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An experiment in engagement

Is dialogue possible between right-wing populists and Muslim activists?

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Executive summary

In March 2021, the Brookings Institution gathered a group consisting of right-wing populists and Muslim community activists for a two-day private dialogue regarding the place of Islam in Europe. While the dialogue allowed for the opportunity to clarify points of division between these two groups on such issues as the hijab, integration versus assimilation, and the role of the state in shaping and enforcing cultural and religious norms, it did not appear to narrow these gaps and left several Muslim participants with reservations regarding the usefulness of such a dialogue. The right-wing populist participants expressed somewhat more enthusiasm for the dialogue. These interactions raise important questions for those seeking to preserve pluralistic democracy at a time when Muslims' presence in many European countries is a topic of charged debate.

Introduction: The context

Attempts at dialogue between mutually opposed groups are fraught and challenging, particularly when a significant power imbalance is present. But such engagement can be instructive for what it tells us about the limits of pluralism in a democratic society. And there must be limits. The question is where to draw these lines of inclusion and exclusion. Pluralism requires learning to live with deep differences — but what happens when those differences are simply too deep and therefore irreconcilable?

In March 2021, the Brookings Institution hosted a two-day private dialogue to consider this question in the context of charged debates over the place of right-wing populist parties and Muslim minority communities across Europe. The dialogue covered seven Western European countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden. This was part of a larger multiyear project, supported by the Luce Foundation, on how right-wing populists view Muslim minorities across Europe.[1] I was the moderator and lead organizer. The main participants were members of right-wing populist parties and Muslim activists. What might happen if these groups discussed charged topics in the same (virtual) room over the course of two days? Was there any possibility of constructive engagement? And how might this experience inform our understanding of what limits, if any, to place on right-wing populist participation in democratic debates?

The conversations grew tense and uncomfortable at times. This, by itself, wouldn't be a problem: There was little expectation for them to be particularly friendly. That said, we had held out hope that at least some gaps could be narrowed, however slightly. Instead, at least from the perspective of many of the attendees, the gaps were as wide as they could have been. By the end of the two days, several of the Muslim participants expressed reservations about the starting premise of the dialogue, for reasons discussed in the next section.

Even if a dialogue such as this one isn't fruitful — because there is no evident common ground and no room for compromise on core premises — is it still worth having? Is there something about the mere act of *trying* to have a dialogue that justifies dialogue, not as a means but an end unto itself? I come at this with somewhat conflicted feelings. I believe, as a matter of principle, that dialogue should at least be attempted. After all, it is difficult to anticipate or prejudge outcomes, particularly when there has been limited historical interaction between the groups in question. At the same time, I approach these topics as an observer and an analyst and not as an activist or advocate, so my interests and objectives are different than those of many of the Muslim participants. As an American Muslim, critical distance from debates about Muslim belonging in Europe comes easier for me. In my own interviews with members of right-wing populist parties, including Alternative for Germany (AfD) officials and members of parliament during a

research trip to Germany in 2019, I was explicit that I was Muslim and stated my views unapologetically. But they, understandably, did not see me as a belligerent in their own domestic debates.

For observers such as myself, tense and even confrontational dialogues can be valuable from an educational and academic perspective. It is useful to clarify the nature of the gaps between participants and to gain a better understanding of exactly where and how they diverge. Much more work is needed to bridge them — but it is also important to note that some gaps cannot be bridged, and it is helpful to be clear-eyed about those constraints. Before addressing the nature of these gaps as well as why they may be insurmountable, I will outline my own thinking behind the design of the workshop, the selection of participants, and why we chose to emphasize certain issues over others.

There weren't many models upon which to draw. This was one of the first times that a dialogue between right-wing populist party members and local Muslim activists covering multiple countries was attempted. Of course, as we soon found out, there was a reason that these kinds of engagements were relatively rare. While not entirely analogous, at Brookings, we had years of experience convening illiberal, right-wing actors in the Middle East, whose views were anathema to the vast majority of Americans. Previously, William McCants and I had co-led Brookings's "Rethinking Political Islam" initiative, with the Luce Foundation's support, focusing on Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Islamist movements across 10 countries. Most Americans, even those in the Washington policy community, would have never had the experience of talking to an actual member or leader of an Islamist party. We believed that it was impossible to truly understand Islamists — who they were and what they believed — without talking to them.

This approach inspired our project on right-wing populism. Similar to how we wished to understand Islamist movements in their own words,

we wanted to do the same for right-wing populists. They weren't quite equivalent, of course, but we saw a similar inability or unwillingness to engage directly with these parties. In many ways, however, the unwillingness was greater. Most academic studies on right-wing populist parties have tended to observe them from afar, without actually speaking to their members, supporters, or leaders at length — or at all.[2] This struck me and my original co-lead on the project, Alina Polyakova, as a potential weakness in both the academic literature and popular writing on the topic.[3]

There were understandable reasons for this. First, unlike Islamists in the Middle East, Western right-wing populist parties were part of a constellation of individuals and groups that many in Europe (and the United States) perceived as a threat to their own democracies from within. The stakes were higher and hit closer to home, so naturally, it would be harder for scholars to take a more anthropological or ethnographic approach to studying these groups. Moreover, right-wing populists were openly and unapologetically anti-Muslim as well as outwardly hostile toward journalists and researchers. In contrast, Brotherhood-inspired Islamist parties went out of their way to present themselves as "moderate" when it came to minority rights, even if in practice they continued to support discriminatory policies against Christians and other religious minorities. Moreover, Islamist leaders knew that they had to appeal to Western audiences and demonstrate that they were worthy interlocutors. After all, they were being repressed by U.S.-backed regimes, and so American pressure would be necessary to relieve the pressure and open up political space.

Still, the same principle held. It is important to understand right-wing populists, regardless of how morally objectionable they may be. I realize that this itself is a contested premise, and I appreciate the very legitimate concern that "platforming" certain actors may grant them greater legitimacy. In this case, however, there was no public platform. Everyone who partic-

ipated agreed to do so, with full knowledge of the framework and intent of the dialogue as well as the participants. The sessions were carefully and actively moderated, and I stepped in often to challenge unsupported claims as well as comments that were needlessly provocative or undermined the spirit of the dialogue.

I will not attempt to resolve the question of what makes a given party "legitimate" or worthy of consideration. To put forward a normative argument around the limits of toleration would be outside the scope of this paper. In practical, political terms, however, these parties are already tolerated. They are legal. In the countries in question, they participate in the democratic process, they do not engage in violence or have armed wings, and they are represented in and through legitimate institutions, including various parliamentary platforms and committees at the local and national levels. They have often been the second- or third-largest parties in their countries. At the time of writing, the Sweden Democrats are the largest party in the governing coalition, after winning 20.5% of the popular vote in the September 2022 general elections. In Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) is the third largest party, with 16% of parliamentary seats. In France, the National Rally — previously the National Front — has come second in the two most recent presidential elections, under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, having won 41% of the popular vote in 2022.

In 2018-2019, Italy had a short-lived "all-populist government" led by the right-wing populist League (Lega) and the more ambiguously populist Five Star Movement.[4] In the 2022 elections, another right-wing populist party, the Brothers of Italy, came in first and formed a government. For the first time in the postwar period, Italy had a democratically-elected far-right prime minister. But these outcomes, as striking as they may have been, only tell part of the story. Right-wing populist parties do not necessarily have to win to claim victory. As *niche parties*, one of their primary objectives is to inject a particular issue — one neglected by mainstream parties — into

public discourse and to make it more salient.[5] By this measure, they had succeeded. Their views on Islam's place in their society — despite being bigoted, or perhaps because of it — could claim broad popular support. In France, for example, a 2019 survey by the Institut français d'opinion publique (Ifop) "reported that 75 percent of the French public favors banning the display of all religious symbols by public employees (the figure dips slightly to 72 percent for employees of private firms), and that 82 percent favor banning all religious displays from the public space," as noted by Catherine Fieschi in her 2020 paper for Brookings on right-wing populist parties and Islam in France.[6]

As these numbers suggest, right-wing populist parties were no longer on the fringe. Importantly, they no longer stood "psychologically outside the frame of normal democratic politics," to use Richard Hofstader's influential formulation.[7] This had long been the view among academics and policymakers — that there was something fundamentally "abnormal" about right-wing populism, and that it was akin to a pathology that could either be extinguished or ignored. In critiquing this perspective, Cas Mudde, a leading scholar of populism, characterized it as follows:

> "Under 'normal' circumstances, [the presumption was that] the demand for populist radical right politics comes from only a tiny part of the population. Hence, the search was on for those abnormal circumstances in which populist radical right attitudes spread."[8]

But what if the circumstances weren't abnormal at all? What if, rather than being anomalous or temporary, such radical views were in fact "much in tune with broadly shared attitudes and policy positions?"[9] Over the past decade, ideas once associated with the "fringe" were increasingly accepted and even adopted by European center-left and center-right parties. When it came to restricting immigration and demanding cultural assimilation, the mainstream was moving toward the populists, rather than the other way around.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the predominant response to populist electoral gains was to establish so-called *cordon sanitaires*.[10] As the term suggests, establishment parties dismissed or ignored far-right competitors as beyond the pale. The imagery of a *cordon sanitaire* was no accident: such groups were akin to pathogens that could infect those who came into close contact. The proximate goal of such an approach was to block extreme parties from holding power as junior partners in coalition governments. The deeper, underlying premise was that keeping them at arm's length would signal to voters that the far-right was too toxic to take seriously.

From a normative standpoint, engaging with parties that orient themselves around and against Muslims or Islam is a difficult ask. If their distaste for Islam was incidental to their politics, it might more easily be papered over. But it is not. In a 2019 Brookings paper, I argued that anti-Islam sentiment should be considered a *defining* feature of how these parties conceive themselves.[11] The numerous parties grouped together as "right-wing populists" differ considerably on any number of issues. Some are economic populists while others support deregulation and free-market reforms. Some like the Danish People's Party support gay marriage, while Austria's FPÖ styles itself as a defender of traditional values.[12] Yet when it comes to the increasingly public presence of Islam and Muslims, the differences narrow considerably. Muslims themselves are perceived as a demographic threat, but it is also about what they represent and signify through their growing visibility. In this sense, "Islam" provides a kind of mirror through which right-wing populists perceive cultural and civilizational decline.

In light of this preoccupation with Muslims as an idealized "other," some will argue that a line has to be drawn *somewhere* — and why not here, on anti-Muslim bigotry? While I cannot speak for the other Muslim participants, I can speak to my own starting premises and commitments. If a goal of academic inquiry is to understand and analyze ideological movements, then it becomes more difficult to do this accurately and effectively without speaking to their supporters, members, and leaders. Since Islam-related issues have become so divisive, it is worth confronting them head-on in the hope of coming to a better understanding of what drives anti-Muslim sentiment. What has made the mere presence of a relatively small minority population such a political lightning rod?

The dialogue

The dialogue was meant to provide a space for substantive exchanges between groups that have had antagonistic relationships and to give individuals an opportunity to speak directly to those they might otherwise only have limited contact with. The hope was that this unique dialogue setting could help clarify the nature and extent of the gaps between participants and to offer a more finely-grained, nuanced perspective on cleavages over the role of Islam in public life in key European countries.

Beyond this, our ambitions were modest. The literature on cross-cultural interaction suggests that significantly reducing prejudicial attitudes over time is extremely difficult. Effective interventions tend to be limited to the particular individuals in a given interaction without universalizing to the entire out-group. In a novel experiment conducted in Iraq, Salma Mousa randomly assigned Christian soccer players to either all-Christian teams or mixed Christian-Muslim teams. She found that while Christian attitudes toward Muslim teammates improved significantly, these sentiments did not extend to Muslim strangers.[13]

In the context of a dialogue setting, we might expect some positive shift in the attitudes of right-wing participants toward fellow Muslim participants without generalizing to all Muslims. This might be called the "good Muslim effect," whereby positive encounters with individual members of a particular group can actually reinforce negative bias toward the group as

a whole.[14] Prejudicial actors can point to the Muslims they personally know or interact with and say in effect: *if only all the others could be like them*.[15] This puts the burden of those on the receiving end of prejudice to demonstrate — through displays of patriotism, secularization, or assimilation — that they have earned better treatment.[16]

The goal of the dialogue was primarily scholarly in nature rather than an experiment designed to test certain hypotheses about the reduction of prejudice. That said, we were still interested to see to what degree conversing with others face-to-face might build rapport between participants and potentially even "humanize" the other. If such interactions are positive and repeated, this might in the long-term breed ideological change toward more inclusion and understanding — if not necessarily wholesale shifts in the official positions of the right-wing parties in question.

The dialogue setting was designed to create the best possible conditions to leverage intergroup contact. This was done in several ways. First, to encourage participants to speak as openly and frankly as possible, the meeting was held according to the Chatham House Rule, which guaranteed privacy and anonymity.[17] Second, in recognition of the charged nature of naming conventions, we took care to use neutral identifiers that would not offend individual participants. At the start of the dialogue, for example, I noted that I would opt to use the identifier "right-wing populist" over the more pejorative "far-right" or "radical right." There was no reason to alienate participants with semantic debates.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, there was at least some initial level of trust. Each participant was, in effect, "vetted." In deciding who to invite, we either relied on recommendations or reached out to individuals whom we already knew. Earlier in the project, we had recruited leading scholars of right-wing populism for each of the countries in question. They wrote case studies, with a requirement that they interview five to 10 members, officials, or leaders of the main right-wing populist party in their country. For this

dialogue, we asked them to recommend partici-pants whom they felt would be appropriate. Many of them also recommended Muslim participants.

For all invitations, we were explicit about the nature of the dialogue, the main topics to be addressed, as well as other invitees. We acknowl-edged that there was a strong likelihood the conversations would be challenging and even uncomfortable. The initial invitation stressed the importance of listening to opposing views in a spirit of mutual respect. Anyone who said yes to the invitation was, at least in theory, willing to talk to those with whom they strongly disagreed or saw as a threat. While this may sound like a low bar, a significant number of invitees suggested that they would not be comfortable doing this. One German writer associated with the far-right wrote back:

> "I despise the profession of [many who are part of] the complex of academic or freelance political scientists and journalists. I have reasons for this because this group of people makes precisely what they describe as their main concern impossible: the conversation, the knowledge, the encounter. This happens through systemic arrogance and lack of empathy toward excluded groups of people."

The irony is that the "excluded groups" he was referring to were not Muslim or migrant voices but rather right-wing populists.

It is also worth mentioning here an important difference between the identities present in the room: the Muslim activists are members of religious communities advocating for those communities, while the right-wing populists represent ideological movements and often parties engaged in electoral politics. Moreover, Muslim communities in Europe still have recent foreign origins and short voting records. They do not necessarily see the ballot box as an espe-cially fruitful route for change. They have been the subject (and object) of integration debates for decades now, with relatively little progress to show for it.

We were also mindful that Muslim activists who have been outspoken critics of right-wing populists might not want to publicize their participation in the same "room" with said populists. Interestingly, this concern around publicity was not held to the same degree by the right-wing populist participants. This was just one of many examples of an "imbalance" that became evident over the two days of discussion, which I will address in more detail below.

At the start of the opening session, the ground rules were outlined in detail, including the admonition that personal attacks would not be tolerated. These guidelines were generally respected. To ensure that the discussions were not derailed, I chose to play a more active role when necessary. Obviously, not everyone will agree on what crosses such a threshold. With the aims of the dialogue and the broader project in mind, I made these judgments to the best of my ability.

In order to further help facilitate the conversation and provide context where appropriate, we asked seven leading scholars of right-wing populist parties to join for the two days. Also present were two Brookings colleagues, visiting fellow Sharan Grewal and research assistant Israa Saber. Overall, there were a total of 23 participants. We attempted an even split between the two "sides." However, due to several last-minute cancellations, there were slightly more Muslim activists than right-wing participants. Seven countries were represented. The project of which this dialogue was a part covered 10 countries, including Hungary, Poland, and the United States.[18] In the hope of narrowing our discussion to more similar cases, we decided to focus on the slightly smaller set of Western European countries, each of which had a Muslim population of at least 2%.[19]

To assess changes in attitude and behavior, participants were asked to complete an anonymous post-dialogue survey. Of the respondents, 8 out of 15 said that the dialogue was either "somewhat successful" or "successful," with the remainder answering "neutral." Out of the four right-wing populists who completed the survey, two said they came out with a "much better" understanding of what motivates Muslim activists. Perhaps more promisingly, two of them also said they would be more likely to accept an invitation to be on a public panel or media appearance with Muslim activists. Out of the five Muslim respondents, two said they would be more likely to accept to be on a public panel or media appearance with a right-wing populist. On the metric of whether engagement "humanized" the other, the results were less encouraging. All four of the right-wing populists who responded said there was no change, while three of the five Muslim participants said that the dialogue "did not humanize" the right-wing populists who were present.

With these results in mind, the rest of this report discusses the major themes, arguments, and areas of disagreement that emerged over the course of the discussions, with special attention to the following topics:

- Gaps in religious observance between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens.

- Attitudes toward recent migrants versus integration of second-generation and third-generation Muslims.

- Responsibilities of the "host" country versus reasonable (or unreasonable) expectations of immigrant communities.

- The appropriateness of Islamophobia as a frame of reference.

- The nature of Islam as compatible or incompatible with Western Europe's secular "consensus."

- The role of the state in restricting public religiosity and promoting a particular national identity.

Before diving into these topics, we tried to establish some basic understandings on framing and definitions.

The decision to refer to the "right-wing popu-lists" as such was discussed at the start and is more neutral since it steers away from making judgments about how extreme a given party is on the ideological spectrum. In many cases, as discussed above, these parties — and some of their most controversial ideas regarding Muslims — have entered the political mainstream. As a French journalist aligned with the National Rally[20] on Islam-related issues claimed:

> "French President Emmanuel Macron is still to the left of the average Frenchman [on Islam]. He has moved way, way, way far to the right but he is still pulling the country to the left of where it would be if all of these issues were settled by Swiss-style referendums."

This may overstate matters, but the broader point is well-taken. If Macron sounds sometimes like he's on the far-right, then it suggests that the far-right isn't far-right at all. Many even on the French left, for instance, would agree with "right-wing" critiques of the headscarf as undermining gender equality and impeding integration into French culture and society. They would, however, frame the problem differently. As one scholar explained it during the dialogue:

> "Even though on the surface French non-Muslim citizens may all agree on this, if they're on the left they might say 'Okay but we realize that giving up a part of your religious identity is a trade-off and therefore it can only be seen as fair and reasonable if we offer something in exchange.' That something is full civic identity, and that means access to jobs and full access to citizenship rights. I think what you would find on the right-wing part of the spectrum is people just saying, 'Well, actually the first thing is that you relinquish all this [religious] stuff. Your French national identity takes priority over everything else, and yeah, we hope that we can eventually grant everyone the same civic rights but only after they take that first step.'"

Muslims' religious distinctiveness, at once real, apparent, and imagined, becomes the touchstone for right-wing actors. Muslims can be Muslim as long as they keep it private, or so the argument seems to go. But what if their faith commitments prevent them from doing so?

The "problem" of hijab

Almost immediately, the question of the hijab came up, prompting several headscarf-wearing participants to highlight how Muslim women are marginalized through the objectification of the headscarf. One Austrian Muslim participant explained her frustrations as follows:

> "I usually don't like to talk about the hijab anymore. It traumatizes me a little bit. There's this argument that they [restrict the wearing of the hijab] for the protection of women, but I have never ever been asked if the hijab hinders me in anything. My comfort and my protection have never, ever been at the fore when it comes to these restrictions. The prob-lems I face with wearing the hijab is not me wearing the hijab but how I am restricted from the job market, how I'm treated on the streets, so this whole idea about 'we're trying to protect women from wearing the hijab' doesn't add up when you're not trying to protect those who actually wear the hijab and make sure they get the same opportunities just as other women. So, for me, there is hypocrisy in that sense."

A comment from an Italian journalist who supports the League offered a rather different perspective. She noted, correctly, that in Muslim countries like Tunisia or Turkey, the face covering, or niqab, has been banned. Even the wearing of the headscarf has been restricted or discouraged by state authorities over different time periods. "Why is it controversial in Europe to have those same measures that Middle Eastern countries themselves have implemented?" she asked.

"Why is it when we have these debates in Europe it's framed as 'far-right' or 'Islamophobic' or like we're being brainwashed by our media when really it boils down to a security threat and what it represents in terms of Islamism or radicalism."

This objection helped crystallize some key questions and divides that recurred throughout our two days of discussion. At a basic level, Muslim participants (including myself) wonder why Muslim citizens of European nations should have to answer for the often authoritarian and hardline secularist policies of Muslim governments — governments they have nothing to do with. These also, of course, are authoritarian regimes. Tunisia, in particular, was one of the region's most repressive until the 2011 uprising ousted longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. In contrast, the Western European nations under consideration are liberal democracies, so it is unclear why or how they should be compared to completely different regime types. If Western democracies say they value freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and individual choice, then they should presumably be held to *that* standard.

Moreover, imposing "burqa bans" and restrictions on the hijab in Muslim-minority contexts have different political implications than imposing them in a Muslim-majority context. In the former, Muslims are not being singled out as such, since nearly everyone is Muslim to start with. In the latter, however, any such legislation has the effect of stigmatizing and separating Muslims from the rest of the population, since bans on face veils can only conceivably affect a small portion of the overall population. Even if stigmatization isn't the intent, it is the effect; Muslims become the object of coercive legislation, and in the process, Muslims become further otherized as strange, foreign, and a potential threat to national cohesion. As one Muslim participant remarked, "When we hear people argue that say in Tunisia or other Muslim countries that they are banning the niqab and using that as an argument for why European countries should do the same,

it gives a signal that people like us — European Muslims — don't belong to Europe, like we belong somewhere else."

Immigration versus integration

Are Muslims in the West to be viewed as immigrants or citizens (or both)? This question becomes more complicated in a European context that diverges from the American self-definition as a "country of immigrants." To be an immigrant in Europe, or even a child of immigrants, is in tension with citizenship in reality as well as perception. It is one thing, for example, to have a German passport, and quite another to be seen by Germans as German. At the same time, even German-born Muslims still face difficulties in obtaining citizenship.[21] This is not unique to Germany. While Europe's citizenship regimes vary, not a single country has unrestricted birthright citizenship.[22]

Because Muslims have been reified as an all-encompassing category — one that elevates religion over other distinguishing characteristics — citizens and would-be citizens are lumped together with recently-arrived migrants. During the refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016, anti-Muslim attitudes — along with the fortunes of right-wing populists — increased significantly. This could make the ensuing debates seem as if they were primarily about immigration and asylum policies. Yet this would be misleading. A growing number of Muslims living in European countries — and often a majority — are not, in fact, immigrants but are native-born. And for those who are recent immigrants, the bigger issue is not that they are immigrants, but that they are *Muslim* immigrants.

In this sense, the heart of the debate is about religion and integration, specifically whether Islam and Muslims are distinctive and whether this distinctiveness is something to appreciate, accommodate, or lament. Narrower questions

of whether or how to change immigration policy may be missing the point. This is not a technocratic policy question that can be "fixed." It is a question of what makes a nation and a culture — in nations that have at times sought to define their national identities as exclusive and static.

During the dialogue, with these concerns in mind, I asked an Iranian-born member of the Dutch right-wing populist party Livable Rotterdam: "Based on what you've heard from your Muslim colleagues, is there anything that European governments can do to be more accommodating, or do you still put most of the burden on newcomers or recent immigrants? I'm just trying to find some kind of middle ground." He replied: "We passed that train station a long time ago. The name of the station we're in now is 'enough is enough.' This has been going on for 30 years now, at least 30 years in my country."

I tried to push him: "It sounds to me like you don't think there really is a middle ground then?" His reply was, "Well, no. Actually, there is. There's rules set for example in chess or football. Play by the rules. That's it."

A French Catholic participant was similarly stark but refreshingly honest:

> "It's sort of frustrating to be part of a group where people say 'oh, Catholics are like this,' but you think to yourself, well I'm not like that. But, you know, I also think that that's life. There is an issue, otherwise, we wouldn't be here talking about Islam in Europe in the first place. If you're going to ask questions about Muslims in Europe, then you have to be able to say things about Muslims in Europe. I understand why it can feel uncomfortable but that's just the nature of public discourse."

Is Islamophobia the same as other forms of bigotry?

Clearly, some forms of Islamophobia are racist, but is *all* Islamophobia racist?[23] To this, the right-wing participants responded: culture and ideology are not the same as race. There is a difference, they said, between attacking someone for their ethnicity or country of origin versus criticizing Muslims for how they practice or understand Islam. The latter represents a choice to believe in a particular "ideology," while the former is an accident of birth. As the anthropologist Esra Ozyurek notes in her book "Being German, Becoming Muslim":

> "[W]hat is most distinctive about Islamophobia is that it is based on the premise of a rational individual subject who is responsible for their actions and thus their consequences. Islamophobes maintain that Muslims do not qualify for the legal protection granted to other groups that are systematically discriminated against, such as women or blacks, because belief is not ascribed at birth but instead is willingly chosen or held by Muslims."[24]

This individualization of Islam as, in effect, a lifestyle choice (but paradoxically a choice that seems to be imposed on Muslims by their religion) figured prominently in our dialogue. A senior parliamentary advisor in Germany's AfD argued that Muslims who were willing to "fight against Islamism" would be welcomed in the party. This is where it gets complicated. Many in the AfD — and in right-wing populist parties more generally — conflate Islam and Islamism.

At best, they interpret Islamism rather broadly to include any kind of public expression of Islam. "Good" Muslims, then, would be expected to keep their religion to themselves, in keeping with the increasingly private nature of religious belief in Western Europe. It is not clear, however, how this might work in the context of Islam. Markers of Muslims' religiosity include things like workplace prayer accommodations, abstention from alcohol, discomfort with gender mixing, conservative dress, and demands for halal meat options. These are practices that reflect "private" faith commitments but are at the same time either publicly observable or have public and legal implications. In effect, then, for right-wing populist parties, Muslims are acceptable only insofar as they are wholly secular and refrain from displaying their religious or cultural identity in any perceptible way.

As the Livable Rotterdam member put it:

> "I mean, I wish we had more immigrants from China coming over here to be honest. So, we have no issues with immigrants. This is not about race. This is about ideology. Islam is not compatible with Western values. That's what it's all about. And when I say Islam, I mean political Islam basically."

Indeed, Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants were brought up several times as examples of model minorities who are quiet, work hard, and have little interest in asserting their culture in public life or politics. Perhaps most importantly, they are seen as secular — in contrast to Muslims who clash with the prevailing secular consensus.

This "secular consensus" — and whether Muslims need to accept it as a condition for integration (or, more accurately, assimilation) — is a theme we returned to repeatedly. Looked at from this perspective, the debate becomes more about culture than racial bigotry. Ozyurek notes that "whereas pseudoscientific theories of heredity were used to justify exclusionary and oppressive practices during the colonial era, in the post-

colonial period, there has been an upsurge in theories that legitimize similar practices based on allegedly irreconcilable cultural differences."[25]

It is important to underscore this distinction, since cultural and religious animus is at least somewhat different from racism — and therefore must be addressed somewhat differently. In a liberal democracy, does the majority culture have the "right" to insist that minority cultures — particularly assertive ones — defer to the majority?[26] I won't attempt a definitive answer here, except to say that if the majority has the right to insist on the preservation of "their" culture, minorities — from a legal and constitutional standpoint — have the right to refuse the majority's demands to assimilate. This, of course, leads to an impasse, where Muslims are stigmatized not for their ethnicity per se but for their unwillingness to accept the secular consensus mentioned above.

As the French Catholic participant explained:

> "I don't know what it means to talk about stigmatization. I don't understand that word. My position is that France and every other nation on Earth has a perfect right to defend its own culture and a perfect right to demand whatever it deems necessary from people who are from outside and want to live on its territory and acquire citizenship. I do think it is totally OK to have an affirmation of a historic culture and to create incentives for people to assimilate into that historic culture, and so if you want to call it stigmatization, fine, call it stigmatization. I mean, the whole point is that we want people to behave a certain way."

In this reading, to absorb new religious practices threatens French national identity, which is inextricably linked to France's assertive form of secularism, known as *laïcité*. It is worth noting that this secular consensus — that religion is fine insofar as it's expressed as private belief rather than public activity — is perceived as a hardfought product of decades (even centuries) of

secularization and anti-clerical agitation. Why, they ask, must these battles be fought all over again, when it seemed like they had already been won?

Accommodating a relatively new and growing religious presence is also made more difficult by the fact that French society, like all modern societies, is already under considerable stress from globalization, economic stagnation, dropping fertility rates, the decline of the socialist left, and post-nationalism in the form of the European Union. Needless to say, this tests citizens' ability and willingness to accept yet more change, particularly the kind of change that seems foreign to their own understanding of who they had been.

With the decline of biological racism and neo-Nazism in the postwar period, the construction of exclusive national identities has shifted from an explicitly ethnic project to one defined in cultural terms. The latter is still exclusionary (and, in practice, relies on racist tropes), but it is a different kind of exclusion that singles out Islam as a civilizational competitor and idealizes the minority of Muslims who publicly break with their own communities. As the AfD official pointed out:

> "The AfD is very successful with some ethnic groups in Germany, especially among Russian Germans, Polish Germans, but also among Persians, Armenians, and Jews. We held a great event in the Bundestag with secular Persians. I think the reason is very clear and very rational. Secularized Turks have much more personal problems with Islam than I do. And the same applies with Armenians who have problems with Turkish nationalists and for Persians who are against the regime in Tehran. And I think the future of the white, right-wing conservative parties in Europe is to gain more and more support among secularized immigrant groups."

This idealization of secular Muslims as the ones to be tolerated and perhaps even accepted naturally creates a separate category of "bad"

Muslims.[27] But if Islam itself is perceived as an overarching civilizational threat, then can Muslims — generally defined as those who believe in Islam — ever fully escape being associated with this threat?

As a French Muslim city councilor put it:

> "We cannot divide Muslim identity or identities from other symbols of visibility. The hijab in the street or the beard or the *jalabiya* [male traditional dress] or the minaret of the mosque is going to be there. They are parts of culture, of customs for people and not simply an ideology that people decide to subscribe to as a political project."

Of course, the exclusion of *some* practices, customs, and beliefs (rather than others) is precisely the point — and the process and content of exclusion is decided by those who are more powerful in relative terms. One could say that the very idea of a nation-state includes within it an exclusionary premise — particularly for nations with limited histories of immigration. Political theorists like Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau have argued that politics, to be *political*, requires a "we" constituted against a "they."[28] It's only a question of where one draws the line. For the traditional left, the "they" can be corporations and the rich, the so-called "1%." For the right, the line of demarcation is increasingly cultural and identitarian, because the right sees culture as the primary mover whereas the left prioritizes (or prioritiz*ed*) class relations, the means of production, and economic inequality. Laclau puts forward the notion of an "empty signifier" against which "the people," in the populist imagination, define themselves.[29] It is empty because the policy content is secondary to the signifier's ability to unite the "we" against the "they." The populist right has found significance and self-definition in opposition, increasingly, to Islam and Muslims. In practice, this means that disproportionate attention is paid to what makes Muslims different rather than what makes them similar.

As an Austrian Muslim participant put it:

> "The fact that I channel more French chicness in my fashion sense and the fact that my home is styled in Scandinavian home decor doesn't matter at all. In my everyday life, I channel more Western culture than probably a lot of other indigenous Europeans do, but it doesn't matter to them, because I don't drink a glass of wine with my dinner, and I don't eat pork schnitzel."

If right-wing populists paid more attention to uncontroversial cultural markers like a shared love of Scandinavian home decor, these markers of it would be harder to construct a "them." But then they would lose part of their raison d'être; highlighting the threat that Muslims present to a fixed national culture is precisely their project, as they themselves acknowledge.

The role of the state

If, for the populist right, this is the existential cleavage, then the question is what to do about it. And this brings us to the question of the nation-state and to what extent it can, or should, interfere in the lives of citizens. One can, for example, lament (or even hate) that a tiny minority of Muslim women wear the niqab, without wishing for the state to coerce these women to remove it.

As several Muslim participants pointed out, if the state has already stigmatized one group, it can now claim a precedent with which to stigmatize other groups. There is no obvious limiting principle by which a face veil is deemed dangerous while the headscarf is accepted as legitimate. What would that principle be, exactly? (The justification of the face veil bans on security grounds is less plausible in an age of pandemic-related masking). The limiting principle is what the state wishes it to be, and this is ultimately arbitrary.

If the "problem" with the face veil is, at least in part, one of religious visibility, then any kind of religious visibility will find itself potentially threatened by subsequent legislation. As one Muslim scholar of right-wing populism noted, "This is exactly what happened in the Austrian case, which is we had the ban of the niqab in 2017. What followed one year later was the ban of the hijab in kindergarten, then what followed was the ban of the hijab a year later in primary school. Then what followed again was they began considering expanding it into secondary school."

The question of "religious visibility" is an important one, because it highlights a gap between how Christians and Muslims demonstrate religious observance. First of all, the proportion of, say, French or Swedish citizens from a Christian background who are practicing Christians is relatively small. If we take church attendance as an (inexact) proxy, the percentage can drop to 10% and below. According to the Pew Research Center, for example, only 3% of Danes attend weekly services and 9% consider religion "very important" in their lives. In Sweden, the comparable figures are 6% and 10%.[30] This creates a sizable gap in religious observance between Muslims and non-Muslims in the countries in question. In France, many Muslims are relatively secular, which is often cited as evidence that the assimilationist model can work. And perhaps it can, but only up to a point. In France, 31% say they attend a mosque or prayer room weekly, which is quite low relative to Muslim-majority contexts. Yet 31% is still roughly *four times* the comparable figure for the overall French population, of which only about 8% attend weekly services.[31]

However, this perception of a religious observance gap — one based in reality — is further magnified by the fact that practicing Catholics are not obviously so. On a lay individual level, the only visible signs of such practice may be wearing a crucifix. For practicing Muslims, there are many more visible signs of religious observance, as mentioned

earlier. These markers, unlike the crucifix, are considered by observant Muslims as "obligatory" (*fard*) based on the prevailing scholarly consensus (*'ijma*). To say, then, that these Muslims should just keep their religion to themselves is incoherent for it treats what are widely understood as obligatory practices as just another lifestyle choice or a matter of personal expression. Instead, state restrictions on public religiosity are better understood as inducing Muslims to commit sins in the name of the state, interfering with their relationship to God in the process.

It is not entirely clear what can be "done" about Muslim religious expression, and even the notion that Muslim religiosity is a problem to be solved is perhaps itself a problem. Of course, the state can try to compel assimilation, and this is more or less what various states are attempting to do, even if they don't go quite as far as right-wing populist parties might wish. But this coercive approach does not appear to be successful even on its own terms, otherwise, we wouldn't have held the dialogue in the first place. Which raises the question: can a strategy of coercive assimilation be effective in a democratic setting, where there are (presumably) limits on how far the state can go in its coercion?

Some right-wing participants seemed to think that secularism could win out in a free marketplace of ideas, but this would be a decidedly antagonistic marketplace where different ways of life and living compete with each other for cultural dominance. A comment from the AfD participant is worth quoting at length:

> "From the part of the AfD, it's absolutely politically useful to talk with immigrants from the Middle East with a secularized lifestyle who support Western values. However, to discuss political issues with conservative Muslims makes no sense from the perspective of the AfD. They have enough other political parties. In a pluralist system you have different parties with different programs and that's absolutely okay. The second thing is how to solve the problem. You can have your own views in a free

society but there is of course a competition between different lifestyles and value systems, and I'm optimistic that, in the end, the Western lifestyle is more attractive for many people coming from Muslim societies than the Islamist and conservative Muslim lifestyle. And that's why I'm optimistic that Western values will prevail. I don't want to force anyone, but I want the rule of law and to give people the chance. I want to give young Turkish girls the chance to decide for a secularized, liberal lifestyle, but they have not the chance in many situations because they are in a framework of big families who force on them a certain conservative lifestyle."

This is the sort of comment that can sound either positive or negative, depending on how you look at it. But either way, it is a view that doesn't leave much room for a compromise. This is by design. The AfD representative is suggesting that compromise isn't necessary or desirable: his party stands for something, however much others may dislike it, and that is what makes his party different.

Any number of questions were posed over the course of the dialogue. All of them, in some way, related to this question of what it means to live in a pluralistic society with people who disagree with, dislike, or perhaps even hate each other. Pluralism, as the AfD member suggested, is not synonymous with compromise. In a context of a confrontational and even chaotic pluralism, there are basically two options. One approach is to take a harder line and say that the burden is on Muslims to assimilate. They are the ones who must accept the dominant majority culture and defer to it. The other view is to say that national identity is itself fluid. It evolves over time, and it is always being constructed and reconstructed by citizens. Insofar as some of those citizens are Muslims, they play a role in reshaping the culture, and perhaps in the process, the majority culture becomes less dominant. Why shouldn't a culture change and broaden its conception of national identity? Of course, it can. The question is whether it *should*. And this is where our participants diverged.

What is the point of dialogue without compromise?

At one point in the conversation, a German Muslim participant commented that "some of the speakers give me the impression that the only solution would be Muslims leaving Europe," to which a non-Muslim participant offered the quick retort "not all of them." There was a moment of awkwardness, and the latter apologized, clarifying that he just meant it as a joke. The German Muslim replied, "I don't think it's a time for joking. I think the Muslim participants have been very friendly to everyone and I'm not sure it's actually a good attitude to be that friendly in such an environment."

This idea of an uneven playing field — felt by one side rather than both — became increasingly clear as the two days progressed. Several of the Muslim participants felt they were being disrespected, despite their willingness to sit down with those who saw them as second-class citizens. In effect, to sit in a room with right-wing populists was a preemptive concession, one made in good faith but not reciprocated.

By the end of it, the right-wing participants were visibly more enthusiastic about the dialogue than their Muslim counterparts. They had less to lose and more to gain. As one scholar of right-wing populism remarked in the final session:

> "Of course, it's interesting that right-wing populist politicians find this [dialogue] useful. Well, no kidding. It's another opportunity to set out the wares and it's a rhetorical opportunity to essentially lay out in rhetorical terms the kind of take-it-or-leave-it approach."

Perhaps there were no compromises to be had, in part because of the power differential but also because the problem itself was so foundational. One Muslim participant from Sweden noted that

this was the first time she had taken part in a private dialogue with right-wing populists — and that she was unlikely to do so again:

> "It is important that I keep some kind of dignity. Because this discussion is very violent. When people question your humanity, your intentions. They question whether you are really here to create a Sharia state or to abolish the white norms and values and so on. So, I think just for psychological reasons, one shouldn't participate in too many of these discussions."

She had said yes to participating, she explained, for educational reasons.

> "It's interesting to both hear the right wing in different European countries and hear how the Muslims respond to these assumptions about us ... But no, I don't think the dialogue will take us further than this. I think the right wing wants one of two things: either expel us from Europe or assimilate us with a civilizational mission to make us like them. I don't see any other way."

As a French writer and self-described right-wing populist acknowledged: "I think this debate is fundamentally about a metaphysical difference regarding what it means to be a human being and those are always the hardest."

One of the built-in limitations of this particular dialogue is that it was meant to focus on a somewhat narrow set of questions. Because our larger project was about how right-wing populists view Islam and Muslims, the dialogue, with the limited time we had, would inevitably focus on that. The very framing of the dialogue was perceived by some participants as reifying the cleavage it was ostensibly trying to address. If one asks right-wing populists whether and why they believe Muslims are different, they are more likely to focus their attention on the starkest contrasts.

What if, instead, we had invited the same individuals but completely changed the topics so that they had nothing to do with Islam, at least not explicitly? As the AfD official said toward the end of the discussion:

"It would have been very interesting to see what would have happened if we had changed the issues — if we had started to discuss tax cuts, abortion, nuclear power, I can imagine that the conflicts would be absolutely different. This would have been interesting because my experience now on the COVID crisis — there are very left-wing and crazy people, I never thought I could have something in common with them but since the start of the corona crisis, we have absolutely new friends from some left groups because the political issue changed. And this would be an interesting experiment to see how the discussion changed if we had started to discuss abortion, gay marriage, nuclear power, climate change, and so on."

Indeed, right-wing populist parties are capable of compromise on gay marriage, nuclear power, and climate change. But they have no real incentive to compromise on their core ideological preoccupations — and those preoccupations have to do with what they perceive as a struggle for a certain kind of civilization, one that has limited room for Muslims who self-define as such, which is to say most Muslims. Right-wing populists in Europe draw on popular opposition to and discomfort with specifically Muslim immigration. These are not anti-immigrant parties as much as they are anti-Muslim immigration parties. They are not necessarily trying to encourage integration, because they do not believe integration is worth pursuing if it comes at the cost of the majority culture.

One potentially more promising route, as several participants mentioned toward the end of the discussion, is to focus dialogue efforts on Muslim activists and right-wing populists from the same city or municipality, since they might be more likely to be open to practical accommodations.

All in all, however, there are obvious limits to what can be gained when different "sides" start with such fundamentally different premises and assumptions. And perhaps there is a certain wisdom in coming to terms with this reality — and the reality that the war over culture, religion, and national identity is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Muslims in Europe aren't going anywhere. In fact, demographic projections suggest that their numbers will increase significantly over the next three decades.[32] They are part of Europe, and so their growing presence — and, unfortunately, their very existence — will continue to be a source of charged debate. It is the right of democratic majorities to choose how they wish to define themselves. But it is also the right of minorities to object to this self-definition.

References

1 I led the organization and moderation of the dialogue, with the support of research assistant Israa Saber and nonresident fellow Sharan Grewal. For more on the larger project which included case studies from 10 countries, see "The One Percent Problem: Muslims in the West and the Rise of the New Populists," The Brookings Institution, https://www.brookings.edu/product/muslims-in-the-west/.

2 For example, during the duration of this project, I reviewed a random selection of 14 academic articles on German's AfD, based on Google searches, cross-references, and recommendations from researchers. None of these studies featured any author interviews with AfD leaders or officials. As part of the overall, multiyear project, 10 leading scholars of far-right populism took part, contributing working papers on their country of focus. At the start of the project, we discussed the existing literature at length, and in each instance, the case study authors acknowledged that most academic studies did not include interviews with the object of study, in this case, members or officials of right-wing populist parties. This gap — to the extent one views it as such — guided our contributors in preparing their working papers. We required each author to conduct at least 5 to 10 interviews with party officials, leaders, or members of the main right-wing populist party in a given country. In several cases, this turned out to be quite challenging. We selected contributors precisely for their willingness to conduct these interviews. Some of those whom we initially reached out to were not comfortable doing this and referred us to other scholars. In two cases, for the France and Sweden papers, our originally-assigned authors dropped out of the project because they were either unable or unwilling to meet the requisite number of interviews with members of right-wing populist parties.

3 For the first year-and-a-half of its duration, Polyakova, then a Brookings fellow in the Center on the United States in Europe, co-directed the project. She soon departed Brookings to become president of the Center of European Policy Analysis (CEPA). The overall design and format of the project was a joint endeavor, with each of us drawing on our own different experiences, areas of focus, and approaches to the material. The project was all the stronger for it.

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6 Ifop pour *Le Figaro*, "L'image de l'Islam en France," October 2012, http://www.lefigaro.fr/assets/pdf/sondage-ipsos-islam-france.pdf. For a more detailed discussion of these poll numbers in the context of the role of right-wing populists in debates over Islam in France, see: Catherine Fieschi, "Muslims and the secular city: How right-wing populists shape the French debate over Islam," (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, February 2020), https://www.brookings.edu/research/muslims-and-the-secular-city-how-right-wing-populists-shape-the-french-debate-over-islam/.

7 Richard Hofstadter, "Pseudo-Conservatism Revisited: A Postscript," in *The Radical Right*, ed. Daniel Bell (New York: Anchor, 1962), 102.

8 Cas Mudde, *On Extremism and Democracy in Europe* (New York: Routledge 2016), 5.

9 Ibid, 9.

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