The Relationship of Attitudes toward Other Religious Groups with Perceived Islamophobia, Intergroup Contact, and Social Identity: A Study among Muslims Living in Western Countries

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Abstract

The Muslim population in Western countries gradually increases, and thereby, individual, social, cultural, economic, political, etc. matters related to the lives of Muslims draw researchers' attention day by day. Muslims, who make efforts to survive within the given population as a minority group, may encounter negative attitudes and behaviors in different life venues such as exclusion, discrimination, prejudice, labeling or stigmatization, hatred, anger, and violence. In this regard, the literature addressed verbal taunting, obstructing religious practices, workplace discrimination, travel discrimination, armed attacks, threats, bullying, and vandalism as significant problem instances. Particularly, the 9/11 attacks had caused a breakthrough change in the lives of the Muslim population in terms of the addressed negative attitudes and behaviors, causing such complicated and deleterious incidents to happen increasingly. Therefore, the relationships of different religious groups with each other living in Western society prompted a significant scholarly interest. The existing literature explored the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of religious groups toward each other and found that Muslims have to struggle with detrimental attitudes more compared to any other religious group. In this regard, an important question that comes to mind is what thoughts, feelings, and attitudes Muslims living in Western countries may have toward other religious groups while facing negative and complicated thoughts, attitudes, and actions of other religious groups. Accordingly, this research explored the attitudes of Muslims living in Western countries toward other religious groups and the relationship of these attitudes with intergroup contact, quality of contact, perceived Islamophobia level, and social identification level. As a quantitative study, we collected the data with the survey technique and ran the correlational analysis. The cross-sectional data came from 158 participants (93 Males (58.9%) - 65 Females (41.1%)), who mostly live in the U.S., the U.K., Germany, and other Western countries, aged 18 and 55+. The survey deployed "Social Identification Scale" and "Perceived Islamophobia Scale." In addition, we ask questions to the participants regarding (a) the frequency and quality of intergroup relations and (b) the attitudes towards other religious groups. Results indicated that (a) Catholics are the most positively regarded religious group for Muslims and they are the group with whom Muslims have the highest frequency of contact; (b) attitudes toward other religious groups were associated with frequency of contact and positive evaluation of contact; (c) there was no statistical relationship between levels of social identification, contact and perceived Islamophobia and attitudes towards other religious groups, and (d) among religious groups, perceived Islamophobia was only associated with attitudes toward Jews and evaluations of contact with this group. We discuss the study implications, limitations as well as future research avenues.

Keywords

Islamophobia, West, Muslims, Religious Groups, Attitudes, Social Identity.

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Öz

Batı ülkelerindeki Müslüman nüfus giderek artmakta ve buna bağlı olarak Müslümanların hayatını ilgilendiren bireysel, toplumsal, kültürel, ekonomik, siyasi vb. farklı meseleler her geçen gün araştırmacıların ilgi sahasına dahil olmaktadır. Azınlık bir grup olarak genel nüfus içerisinde kendine yer bulmaya çalışan Müslümanlar dışlanma, ayrımcılık, önyargı, damgalama, nefret öfke ve şiddet gibi olumsuz tutum ve davranışlarla hayatın farklı alanlarında karşılaşabilmektedirler. Sözlü sataşma, dini pratiklere müdahale, iş yerinde ayrımcılığa maruz kalma, seyahat esnasında dışlayıcı güvenlik taramalarına katlanma, silahlı saldırı, tehditler, zorbalık ve vandallık yaşanan problemler örnekleri olarak tespit edilmiştir. Özellikle 11 Eylül saldırıları, bu tür olumsuz tutum ve davranışlar açısından Müslümanların hayatında yeni bir dönemin başlangıcı olmuş; hayatı zorlaştırıcı bu tür olaylar çok daha fazla yaşanan hale gelmiştir. Dolayısıyla Batı toplumu içerisindeki farklı dini grupların birbiri ile olan ilişkileri araştırmacılar açısından yeni bir boyut kazanmıştır. Mevcut literatür, dini grupların birbirine yönelik düşünce, tutum ve davranışları üzerine incelemeler yapmış ve Müslümanlara karşı sergilenen böylesi yıpratıcı tutumların diğer herhangi bir dini gruba yönelik tutumlardan daha yıkıcı olduğunu tespit etmiştir. Bu bağlamda, şu önemli soru akla gelmektedir: Batı ülkelerinde yaşayan Müslümanlar, diğer dini grupların olumsuz ve hayatı zorlaştırıcı düşünce, tutum ve uygulamalarına maruz kalıyorken, onlar diğer dini gruplara karşı hangi düşünce, hissiyat ve tutumlara sahiptirler? Buradan hareketle bu çalışma, Batı ülkelerinde yaşayan Müslümanların diğer dini gruplara yönelik tutumlarını, bu tutumların tecrübe edilen gruplar arası temas ile ilişkisini, diğer gruplar ile olan iletişimlerinin kalitesini, algıladıkları İslamofobi düzeyini ve kendi grup içi dinamiklerini belirleyen sosyal kimlik seviyelerini incelemiştir. Araştırmada ilişkisel tarama yöntemi ve anket tekniğinin kullanılmıştır. Araştırma verileri ise kesitsel desenle Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, İngiltere, Almanya başta olmak üzere Batı ülkelerinde yaşayan, 18 ile 55 ve üzeri yaşlardaki 158 Müslüman katılımcıdan elde edilmiştir. Katılımcıların 93'ü erkek (%58,9) ve 65'i kadındır (%41,1). Katılımcılara sunulan anket formunda "Grup İçi Kendini Tanımlama Ölçeği" ve "Algılanan İslamofobi Ölçeği," kullanılmıştır. Bunun yanında gruplar arası ilişkilerin sıklığı ve niteliğine dair sorular ile diğer dini gruplara yönelik tutumları belirlemeyi amaçlayan sorular katılımcılara yönlendirilmiştir. Araştırma bulguları (a) Müslümanların en olumlu şekilde yaklaştığı dini grubun Katolikler olduğunu ve en sık şekilde Katolikler ile iletişim geçtiğini, (b) diğer dini gruplara yönelik tutumların onlarla iletişime geçme sıklığı ve olumlu temaslarda bulunma ile ilişkili olduğunu, (c) sosyal özdeşleşme, temas ve algılanan İslamofobi düzeyleri ile diğer dini gruplara yönelik tutumlar arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir ilişki bulunmadığını ve (d) algılanan İslamofobi'nin sadece Yahudilere yönelik tutumlar ve bu grupla olan nitelikli iletişim ile ilişkili olduğunu göstermiştir. Araştırmanın sonuçları, sınırlılıkları ve konuya dair ileride yapılabilecek çalışmalar çalışma içerisinde değerlendirilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

İslamofobi, Batı, Müslümanlar, Dini Gruplar, Tutumlar, Sosyal Kimlik

Abstracting and Indexes

Introduction

Today, most of the world's Muslims live in the Asia-Pacific region (61.7%), while the least lives in the Western countries (2.9%); this figure corresponds to a population of approximately 47 million (PEW, 2010). Looking at the 2050 projection regarding the future of world religions, it is estimated that the Muslim population will increase from 23.2% to 29.7% in the world, while there is no change in the Christian population between 2010 and 2050. According to 2017 data, the number of Muslims in the U.S. is approximately 3.5 million (PEW, 2018a). In the U.S., the proportion of Muslims in the general population was 0.4% in 1990, 0.6% in 2010, and 0.9% in 2012. In total, the Christian population decreased by approximately 6 million in 7 years. However, the Muslim population increased gradually. The projection expects this rate to be 1.7% in 2030 and 2.1% in 2050 (PEW, 2015). According to the current population growth rate, the population in Europe will decrease by approximately 30 million in 2030, while the Muslim population will approach to 60 million. While the proportion of Muslims in Europe was 6% in 2010, it is expected to be 10.2% in 2050 (PEW, 2015). The countries with the highest Muslim population in Europe are France, Germany, and England. The countries with the highest proportion of Muslims are France (7.5%), Austria (5.7%), Switzerland (5.7%), and the Netherlands (5.5%) (PEW, 2011, 124). The burgeoning Muslim population in Western countries has prompted significant scholarly interest in the dynamics of interreligious relationships and the corresponding attitudes held by various religious groups toward one another. This demographic shift has become a focal point for researchers seeking to understand the multifaceted interactions and perceptions within the religious landscape of these nations. In this regard, studies have indicated that the surge in Muslim population, perception of realistic and symbolic threat, xenophobia, racism, social identification, social dominance orientation, authoritarian politic attitudes, cultural value orientations, religious fundamentalism, and intergroup contact are among the predictors of negative attitudes toward Muslims (Cesari, 2010; Başaran - Özbay, 2017; Ekman, 2015; Esses et al., 1998; Fekete, 2009; Helbling, 2014; Khan - Eucklund, 2012; Okumuş, 2007; Pratt, 2016; Stephan et al., 2009; Stolz, 2005; Zick et al., 2011; Zick - Küpper, 2009). However, to understand the underlying factors of Islamophobia, researchers must investigate not only the attitudes held by individuals who have Islamophobic sentiments but also the attitudes of Muslims toward other religious groups.

Many Gallup polls held today show that there is an increase in negative views and discrimination against Muslims in the West (Ogan et al., 2014). In almost all Western countries, the least liked religious group is Muslims. When Noll (2010) analyzed the data of the *PEW Global Attitudes* survey conducted in 2005, she saw that 17% of the public in England, 33% in France, 50% in Germany, and 52% in the Netherlands viewed Muslims negatively. In a study conducted in the U.S., participants were asked how favorably they viewed other faith groups. According to the data, Muslims were viewed most negatively among all other belief groups, including atheists (PEW, 2014).

Muslims living in Western countries must encounter the negative consequences of the existing views toward them. Perry (2014) states that hate crimes against Muslims increased periodically after the September 11 attacks. For example, while 40 hate crimes against Muslims were detected in New York on September 18, 2001, this number increased to 90 on October 3rd and 145 on October 11th. When we look at the cases, we see actions such as verbal taunting, obstructing religious practices, workplace discrimination, travel discrimination, threats, armed attacks, and vandalism. A study conducted in 2015 with the participation of 600 Muslim students showed that more than half of the students were exposed to bullying at school (Clay, 2017).

Taken together, how do Muslims see this discrimination, violence, and exclusion? What is the perceived Islamophobia level of Muslims themselves? Despite these negative attitudes toward Muslims in Western countries, what are the attitudes of Muslims living in Western countries toward other religious groups? Do Muslims have negative attitudes toward Christians, who are the majority in Western countries? Is the perceived Islamophobia of Muslims related to attitudes toward other religious groups? Does intergroup contact and the pleasant intergroup contact with other religious groups affect these attitudes? These and all related questions affect the lives of Muslims living in Western countries and merit comprehensive investigation by researchers.

There are few studies on the attitudes of Muslims toward other religious groups. In a study conducted by PEW (2013) on the attitudes of Muslims around the world examined the interfaith relationships in Muslim-majority countries. The rate of those who think that Muslims are hostile toward Christians is only around 10% among Muslims living in Southern Europe, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. In addition, Kanol (2021) investigated the attitudes of Muslims toward atheists, Christians, and Jews on a sample of 10046 people. The findings suggested that the group that Muslims viewed most positively was Christians, followed by Jews, and the group they viewed most negatively was atheists.

Religious intolerance is on the rise around the world (PEW, 2017). A broad literature on the causes of negative attitudes among

religious groups addresses various reasons in this regard: prejudice, religious fundamentalism, social identification, perception of threat, intergroup contact, and social dominance orientation, etc. (Dekker - Noll, 2009; Haji-Ghasemi, 2013; Cinnirella, 2013; Noll et al., 2017; Stolz, 2005). However, there is still a need for research on the attitudes of Muslims living in Western countries where Islamophobia is on the rise toward other religious groups, and the relationship of these attitudes with intergroup contact and perceived levels of Islamophobia.

A growing research body examined Islamophobic incidents that happened in the U.S. in the last two decades and related anti-Muslim attitudes and behaviors causing fear and anxiety among Muslims. In this regard, a study conducted in mosques in the U.S. reported that 25% of the participants thought that American society was hostile to Islam (CAIR, 2012). Another research conveyed that 85% of the participants stated their schools did not allow them to pray or provide a place for them to worship (CAIR, 1999). A report prepared by EUFRA (2007) indicated that there was an increase in perceived discrimination with the rise in Islamophobic cases in Europe. Furthermore, the literature addressed that perceived discrimination was respectively associated with self-esteem, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, stress, depression, and anxiety (Kessler et al., 1999; Kim et al., 2023; Stevens, 2017; Jang et al., 2008). In their meta-analysis, Pascoe and Smart Richman (2009) demonstrated that there was a strong negative correlation between the level of perceived discrimination and psychological health. Additionally, studies suggested that perceived exposure level to Islamophobic incidents was related to various psychological health outcomes (Kunst et al., 2012; Uddin et al., 2022). In sum, such Islamophobia-based incidents and experiences directly or indirectly may be related to the attitudes, behaviors, and various deteriorating mental health outcomes among Muslims.

Social identity refers to "the part of the self-concept derived from belonging to one or more groups" (Taylor et al., 2012, 195). Each individual may feel that they belong to various groups in daily life. Individuals' identity includes several interrelated components such as religious, national, political, ideological, and so on (Saroglou - Cohen, 2013). People attribute different levels of values to their identities, and although they sometimes act as individuals, most of the time they act based on their identity-related affiliations (Stangor, 2009, 4). After individuals feel like they belong to a group, they develop judgments about other groups. For instance, if a religion-based social identity has been developed by a person, then members of other religions may be seen as an outgroup (Ciftci, 2012). People compare the group they belong to with other groups and evaluate their group more positively compared to other groups (Dekker - Noll, 2009). Studies indicated that in-group identification was one of the most important motivations underlying prejudice and discrimination (Stangor, 2009; Kenworthy et al., 2011; Sevinç, 2019). Research reported that Islamophobia was related to the level of in-group identification and was an attitude toward Muslim identity defined as an outgroup (Dekker - Noll, 2009; Okumuş, 2007; Sevinç, 2019). Additionally, Perozzo and colleagues (2016) showed that social identification was positively related to perceived discrimination.

The Intergroup Contact Theory (ICT) developed by Allport (1954) suggests that contact between members of different groups would reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict. Accordingly, being in contact with people from other groups, embracing multiculturalism, or not having a strong affiliation with a particular group reduces the level of discrimination against other groups. However, there are some prerequisites to be able to have a decreasing level of discrimination: (a) having a similar status, (b) making cooperation between the groups, (c) pursuing some common goals, and (d) having a contact supported by their social or institutional authorities. Thus, there might be a decrease in prejudice against the members of the contacted group.

An extensive research body has tested ICT in this regard. Everett and Onu (2013) examined ICT and showed that contact reduces prejudice and increases tolerance toward other people. Similarly, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) examined 515 studies and showed that prejudice decreases with more contact, as claimed by Allport. In their research, Dekker and Noll found that more than half of the participants viewed Muslims negatively and examined whether these participants were in contact with Muslims. Looking at the results, it was seen that approximately 60% of the participants rarely contacted Muslims. Among those who met Muslims, the rate of those who had positive emotions (38%) was higher than the rate of those who had negative emotions (30%). Among those stating that they had frequent contact with Muslims, the rate of those who had positive feelings was 65%. Stolz (2005) conducted a study in Zurich, Switzerland, with the participation of 1138 people in 1994-1995, and found that being in contact with Muslims reduced prejudice against them. In her research focused on the participation of members of three Abrahamic religions, Kanol (2021) found that close and pleasant intergroup contact brings positive attitudes, whereas problematic intergroup contact and perceived discrimination were associated with negative attitudes. Kanas and colleagues (2017) investigated ICT with Christian and Muslim participants and found that interreligious friendships reduced negative attitudes, but casual interreligious contact increased negative attitudes. Additionally, the literature observed that those who were subjected to physical or psychological violence by someone from a different religion developed high levels of negative attitudes. In the light of these findings, we may expect that the attitudes of Muslims living in Western countries toward other religious groups will be related to the level of perceived Islamophobia and intergroup contact. Although there are studies on the relationship between perceived discrimination and intergroup contact

(See Conway, 1997; Te Lindert et al., 2022), the direct relationship between perceived Islamophobia and intergroup contact merits future inquiry.

Taken together, this research has two main purposes. First, we aim to describe the attitudes of Muslims living in Western countries toward other religious groups, their frequency of contact, and their level of positive evaluation related to this contact. Second, we aim to explore the relationship between attitudes toward other religious groups and intergroup contact, the quality of intergroup contact, perceived Islamophobia, and the level of social identification among Muslims living in Western countries. Accordingly, this research seeks to determine whether the attitude toward other religious groups is related to the level of perceived Islamophobia and the level of social identification. Given the foregoing, this study tested the hypotheses below:

H_1: There is a positive correlation between attitudes toward other religious groups and intergroup contact.

H_2: There is a positive correlation between attitudes toward other religious groups and the quality of intergroup contact.

H_3: There is a negative correlation between attitudes toward other religious groups and the level of perceived Islamophobia.

H_4: There is a negative correlation between attitudes toward other religious groups and the level of social identification.

H_5: There is a negative correlation between the frequency of intergroup contact and the level of perceived Islamophobia.

Method

Data

To test the study hypotheses, we used data collected via Google Forms from Muslims and Muslim organizations in Western countries between September and October in 2023. We sent a survey prepared in English to the participants via social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) and emailed a link of the survey to various Muslim organizations to recruit more Muslim participants. Since we could not provide any incentives to participants, the number of participants did not reach the anticipated participant number.

At the beginning of the survey, we wanted the participants to approve their religious affiliation in Islam. Those who did not approve that they were Muslim in the consent form could not continue the survey. We used the convenience sampling method to reach out the participants because we needed to have Muslims in the study. Thereby, the data was gathered from a non-probability sample of 158 Muslims aged 18 and over living in USA, Australia, Austria, Belgium, UK, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Measures

Feeling Thermometer

Measuring attitudes and perceptions toward religious groups is a very complex process. There is no specific scale developed on this subject. To measure these phenomena, researchers have used various questions. For example, Dekker and Noll (2009) listed various religious groups and asked participants to express their feelings about these groups. In this research, we asked the participants to express their feelings toward individuals from different religions on an eleven-point Likert scale (from -5 to +5). If there was no positive or negative emotion toward the relevant group, this response was scored as neutral (0 point). Positive scores indicate positive emotions, and negative scores indicate negative emotions. By this question, we measured whether the participants have positive or negative sentiments toward the listed groups. To collectively evaluate Muslims' attitudes toward other religious groups (Catholic, Protestant, Other Christians, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Non-religious), we averaged the attitudes toward all groups.

Intergroup Contact

We gauged contact frequency and quality of contact via questions used by Dekker and Noll (2009). Dekker and Noll (2009) asked participants two questions to measure contact with Muslims and whether this contact was positive or negative. The first question was about how often they had contact with members of the listed religious groups (e.g., in class, at school, in the neighborhood, somewhere else). Response categories ranged from 1= "never" to 5= "always." Unlike the questions used by Dekker and Noll (2009), in the present study, the Christianity option in the list of religious groups was divided into three categories: Catholic, Protestant, and other Christian Groups. The other religious groups were in the list as followed: Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Non-religious. The second question was about how positive or negative they evaluated their contacts with individuals from the listed religious groups. The response categories also ranged from -2= "very negative" to +2= "very positive". If the participant is neutral about this contact, they give 0= "neutral" score. We used these two questions to

determine contact with Muslims and the nature of the contact. Response categories ranged from 1= "never" to 5= "always." To determine the relationship of contact frequency with other variables, we averaged the participants' contact frequencies with other religious groups, excluding Muslims, and thereby we created a contact score.

Social Identification

We measured the effect of social identity on the level of Islamophobia via Ingroup Identification Scale (Kenworthy et al., 2011) consisted of the following 9 items: (1) "Being a member of my race/ethnicity is an important reflection of who I am", (2) "In general, being a member of my race/ethnicity is an important part of my self-image", (3) "I see myself as a member of my race/ethnicity", (4) "Being a member of my race/ethnicity is central to my sense of who I am", (5) "I value being a member of my race/ethnicity", (6) "Overall, being a member of my race/ethnicity has very little to do with how I feel about myself" (reversed), (7) "I feel proud to be a member of my race/ethnicity", (8) "Being a member of my race/ethnicity is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am" (reversed), and (9) "I feel strong ties to other people of my race/ethnicity". Response categories ranged from 1= "strongly disagree" to 5= "strongly agree." High scores demonstrated a high level of self-identification with the ethnic group they have (alpha= .94).

Perceived Islamophobia

To measure perceived Islamophobia, we used the Perceived Islamophobia Scale (PIS) (Kunst et al., 2013) comprising the following 12 items: (1) "Many Germans avoid Muslims," (2) "Germans are suspicious of Muslims," (3) "In general, Germans trust Muslims (reversed item)," (4) Overall, only few Germans are afraid of Islam (reversed item)," (5) "Most Germans feel safe among Muslims (reversed item)," (6) "Many Germans get nervous in the presence of Muslims," (7) "A lot of Germans are afraid that Muslims are going to take over Germany," (8) "Many Germans fear an "Islamization" of Germany," (9) "A lot of Germans consider Islam a threat to German values," (10) "German media always presents Muslims as dangerous people," (11) "Islam is always presented as a threat to German culture in the media," (12) "German media spreads a lot of fear of Muslims and Islam." Response categories ranged from "totally disagree" = 1 to "totally agree" = 5. High scores indicated a high perception of Islamophobia (alpha= .90). The items were rephrased according to the country where they were completed.

Demographics

We measured the analyses for demographics: gender (male and female), age (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55+), race/ethnicity (White/Caucasian, Black/African, Middle Eastern, South Asian, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latina or Latino, Other), educational attainment (less than high school, high school, some college, associate degree, bachelor's degree, professional degree, doctoral degree), religious affiliation (yes and no), and country of residence (USA, UK, Germany, and the others). Additionally, we gauged socioeconomic status with the following statement: "Please rate your income level on a scale from 1 to 5." Whereas "1" meant that the participant had a low level of socioeconomic status, "5" meant that the participant had a high level of socioeconomic status (Low, lower-middle, middle, upper-middle, high).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (n=158)

	Range		Frequencies	Mean (%)	SD	α
	Min.	Max.				
Focal Measures						
Attitudes toward other religious groups	-5	+5		.92	2.09	
Social identification	1.11	5		3.67	.91	.89
Perceived Islamophobia	1.17	5		3.48	.75	.88
Intergroup contact	1	5		2.80	.79	
Quality of intergroup contact	-2	+2		.52	.80	
Gender						
Male			93	58.9		
Female			65	41.1		
Age Groups						
18-24			41	25.9		
25-34			56	35.4		
35-44			31	19.6		
45-54			22	13.9		
55+			8	5.1		
Education						
Less than high school			3	1.9		
High school			11	7.0		
Some college			21	13.3		
Associate degree			5	3.2		

Bachelor's degree	53	33.5
Professional degree	48	30.4
Doctoral Degree	17	10.8
Socio-economic Status		
Low	8	5.1
Lower-middle	24	15.2
Middle	74	46.8
Upper-middle	29	18.4
High	23	14.6
Ethnical/Racial Background		
White/Caucasian	46	29.1
Black/African	6	3.8
Middle Eastern	49	31.0
South Asian	28	17.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	8	5.1
Hispanic/Latina or Latino	3	1.9
Other	18	11.4
Country		
USA	99	62.7
UK	11	7
Germany	7	4.4
Other	41	26

Table 1 indicates the descriptive statistics of the study variables. Participants reported an average level of attitudes toward other religious groups whereas demonstrating a considerably high level of social identification. Additionally, they showed a significantly high level of perceived Islamophobia. Nonetheless, their intergroup contact level and their intergroup contact quality were slightly above the average.

Analytical Strategies P

By using SPSS for all statistical analyses, first, we respectively estimated the averages of attitudes toward other religious groups, the frequency of contact, and the level of finding the contact positive. Afterwards, we run correlation analyses to determine if there are relationships among attitudes toward other religious groups, frequency of intergroup contact, quality of contact, perceived Islamophobia, and social identification.

Results and Discussion

Attitude, Contact, and Nature of Contact toward Other Religious Groups

We asked Muslim participants living in Western countries to rate their attitudes toward other religious groups. As seen in Table 2, the most positively viewed religious group is Muslims (3.37) as expected. In addition, when we look at which religious group is viewed most positively after Muslims, it is Catholics (1.49), followed by Protestants (1.25), other Christians (1.24), Sikhs (0.79), Buddhists (0.75), Hindus (0.65), atheists (0.56), and Jews (0.55).

Table 2. How do you feel in general about the following groups? (n= 154)

	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Catholic	-5	5	1.49	2.16
Protestant	-5	5	1.25	2.26
Other Christians	-5	5	1.24	2.36
Muslim	-3	5	3.37	1.98
Jew	-5	5	.55	2.55
Buddhist	-5	5	.75	2.34
Hindu	-5	5	.65	2.46
Sikh	-5	5	.79	2.42
Atheist	-5	5	.56	2.71
Average (no Muslim)	-5	5	.91	2.08

In this data, positive values indicate positive emotions and negative values indicate negative emotions. When looking at the findings, there is no group that is viewed negatively among the religious groups listed. The average of the participants' attitudes toward other religious groups, excluding Muslims, was found to be 0.91 (SD = 2.08). Thereby, there is a positive attitude score in

total. Many studies conducted in Western countries show that Muslims are the most negatively viewed religious group (Commission, 2005; Noll, 2010; Lee et al., 2009; Jung, 2012). After Muslims, the most negatively viewed group is mostly atheists (PEW, 2014). Analyzing the Austrian Social Survey 2018 data, Höllinger (2020) found that when it comes to Christian sects and atheists, those who viewed Muslims most negatively were atheists, while those who viewed Muslims most positively were Orthodox. Those who viewed atheists most negatively were found to be Catholics and Muslims. Additionally, Kanol (2021) reported that when it comes to atheists, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, the most negatively viewed group was atheists. Those who viewed atheists the least negatively were Jews. The group that Muslims viewed most negatively were atheists. On the other hand, the group that Jews viewed most negatively was Muslims. This research was conducted in 8 different countries, including Israel and Palestine. In our research, it is seen that Muslims view Christians more positively than other religious groups. The fact that the second most negatively viewed group is atheists is consistent with the data of previous studies in the existing literature. However, it is remarkable that the group that Muslims viewed most negatively was Jews. This outcome is likely to be related to events starting in October 2023. This will mean that the attitudes of religious groups toward each other may be situational.

Table 3. Contact with other religious groups and evaluation of contact (n= 158)

	Contact with Others				Contact Quality			
	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Catholic	1	5	3.40	1.04	-2	2	.82	.87
Protestant	1	5	3.08	1.28	-2	2	.65	1.01
Other Christians	1	5	3.16	1.14	-2	2	.70	.98
Muslim	1	5	4.49	.82	-1	2	1.50	.72
Jew	1	5	2.49	1.09	-2	2	.38	1.04
Buddhist	1	5	2.08	1.01	-2	2	.42	1.01
Hindu	1	5	2.66	1.18	-2	2	.44	1.05
Sikh	1	5	2.18	1.15	-2	2	.30	1.04
Atheist	1	5	3.32	1.20	-2	2	.47	1.08
Average (no Muslim)	1	5	3.40	1.04	-2	2	.82	.87

Table 3 illustrates the statistics regarding contact with other religious groups. The findings point out that the religious group with which Muslims have the most contact (excluding Muslims) is Catholics (3.4), followed by non-religious (3.32), other Christians (3.16), and then Protestants (3.08). Here, the frequency of contact is between 1 (never) and 5 (always). It appears that Muslims rarely have contact with other religious groups. When looking at the nature of the contact, contact with all listed religious groups is evaluated positively. The group in which contact is evaluated most positively is again Catholics (0.82), followed by other Christians (0.70) and Protestants (0.65). The groups with which Muslims have the most contact and with whom they evaluate the contact most positively are Christians. In a study conducted with participants from four countries in Western Europe (UK, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden), Şimşek and colleagues (2022) demonstrated that the positive bonding of Muslims with other religious groups may differ from country to country. For instance, Muslims in England and the Netherlands developed more positive ties with non-religious than with Christians, while Muslims living in Germany and Sweden developed better ties with Christians. This data suggests that contact with other religious groups may also vary depending on social context. In our research, the highest frequency of contact of Muslims is with Christians and non-religious. What reasons would matter for Muslims who have the highest frequency of contact with Christians and non-religious ones? First, Muslims may consider Christians in a more privileged position compared to other religious groups. In addition, Muslims may have a higher rate of contact with Christians because Christians are seen as the people of the book in Islam. Lastly, they may live in Christian countries. Therefore, they would have more contact with Christians.

Furthermore, research on Islamophobia shows that one of the most important reasons for negative attitudes toward Muslims is religious fundamentalism (Ciftci, 2012; Demmrich et al., 2024; Fetzer - Soper, 2003; Helbling, 2014). In this case, this might be a reason for Muslims to have more frequent contact with non-religious people than religious ones. However, this subject still needs further inquiry, especially using more comprehensive sample sizes.

The Relationship of Attitude toward Religious Groups with Other Variables

The findings revealed that total contact frequency was not associated with gender, education, and socioeconomic status. However, there was a positive correlation between age and contact frequency (r=.245, p<.05). Additionally, attitudes toward

religious groups were found to be related to two variables. First was the frequency of contact (r=.181, p<.05). Namely, as contact with other religious groups increases, positive attitudes toward them also increase. The other was the quality of contact (r=.615, p<.01). That is, as the positive interpretation of contact with other religious groups increases, the positive attitude toward other religious groups increases as well. Moreover, as expected, the frequency of contact and positive interpretation of the contact were also found to be positively related (r=.267, p<.05), which is consistent with the claims of ICT. These findings supported the hypotheses that there is a positive correlation between positive attitudes toward other religious groups, the frequency of intergroup contact (H_1), and the positive evaluation of the contact (H_2).

Table 4. Relationship of attitude toward religious groups with other variables

		1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived islamophobia	r	1	-.034	.064	-.021	-.110
	p		.683	.441	.798	.186
	N		146	146	146	146
2. Attitudes toward other religious groups	r		1	.054	.181[*]	.615[**]
	p			.509	.025	.000
	N			154	154	154
3. Social identification	r			1	.053	.059
	p				.508	.459
	N				158	158
4. Contact score	r				1	.267[**]
	p					.001
	N					158
5. Evaluation of contact score	r					
	p					1
	N					

* p < 0.05 (two-tailed test); ** p < 0.01 (two-tailed test).

Table 4 indicates that perceived Islamophobia was not correlated with any of other variables. Similarly, the level of social identification was not related to attitudes toward religious groups. Consequently, these findings have not supported H_3 claiming that there would be a negative correlation between the level of perceived Islamophobia and positive attitudes toward other religious groups, H_4 assuming that there was a negative correlation between attitudes toward other religious groups and the level of social identification and H_5 claiming that there would be a negative correlation between intergroup contact frequency and perceived Islamophobia.

Table 5. Relationship of attitudes toward other religious groups with perceived Islamophobia

		Catholic	Protestant	Other Christians	Jew	Buddhist	Hindu	Sikh	Atheist
Perceived Islamophobia	r	-.030	-.002	-.067	-.200[*]	.072	-.020	.022	-.002
	p	.724	.984	.421	.015	.385	.813	.792	.983
	N	146	146	146	146	146	146	146	146

* p < 0.05 (two-tailed test).

Afterward, we examined the relationship between attitudes and perceived Islamophobia level based on religious groups. In this regard, as seen in Table 5, the level of perceived Islamophobia is negatively associated with attitudes toward other religious groups only for Jews (r=-.200, p<.05). As the level of perceived Islamophobia increases, positive attitudes toward Jews decrease. Accordingly, the group that Muslims living in the Western countries view negatively most is Jews. We may conclude that perceived Islamophobia would be one of the possible predictors of this situation.

Table 6. Relationship of pleasant intergroup contact with other religious groups with perceived Islamophobia

		Catholic	Protestant	Other Christians	Jew	Buddhist	Hindu	Sikh	Atheist
Perceived Islamophobia	r	-.112	-.158	-.147	-.205[*]	-.041	.012	-.014	-.046
	p	.177	.057	.077	.013	.623	.888	868	.583
	N	146	146	146	146	146	146	146	146

* p < 0.05 (two-tailed test).

Likewise, Table 6 illustrates the relationship between the positive evaluation of contact with other religious groups and the level

of perceived Islamophobia. The findings suggest that only the quality of contact with Jews was linked with perceived Islamophobia (r=-.205, p<.05). That being said, as the level of perceived Islamophobia increases, the level of positive interpretation of contact with Jews decreases.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study suggests that Muslims living in Western countries may not have negative attitudes toward other religious groups and may view all those groups positively. Despite the increasing Islamophobic discourse and cases, it is a noteworthy finding that Muslims living in Western countries would not harbor negative attitudes toward groups that represent Western civilization and culture. Based on the findings, the groups that Muslims view most positively, have the most contact with, and evaluate contact with most positively are Christians. It would be considered that lesser positive attitudes of Muslims, especially toward Jews, may be related to the conjunctural or social context.

Furthermore, it is substantial that the perceived level of Islamophobia is only associated with attitudes toward Jews. Gallup polls in Western countries show that Islamophobia increases while antisemitism decreases. For instance, research conducted in 15 Europe countries shows that 76% of the respondents consider Jews as an integral of their family. On the contrary, 66% of the participants see Muslims in such a familial context (PEW, 2018b). Taras (2009) reported that 11% of individuals living in Germany perceive Jews as not integrated with Western lifestyles, contrasting with 45% of the respondents who consider Muslims as disintegrated with the lifestyles in their society. Moreover, nationalist political parties in Australia, New Zealand, USA, and some European countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, Netherland, and Switzerland) target mostly Muslims. However, Jews are the topics of the political discourses in just Germany and Sweden (PEW, 2018c). The fact that studies compare the attitudes toward Jews and Muslims is because of the perception assuming that Antisemitism and Islamophobia are affected by common problems such as being exposed to prejudice, discrimination, hatred, etc. However, findings show that individuals in Western countries are more likely to experience Islamophobia compared to encountering Antisemitism (Bangstad - Bunzl, 2010; Lopez, 2011; Silverstein, 2008; Taras, 2013). Bunzl (2010) claims that Muslims recently have to deal with the hatred, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by Jews in Europe in the last century. While Antisemitism decreases in Europe over the years, Islamophobia increases contrarily. According to the Commission supported by the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, State of Kuwait (2005), the conflict between Palestine and Israel might affect the perceptions of individuals. For instance, it may be expected that 70% of the Americans have pro-Israeli opinion. At this point, the power of the Jewish organizations on American media and politics takes an important role. From the commission's point of view, we may suggest that the attitudes of Muslims toward Jews might be related with the Palestine matter. This needs to be inquired comprehensively in the future.

On the other hand, the fact that attitudes between religious groups are related to intergroup contact and the quality of contact supports the claims of ICT (Alport, 1954; Kanol, 2021). In addition, the level of social identity was not associated with any other variable. We may consider the high educational level of the participants as one of the reasons for this situation.

In sum, this study demonstrated that Muslims living in Western countries may perceive above-average levels of Islamophobia, and their health may negatively be affected by this reality (e.g. Samari, 2016; Samari et al., 2018; Tuzer, 2024). The findings highlighted that there is need for more inquiries focusing on the predictors and consequences of perceived Islamophobia among all religious groups.

Limitations and Future Research Avenues

Besides important findings, this research has some limitations as well. First, we surveyed in October 2023 and analyzed data from a cross-sectional survey of Muslims who live in Western countries. Therefore, we cannot generalize these findings to other populations and cannot make causal references in this regard. Second, we had difficulties while recruiting participants for this project and ended up with just 158 respondents. Thus, future studies should aim to have more participants and more comprehensive models on this matter. The more participants the stronger the results to have more variations in the related relationships. Third, most of the participants were from the U.S. in this study. Future inquiries may have Muslim participants from different countries and make considerable comparisons regarding perceived Islamophobia and related matters. Lastly, we run quantitative research in this study. Indeed, the findings did not give us detailed information about the complex relationships among the study variables. For this reason, future studies may conduct mixed-method research and derive rich and deep information about the attitudes and perceptions of Muslims toward Islamophobia and other religious groups.

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