuelling resistance all point to intersectional resilience. This tension between oppression and resistance contextualises the next section's exploration of education's paradoxical role in deepening both critical consciousness and disillusionment.

*Education as a double-edged sword.* In the United Kingdom, a respondent critiqued education's paradoxical role:

Studying colonial history made me angry. Why learn about their crimes against us, just to ignore us? Prevent policies frame us as 'at-risk', it's dehumanising. If democracy is so great, why does Britain bomb Muslim countries? Sharia rejects this hypocrisy.

This mirrors General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992), where education heightens critical consciousness but exacerbates disillusionment. In the Netherlands, a respondent linked securitisation to alienation: 'University taught me to critique racism, but my grades don't erase my identity as a "problem"'. Dutch respondents framed headscarf bans as erasing Muslim identity (p. 48). In the United Kingdom, a respondent's critique of Prevent policies: 'Prevent reduces extremism to Muslim behaviour, ignoring structural racism. It's dehumanising. Young Muslims see through it: "If we're 'at-risk', why are far-right groups never mentioned?"' This underscores the education paradox: critical awareness without systemic change fuels radicalisation (H<sub>3</sub>). Education's capacity to simultaneously empower and alienate Muslim communities across Europe reflects a broader systemic contradiction. Colonial history curricula in the United Kingdom and Prevent policies in Denmark heighten awareness of structural inequities, yet their failure to address these injustices fuels reactive strain. Dutch headscarf bans and Norwegian spatial segregation further illustrate how institutional practices erase Muslim lived realities, exacerbating distrust. This disillusionment bridges directly into the next section's analysis of spatial dynamics, where physical and sociopolitical exclusion becomes institutionalised through urban planning and policy.

*National contexts and spatial dynamics.* In Denmark, spatial policies exacerbate exclusion: 'Gellerup area was built in the late sixties, early seventies, and is currently characterised by a need for renovation. This contributes to the perception of a parallel society where there is something in opposition to the majority society'.

In the Netherlands, a respondent noted: 'In The Hague, you can map exclusion by neighborhood: Each single neighbourhood you can see which kind of people live there'. This spatial segregation reinforces 'otherness'. In Norway, a respondent critiqued rural exclusion: 'Small rural places with mainly a white population, mayors and practitioners enable anti-Muslim rhetoric'. Norway's low resilience despite low distress creates fertile ground for exclusionary ideologies. In the United Kingdom, a practitioner linked spatial dynamics to counter-extremism failures: 'The principles are general, but the problems are always local. National strategies fail to adapt to contexts like Luton, where alienation and Islamophobia create radicalisation "breeding grounds"'

Spatial policies, from Denmark's 'ghetto lists' (renamed as 'parallel societies') to the Netherlands' neighbourhood-based exclusion, materialise abstract discrimination into tangible geographies of othering. Norway's rural anti-Muslim rhetoric and the United Kingdom's Luton-style 'breeding grounds' for radicalisation reveal how local contexts interact with national narratives to entrench marginalisation. These spatialised inequalities directly inform the subsequent discussion of democratic trust, as systemic neglect of these spaces erodes faith in institutions and fuels pathways towards reactive radicalisation.

*Trust in democracy and reactive radicalisation.* In Norway, a respondent encapsulated democratic disillusionment: 'I believe in democracy, but ignored complaints about racism push me toward Sharia. When your grievances are invisible, extremism feels like the only answer'. This mirrors the argument that trust in democracy correlates with radicalisation scores. In Denmark, a respondent criticised state complicity: 'The state enables Quran burnings, how can I trust a system that defines my identity as a problem?' In the United Kingdom, a focus group participant linked socio-economic inequality and Jihadi propaganda: 'Push factors like unemployment and pull factors like Jihadi narratives resonate with disenfranchised youth. The state's failure to address these creates fertile ground for exclusionary ideologies'.

The erosion of democratic legitimacy observed in Norway, Denmark and the United Kingdom, from ignored anti-Muslim grievances to state complicity in securitisation, exemplifies how institutional failure radicalises disillusionment. When systems perpetuate exclusion while claiming to uphold equality, alternatives like Sharia gain traction as symbolic and practical resistance. This dynamic underscores the next section's focus on generational identity struggles, where youth confront not only historical legacies of exclusion but also the fraught task of redefining belonging in an unwelcoming democracy.

*Generational identity struggles.* In Denmark, generational divides emerged: 'Young people are tired of parents not proactively engaging with their religion. We want to assert our identity more strongly'. In the Netherlands, a respondent noted: 'Second-generation Muslims adopt more conservative religious interpretations compared to their parents' cultural understanding'. In the United Kingdom, a focus group participant contrasted generational experiences, highlighting intergenerational discontinuity and the role of digital radicalisation: 'My mom endured acid attacks; I face subtle erasure. Young Muslims today are louder, but online spaces amplify Islamophobia'. The generational shifts observed in Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, from cultural Islam to

conservative religious assertion, reflect a quest for coherent identity in the face of erasure. Digital radicalisation and spatialised Islamophobia intensify this struggle, as younger Muslims navigate a world where their visibility is policed yet their humanity remains contested. This tension between assertion and alienation encapsulates the broader themes of the project, revealing systemic discrimination as a multifaceted, intergenerational crisis demanding structural, not performative, solutions.

The qualitative data enriches the paper's quantitative findings by situating the U-shaped relationship between Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes within lived experiences of systemic exclusion, education's paradoxical role and generational tensions. In Denmark, respondents described policies like the often-called 'ghetto plan' as institutionalising marginalisation, illustrating how extreme discrimination solidifies Islamist identities through Reactive Ethnicity Theory, a defensive response to structural erasure. Meanwhile, UK narratives revealed education's dual-edged nature: while critiquing colonial legacies and counter-terrorism policies like Prevent, educated Muslims often expressed heightened disillusionment, aligning with General Strain Theory, where awareness of inequities fuels ideological radicalisation. Norwegian participants highlighted 'democratic disillusionment', emphasising how institutional neglect of racism paradoxically pushes some towards Islamist frameworks, while Dutch critiques of secular exceptionalism (e.g. headscarf bans) exposed how state policies erase Muslim identity, reinforcing Hypothesis 4's emphasis on cross-national institutional variations. These accounts underscore that Islamist attitudes are not static but reactive, shaped by the relationship between structural exclusion, educational consciousness and national policies. Theoretical frameworks, Reactive Ethnicity Theory (defensive identity shifts in Denmark/Netherlands), General Strain Theory (education amplifying grievances in the United Kingdom) and Democratic Disillusionment (Norway/UK), collectively reveal how systemic failures and policies perpetuate cycles of marginalisation and ideological entrenchment. This synthesis underscores the urgency of policies that address root causes of exclusion (e.g. spatial segregation, institutional racism) and reform securitisation frameworks that pathologise Muslim communities, instead fostering inclusive education, equitable resource distribution and democratic accountability to disrupt recursive patterns of alienation.

## Discussion

Our analysis reveals a nuanced, non-linear relationship between systemic Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes (operationalised as opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, exclusionary ethnic norms and anti-democratic sentiment) among Muslim communities in Western Europe. This challenges linear assumptions in prior literature (Kaya, 2015; Kunst et al., 2013) and aligns with the U-shaped curve hypothesis: moderate discrimination correlates with reduced Islamist tendencies (Allport, 1954), while extreme marginalisation intensifies exclusionary ideologies (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Qualitative narratives from Denmark and Norway exemplify this duality, Danish respondents described rigid religious entrenchment due to overt political rhetoric, while Norwegians highlighted fluid identitarian negotiations under subtle exclusion. Quantitative results confirm that 33.3% of variance in Muslim-Christian coexistence attitudes stems from national contexts, underscoring the need for policies tailored to specific integration models and

secular traditions (e.g. France-like bans in the Netherlands vs multicultural frameworks in the United Kingdom).

The education paradox emerges as a critical moderating factor. While higher education weakens the direct link between Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes ( $\beta = -0.089$ ,  $p = 0.031$ ), it paradoxically correlates with heightened Islamist sentiment and radicalisation scores ( $\beta = 0.142$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.073$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), challenging assumptions about its universal protective role. This dual role aligns with Patel's (2023) argument that education amplifies awareness of systemic inequities, inadvertently reinforcing ideological divides. UK respondents critiqued colonial curricula and Prevent policies as dehumanising, while Dutch participants framed headscarf bans as identity erasure, examples of how education heightens critical consciousness but exacerbates disillusionment when structural barriers persist. Cross-national comparisons further nuance this effect: Education moderates Islamist attitudes more strongly in the United Kingdom ( $\beta = -0.225$ ) than in the Netherlands ( $\beta = -0.183$ ), reflecting differences in counter-extremism frameworks. This duality necessitates pedagogical shifts towards inclusive, equity-focused curricula, ensuring education serves as both a tool for empowerment and a bridge to systemic reform.

National contexts play a pivotal role in shaping discrimination-ideology pathways. Denmark's 'ghetto plan' and Norway's rural anti-Muslim rhetoric are shown to institutionalise exclusion, while the United Kingdom's spatial segregation in cities like Luton has been seen to create 'breeding grounds' for radicalisation. Qualitative data underscores how spatial policies materialise abstract discrimination into tangible geographies of othering. For instance, Danish respondents framed the 'ghetto list' as generational trauma, while Norwegian narratives of invisibility reveal how spatial erasure fuels defensive activism. These dynamics align with cultural trauma theory (Alexander et al., 2004), as historical marginalisation intersects with the digital amplification of Islamophobia to radicalise grievances. Generational divides further complicate these processes: Danish youth reject parental cultural passivity for assertive religiosity, while UK respondents link digital radicalisation to amplified Islamophobia. These findings highlight the need for spatial policies addressing segregation through equitable urban planning and housing reforms, dismantling geographies of exclusion.

Perhaps most striking is the positive association between trust in democracy and radicalisation scores ( $\beta = 0.107$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), reflecting democratic disillusionment. Norwegian respondents, despite high institutional trust, expressed frustration over ignored anti-Muslim grievances, illustrating the argument that unmet expectations fuel extremism. This dissonance, between idealistic democratic commitment and lived marginalisation, reveals trust as a double-edged sword: legitimacy erodes when institutions fail to deliver on pluralistic promises. Age further complicates these dynamics: younger respondents exhibit heightened vulnerability to exclusionary ideologies ( $\beta = -0.269$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), potentially linked to digital exposure and socio-economic disparities. These findings challenge assumptions that trust in democracy inherently mitigates radicalisation, urging governance reforms that address structural inequities to rebuild legitimacy.

Gendered dynamics and intersectional discrimination further nuance the analysis. Dutch women confront dual stigma, workplace hostility and patriarchal control, while Norwegian women employ strategic visibility to counter erasure. These narratives reveal

gender as an axis of multiply-mediated exclusion but also highlight agency: UK youth's defiant activism and Danish generational trauma fuel resistance, exemplifying intersectional resilience. Intersectionality underscores the need for policies addressing compounded marginalisation, such as gender-sensitive counter-extremism strategies and participatory governance models that centre marginalised voices.

This study's findings necessitate a multidimensional, evidence-based approach to address the non-linear relationship between Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes in Western Europe. First, proactive anti-discrimination policies must prevent perceived Islamophobia from surpassing critical thresholds ( $\approx 4.5$  on a 7-point scale) that trigger defensive fundamentalism, leveraging legal frameworks and institutional reforms to dismantle systemic exclusion, such as Denmark's 'ghetto lists' or Norway's spatial erasure. Second, education systems should adopt critical pedagogy to address colonial legacies and systemic racism while integrating mental health supports, countering the 'education paradox' where heightened awareness of inequities risks amplifying ideological divides. Third, spatial equity initiatives, including equitable urban planning and housing reforms, are vital to dismantle segregation in 'parallel societies' like Copenhagen's Gellerup area and address rural anti-Muslim rhetoric in Norway. Fourth, counter-extremism strategies must be tailored to national contexts, such as the Netherlands' secular exceptionalism or the United Kingdom's performative inclusion, ensuring policies resonate with local integration models and generational tensions.

Finally, democratic accountability mechanisms, such as participatory governance and transparency reforms, are critical to bridge the gap between institutional promises and marginalised communities' lived realities, addressing democratic disillusionment where trust in democracy paradoxically correlates with radicalisation. These policies must be intersectional, addressing gendered discrimination, generational divides and digital radicalisation, while prioritising marginalised voices in decision-making to foster inclusive societies that disrupt cycles of alienation and reactive radicalisation. They furthermore should work to avoid creating the conditions for feelings of Islamophobia and exclusion that can act to fuel exclusion and violence.

## Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence for a nuanced, non-linear relationship between perceived Islamophobia and Islamist attitudes (operationalised as opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, exclusionary ethnic norms and anti-democratic sentiment) among Muslims in Western Europe. By refining the Islamism scale to focus on core ideological dimensions, such as resistance to democratic governance and social exclusionary norms, we uncovered a U-shaped curve where moderate perceived Islamophobia correlates with reduced fundamentalist tendencies, while extreme discrimination intensifies such attitudes. This contradicts simplistic cyclical or mutually reinforcing narratives and aligns with Social Identity Theory and Reactive Ethnicity Theory, which propose a critical juncture where systemic marginalisation transitions from promoting integration to solidifying defensive fundamentalism.


A key contribution lies in the demonstration of cross-national contextual effects. The multilevel analysis revealed that 33.3% of variance in attitudes towards Muslim-Christian


coexistence is attributable to country-level differences, emphasising the role of institutional and cultural frameworks in shaping intergroup dynamics. This underscores the necessity of policies tailored to specific national contexts, such as varying models of secularism and integration policies in the United Kingdom and Netherlands, rather than universal solutions. The study's exploration of interaction effects further complicates linear assumptions. While education weakens the discrimination-ideology link, its paradoxical positive association with both Islamist attitudes and radicalisation scores highlights the dual role of education in amplifying awareness of systemic inequities while potentially intensifying ideological responses. This aligns with Cultural Capital Theory, suggesting that higher education may heighten sensitivity to discrimination rather than universally reducing extremism. Similarly, the unexpected positive link between trust in democracy and radicalisation points to democratic disillusionment, a tension between idealistic commitment to democratic principles and frustration with their uneven implementation.


Our findings call for sophisticated, context-sensitive interventions. Anti-discrimination policies must prevent perceived Islamophobia from reaching threshold levels that trigger defensive fundamentalism while promoting positive intergroup contact to encourage integration at lower discrimination levels. Educational strategies should prioritise critical pedagogy addressing structural inequities and provide constructive frameworks for processing marginalisation. These should work in concert with, and alongside, programmes fostering democratic efficacy, such as inclusive civic engagement initiatives, which could help to mitigate disillusionment among marginalised groups. Limitations, including the cross-sectional design and moderate reliability of the Islamism scale ( $\alpha=0.60$ ), highlight the need for longitudinal studies and refined measurements. Future research should explore lived experiences of discrimination and ideological shifts through qualitative and mixed-methods while addressing intersectional factors such as age, education and religiosity.

In conclusion, this study deconstructs reductive narratives and advocates for intersectional, empirically grounded approaches to fostering social cohesion. As Western European societies grapple with diversity and integration, nuanced understandings of discrimination-ideology dynamics, and the complex role of education and democracy, are essential to developing evidence-based strategies that address both structural exclusion and ideological resilience.

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