From Moors to Muslims: evolution of the Spanish public debate

De moros a musulmanes: evolución del debate público español

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Abstract

How and when did the religious category “Muslim” replace ethnic and migration related terms in the Spanish public debate? What main public issues have accumulated to signify the new category? In this article we review journalistic and academic production around a selection of events that have ignited each of the main controversies about immigrants
from Muslim majority countries and their descendants in the last three decades. By focusing on what cultural tropes are mobilized to frame and interpret such events we aim to account for the sociogenesis of a category that deeply influences these migrants’ incorporation into the Spanish society.

**Key words:** Categorization, Muslims, Public Debate, Spain, Framing

**Resumen**

¿Cómo y cuándo llegó la categoría religiosa “musulmanes” a centrar el debate público español sobre los migrantes de países de tradición islámica, sustituyendo a términos étnicos y migratorios? ¿En torno a qué controversias ha cobrado su significado? En este artículo revisamos la producción periodística y académica sobre una selección de los acontecimientos que han generado los principales temas de debate en las últimas tres décadas, analizando a qué tropos culturales se ha recurrido para interpretarlos. Ofrecemos así un relato de la sociogénesis de una categoría que condiciona profundamente la incorporación de estos migrantes y sus descendientes a la sociedad española.

**Palabras clave:** categorización, musulmanes, debate público, España, framing

**Introduction**

Spain is a newcomer to the international public debate on the participation of populations from Muslim majority countries in Western societies, although it counts on an eight-century long history of pervasive Islamic presence – between Islam’s expansion in the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th and the ruling out of Islamic practice from the Kingdoms of Castilla and Aragon in the 16th – and recent memories of colonization and decolonization in the Maghreb. The issue of Muslim presence gained saliency in the national public agenda only around the turn of the 20th Century, when immigration, particularly from neighboring Morocco, intensified. Since then, public discourses about these migrants and their descendants have been written and rewritten, at the pace of local, national, and international events, generating the evolving discursive atmosphere that frames their identity formation processes and their efforts at finding a place and a voice in the public sphere. How and when did the term “Muslims” come to be used as a category in the Spanish public debate, and what are the main controversies on which it feeds?

The traditional ethnic and racial category “Moor”, with deep othering intention, and their more polite alternatives “Moroccan” and “Moghribi’s” dominated public discourse in the 1990s, together with “immigrants”, “clandestinos”, “illegals” or “irregulars”. But since the early 2000s, Spain joined the international trend for the religious category “Muslim” to overshadow previous ethnic, legal and socioeconomic terms labelling groups of immigrant origin in the European academic literature and mass media (Allievi, 2005; Yildiz, 2009; Brubaker, 2013). This shift coincides with the raise of
international Islamist, and the shared shock of terrorist violence in Europe and North America, but the term is signified in controversies that are specific to each national context, since they result from events which require collective reinterpretation of Muslim presence in the light of national cultural traditions. The turn from ethno-racial categories like “moors” to the religious category “Muslim” may be conceived as the last knot in a long historical braid in which geographical origin, culture, race and religion have become interlocked in public perceptions of the other. The word “maurus” circulated among the Romans in the Peninsula long before the expansion of Islam in North Africa, later to cohabit and absorb meaning from religious categories like “mahometanos”. The complex history of population ebbs and flows across the Strait, with periods dominated by conflict and others by negotiation and exchange, created numerous conjunctions that tilted the balance among the geographical, cultural, racial and religious connotations of “moros” (Mateo Dieste, 2017; González Alcantud, 2002; de Bunes, 1989; Martín Corrales, 2021). As maurophobia sketched the shifting and polyhedral stereotype of the enemy, ambivalent traits of maurophilia joined it, most notably in orientalist esthetics (de Bunes, 2006; Morales Lezcano, 2006). The complexity and non-linearity of its socio-history, to which this article contributes a most recent episode, is evident in recent analysis of perceptions of Moors based on Spanish arts (Martín Corrales, 2002: 26-32) and, closer to this article, social sciences (López García, 1990) and press production (Boundi, 2011).

The following pages offer a review of the public debates in the aftermath of generative events involving populations from countries of Muslim tradition in the last three decades, based on academic publications and press articles from the two most read national newspapers, center-left El País and conservative El Mundo. Our review of the press is longitudinal and exhaustive for series of events with relatively minor coverage but cumulative effects on public debate, such as conflicts over the building of mosques, and covers the two weeks following highest priming happenings like bombings in Atocha in 2004.

For the first events related to irregular migration, we checked 67 bibliographical references and an exhaustive press analysis at the time covering the parliamentary discussion of the Foreigners Law and its reform in 2000 – from proposals on 10 May 1998, to its enactment on 23 January 2001 –, the social mobilizations around its implementation in January and February 2001, and its second reform from 8 July to 20 December 2003.

On the Atocha bombings, we analysed a qualitative sample of 359 press articles responding to key words “11M”, “musulmán/es/as”, “Islam”, “árabe”, and “Al Andalus” in the two weeks after 11 March 2004, as well as 26 academic references. Related to it, discourse on the new terrorist prevention model was observed via a critical analysis of 38 academic pieces, and press coverage of a few preventive detentions that stirred up wide media debate.

Regarding religious symbols, our selection included, on the one hand, the 33 articles responding to the simple search “mosque” from 1990 to 2021 in the two selected

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1 See Alexandra Poli’s and Berta Álvarez-Miranda’s contribution to this issue for more detail on our use of categories, controversies and events as methodological instruments.
newspapers, and 37 academic pieces. On the other hand, we studied two debates over the hijab, a student expelled from high school in 2010 (with a total of 94 press articles from 5 April to 3 September 2010 and 27 academic references) and the participation of a veiled politician in a national rally in 2021, with very limited press coverage (5 articles, mostly opinion pieces) but an exponential development on social media. In this exceptional case, we used Graphext to download from Twitter the 35,595 tweets posted during the two following weeks, of which 17% referred to Hamed (6,050 tweets), and observe trends and patterns of discourse. Analysis on Instagram focused on the profiles identified on Twitter with the highest indegree (impact in terms of retweets).

Finally, for the most recent event, the massive entrance of migrants in Ceuta 2021, our database included an exhaustive selection of articles from 17 to 31 May (194 pieces) and 24 academic pieces, a few providing immediate reactions to the specific event and others more contextual on the Ceutí border.

Our content analysis allows for a contrasted description of the discursive stances coined by academics and journalists – quite independent from each other, quite different in their outlook –, but also, indirectly, by politicians and civil society actors. From their wording and arguments emerge the categories and tropes that have dominated the framing of Muslims in Spain.

**Ethnic and racial categories by the end of the 20th Century**

Ethnic, racial and migration related categories dominated the framing of the newly arrived populations from countries of Muslim tradition in Northern Africa (together with much smaller and less prominent in public perception populations from Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia) in the 1980s and 1990s, and would linger on to coexist with religious categories in the 2000s, while Muslim presence rose to an estimated maximum of three million by 2021\(^2\) (Statista, 3-08-22). Lacking experience of immigration in contemporary times, Spanish elites developed new codes and arguments about it when facing a proliferation of extremely risky crossings of the Mediterranean, enacting legislation on foreigners for the first time, and interpreting nativist violent reactions. At a time when news of the Rushdie affair seemed far-off, emerging conflicts over the building of mosques were engulfed into the debate on the incorporation of migrants in urban spaces, not yet giving prevalence to their religious categorization as Muslims.

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\(^2\) Lacking official statistics on religiosity, survey samples remain more reliable than community organization’s registers.
Framing irregular migration

The framing of migrations across the Spanish Southern frontier must be understood against the backdrop of a long-haul history of South-North movements, integrated into collective memory as invasions of Spanish territory. Most significantly, Spaniards have been taught an epical history of the Conquest in the 8th Century by Muslims from Northern Africa, and the subsequent Reconquest until 1492. Despite some historians’ (and Muslim organizations’) efforts to depict the situation in Al-Andalus as one of comparatively generous rights for Christians and Jews under Muslim rule, of long periods of peaceful coexistence, and of flourishing artistic, philosophical, and scientific creativity, the dominant collective memory is one of constant war of religion. Stories of Christian victories are not only retold in school history books and popular culture, but also celebrated in local official anniversaries, and physically reenacted by epochally dressed warriors in popular “Moors and Christians” festivities along the Eastern coast.

If the Reconquest lingers, as a foundational national myth, in the interpretative frames of the Spanish public, today hailed by the extreme right, other historical episodes reinforce its effect on perceptions of immigrants from Muslim majority countries. A series of coastal military and pirate offensives span the 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries, and colonial clashes punctuate the 19th and 20th. The fact that Franco’s expedition in 1936 started from the Spanish protectorate in Morocco, and the cruelty of his “Moorish troops” during the Civil War left Maurophobic scars in the Spanish left (Martín Lupiáñez, 2021: 315). Most recent and at times politically mobilized is the memory of the nonviolent Green March of civilians over the Western Sahara in 1975, a massive but peaceful “invasion” of the then province of Spain by around 350,000 unarmed civilians that put an end to Spanish colonial rule (Guía, 2014: 22, 131-160).

Perception of the slow but continuous arrival of irregular migrants from Morocco is filtered by these memories of conflictive movements across the frontier. The first patera deadly wreck reported in the national press came in 1988, although floating corpses had been spotted by fishermen and a few small boats had successfully made it to beaches in Cádiz before that date (El Mundo, 01/11/2018). After the imposition of visas in 1991, pateras became more and more common, with lengthening trips and growing numbers of migrants from South Saharan Africa. These extremely risky crossings have distorted public perception of migrants, resonating against the tradition of othering “the Moor”. When asked in surveys of the 1990s who they thought about when the word “migrant” was mentioned, the most frequent spontaneous response was “Moroccans”, even if other groups like “Latin Americans” and “Eastern Europeans” were in fact much more numerous in the country (https://www.analisis.cis.es/cisdb.jsp), and today, polls show that Spaniards tend to overestimate the presence of irregular migrants in the country above the EU average (Álvarez-Miranda, 2018).

Public debate on immigration in Spain and pro-immigrant activism originally focused on “Moroccans” and “Moghrabi’s”, not Muslims, when Spain’s first legislative developments on foreigners came around, by the turn of the Century, motivated by increasing arrivals from Northern Africa and Spain’s participation in the Schengen area of free movement of people. The approval and immediate reform of a Foreigners Law in 1999-2000 introduced for the first time the expulsion of irregular immigrants and
threatened to curtail their civil rights. A review of the press of the time shows that the starting line was an apparent consensus which framed immigration mainly in terms of the moral obligation to “solidarity” and “integration” of all newcomers. But soon in the process of negotiating and implementing the Law, both the incumbent conservative party and, more ambivalently, the main opposition socialist party orbited towards arguments of “responsibility” and “observance of European compromises”, leaving the far left, trade unions, the Church, NGOs, immigrant associations and a great majority of academics on the side of more generous border policies (Pérez-Díaz et al., 2001: 87-136).

The controversy over legislation on irregular migration, which included a regularization process, was inflamed by events of collective nativist violence on February 5-7th, 2000, in El Ejido, a small town in Almería where intensive horticulture is performed in plastic greenhouses, with drip irrigation and immigrant manpower. Two local agricultural workers and a young woman were murdered by a Palestinian and a Moroccan immigrant in a period of two weeks, and in the three days after the latter’s funeral a frenzy of attacks against immigrants and their businesses was unleashed. Estimates are seven immigrants were injured (as against six natives and nine policemen), 25 were arrested (as against 17 Spaniards), 500 to 700 lost their houses, and 3,000 left the area afterwards (Zapata, 2003; Caro, 2002). These events were not the first (or the last) of their kind, they followed a trickle of anti-maghrebi incidents in this area in the late 1990s, including the shooting of a Moroccan individual by hooded men.

Events in El Ejido provided material for one of the yet most notable academic interpretation efforts regarding Moroccan immigrants. Most scholarly commentators framed them as victims of precarious legal, working and housing conditions (Martínez Veiga, 2001; Calavitas, 2005; FINAM, 2002; Checa and Olmos, 2001), social segregation (Chattou, 2000; Castaño, 2009) or outright racism in the shape of a “Moor hunt” (Calvo Buezas, 2000). Few commentaries mentioned religious difference to explain the riots, and most rooted it in medieval and colonial conflict (Zapata, 2003) or in the context of membership in a European Union bordering itself away from the Muslim world (Caro, 2002). In contrast, Mikel Azurmendi (2001: 287-360), at the time president of the government’s forum for the representation of immigrants, coined “exculpatory arguments” (Terrén, 2003; Martínez Veiga, 2003; Goytisolo, 2003: 44-47) to explain natives’ rush against “moors” and not other immigrants in terms of their lesser propensity to hard work and housekeeping, and greater propensity to delinquency, brawling and sexual harassment.

Azurmendi stands alone among academic commentators in framing Moroccan men as prone to violence and delinquency, although this perception has not been uncommon among the public since the 1990s (Pérez-Díaz et al., 2001: 212-215; González-Enríquez and Álvarez-Miranda, 2005: 54-57). In the following years, while the mass media often mentioned foreign nationalities when reporting criminal offence, researchers tended to ignore the issue: the main official survey on attitudes towards immigrants did not contain questions on public order, and readily available official data on police arrests by nationality – for reasons other than immigration control – was used as evidence of police racism rather than of immigrant threat.
Mosques in the city

Ethnic and migration categories have dominated journalistic and academic commentary even at points when the incorporation of Islam within the Spanish system of Church-State cooperation – a protracted and only partially implemented process – has made it to the public agenda, particularly when conflicts have arisen against the building of mosques or Islamic plots in cemeteries. Collective action by Muslim communities has claimed their right to traditional burial against sanitary requirements that corpses be buried in coffins, as in temporary closure of the cemetery in Griñón (Madrid 2014). But most salient in the media and the academic literature have been local mobilizations of natives around projects to build Mosques or refurbish places of worship, especially in Barcelona, framed first as issues of urban planning and conviviality in the press, and as the result of fears of loss of social status and cultural homogeneity in academic analysis, more inclined to picture Islamic practitioners as victims, rather than as issues of religious liberty and tolerance that could have mobilized the use of the category Muslim.

Between 1990 and 2008, Spaniards collectively acted against construction of spaces for Islamic worship in 60 towns, 40 of which in Catalonia (Guía, 2014: 102; Moreras, 2010). The town of Vic witnessed early demonstrations (1990) and the emergence of the first explicitly anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim party in Spain (Plataforma x Catalunya, in 2001). In the greater Barcelona area, neighbors have been reported to organize collective action against one in five mosques. They have created issue specific platforms, demonstrated, signed petitions, hung banners from balconies – reading slogans like “No drugs, no mosque” –, and disrupted prayers with insults and noisemakers, often in small numbers and for a short time, but on occasion in thousands and for years (Astor, 2009; Lundsteen, 2022). They claimed that public space should be put to common and non-disruptive interests, not to those of a particular community whose activities crowded the streets, disturbed order and lowered property values (Guía, 2014: 104). Often, works were delayed for years, and locales were moved out to industrial parks in the outskirts.

Academic observers of conflicts around Mosques have found their roots in processes not related to religious intolerance but to fears of loss of social status and cultural unity, and competition for urban space. Jordi Moreras (2008) acknowledges political arguments about the lack of a legal framework for establishing minority places of worship, but criticizes those about falling housing prices and religious and ethnic mistrust as superficial. He interprets conflicts in Catalonia as the result of both religious communities and their neighbors’ struggle for social recognition in the city, and to citizens’ disenchantment with local and regional political elites who fail to deliver the social services and infrastructures they demanded.

In line with the social recognition hypothesis, Avi Astor’s (2016) interpretation embeds anti-mosque activism in the longstanding effort of internal labor migrants – coming from Andalucía and Extremadura in the 1960s – to build and dignify their neighborhoods. They perceive Muslim presence as a threat to their precarious, or still longed for, adequacy in Catalan society. A new Mosque symbolized for them a loss of place, both in

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3 At a time when research on the transformation of religious identification, belief and practice by migration was starting to develop (see for instance Lacomba, 2001).
the literal and the social identitarian sense; in areas in process of degradation, it was perceived as a milestone in their material decay, loss of public order, and dwindling sense of community.

In contrast, Aitana Guía (2014: 111-116) centers her explanation on Catalan nationalism. In her view Muslim immigrants are perceived mostly as a cultural and identitarian threat, since they seem to favor the more cosmopolitan and socially mobile Spanish language to Catalan. Astor’s analysis of survey data, though, shows that Catalans de souche are not the most prone to support mobilizations against mosques: first- and second-generation Spanish migrants are more likely to deem protests as acceptable (2016: 108).

A materialist interpretation is offered by Martin Lundsteen (2022). He describes how protests in Premià de Mar escalated from the block to the neighborhood, local, regional and national public debates thanks to media attention and political entrepreneurship. Although the issue was framed as a cultural conflict among “immigrants” and “neighbors”, with religious difference playing just one part in an othering process together with nationality, class and race, in his analysis its deepest roots laid in the capitalistic production of space – the Mosque was to stand originally where new constructions were planned to attract middle class commuters from nearby Barcelona.

Counter to this academic interest on early conflicts around Muslim places of worship, national press coverage was scarce, which evidences their consideration as local affairs. *El País* published seven pieces on Muslim places of worship before the Atocha bombings in March 2004 (only three before September 2001) in which it framed incidents mostly in terms of natives’ reactions to urban congestion and competition for public resources, only occasionally as evidence of racism and xenophobia. Journalists categorized the populations involved as “immigrants” or in terms of their ethnic origin as “Africans”, “Moghrabi’s”, “Moroccans”, “Syrians”, as against protesting “neighbors”, leaving tolerance to religious difference aside just like academics. They oscillated from a neutral stance which implicitly justified anti-Mosque mobilization, to sympathy for religious communities, who most often held property titles of the plots and permissions to build and practice. The voice given to Muslim communities was minor compared to that of neighborhood organizations. *El Mundo* joined in covering the subject only after March 2004, at a point in which interest shifted to security issues.

**Religious categories in the 21st century**

**Bombs in Atocha bring home international terrorism**

At 7:30, 7:38 and 7:39 a.m. on March 11th, ten bombs exploded on four trains near Atocha station in Madrid. A country expecting the already apparent end of Basque nationalist terrorism⁴ could not believe that “homegrown terrorists” had killed 193

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⁴ *Euskadi To Askatasuna* (ETA) killed 819 people between 1968 and 2010, mainly law enforcement officers and members of the Armed Forces, as well as politicians.
civilians and left more than 2,000 injured in a single attack. At 9:00 pm on April 3rd, the seven perpetrators of the attack blew themselves up in an apartment in southwest Madrid. Another terrorist escaped. This event was critical in turning media and academic attention to the qualities and implications of Islam as a religion that may be radicalized, and placing the category “Muslim” center stage. Spanish politicians, journalists and analysts joined the international public debate on Islamist terror after the 11M events, but the country’s long experience with terrorism toned down their discourses, while the specific electoral circumstances diverted their attention to the government’s strategy of distraction from the effects of their very unpopular participation in the war in Iraq.

Immediately after the explosions, leaders of the incumbent right Popular Party (PP) blamed ETA, while the opposition accused the government of covering up an Islamist attack in retaliation for Spain’s involvement in the war in Iraq, which the government had joined without parliamentary approval. Two days before the general election of March 14th, nationwide demonstrations under the slogan “¿Quién ha sido?” (Who did this?) did not target the terrorists but the government’s denial of evidence that Al Qaeda’s, not ETA’s, responsibility. With a higher-than-normal turnout, the PP, portrayed as winner by the polls, lost the election5.

Paramount among scholarly analysis was the fact that 11M was the first time an Islamist terrorist attack in Europe had been masterminded from within the national immigrant Muslim community. 9/11 had been perpetrated by foreigners, whereas in Madrid the leader of the group, Serhane Ben Abdelmajid Fakhet, was a Tunisian doctoral student in Spain and founder of a local Muslim Student Association. The cell used to meet in Lavapiés, one of the most central and multicultural areas of Madrid, in the electronics shop owned by Jamal Zougam, who immigrated from Morocco aged 13. One common denominator among “the people of Lavapiés” was their feelings of not belonging to the city and hostility against Spain, despite their social and economic integration. They self-identified with a global jihadist movement whose leaders were, at the time, part of Al Qaeda (Jordan and Horsburgh, 2005; Jordan et al., 2008; Reinares, 2021, 2014; García-Abadillo, 2004; Reinares and Elorza, 2004; Rodríguez, 2004).

The shock of home-grown terrorism suspended for some time the Spanish pro-immigrant, pro-Muslim academic consensus, and broke their silence in the mass media. Invited by El País (18/03/2004) seven days after the attack, French sociologist Gilles Kepel warned that “if the European Muslim communities are unable to keep their citizens under control and cut out this extremism then there are reasons to fear violent acts linked to Al Qaeda on European soil”. He thus assigned citizens of Muslim faith responsibility in preventing new grassroots jihadist networks. An idea seconded by Spanish scholar Antonio Elorza, who summoned Muslims in Spain to eradicate the notion of jihad and bring their religion forward into the 21st century. He accused mainstream academics of naïveté for failing to see the connection between Islam and violence, and claiming that jihad is a Western misconception. For the first time after March 11th, connections between Islam, war and violence were made in the Spanish press by these two sociologists. They also linked present violence to the past Arab

5 The long trail of polarization over 11M still tainted the coverage of the 20th anniversary of the bombings in March 2024 in El País and El Mundo, with mutual accusations of lying, at the time or currently, among the main political parti.
invasion, pointing out that Spain could become a target for jihadists because Al-Andalus is one of the lands that “should return to Islam”.

Several other journalists and opinion makers in El Mundo took up Huntington’s (1996) narrative about the new era of “a clash of civilizations”, making religion and culture the main sources of conflict in years to come. The idea of “inevitable revenge”, the perspective of the coming of “a never-ending war”, or “a permanent state of emergency” was present in a few very pessimistic articles. On a more divulgative and provocative key, César Vidal (2004) called for a selective border policy that would filter out Muslim incomers, to save Spain from her only historical enemy; his essentialist depiction of Islam as a religion of war from its origins up to the present times won considerable attention from readers, and apparent influence on right wing political personalities, but no credit from experts (Bravo López, 2009).

But our press analysis shows that statements by Spanish politicians differed radically from those made, for example, by François Hollande after the attack in Paris on November 13th, 2015, declaring that “France was at war” and calling for new exceptional measures. In 2004, Spain lacked a preventive strategy against Islamist terrorism, and prior experience of terrorist violence (ETA) allowed both left and right-wing politicians to repeat a phrase they had used over the last 40 years: “the only response to the enemies of democracy is more democracy” (El País, 17/03/2014). The fact that the perpetrators were of a different nationality and religion did not change the narrative, and Spanish society’s resilience against terrorism restrained direct confrontation and Islamophobic political messages. Most of the headlines immediately after the attacks referred to “universal citizenship”, described Madrid as a welcoming city, invited the Muslim community to public acts in memory of the victims, and promised Spanish citizenship to all foreign victims.

Surveys conducted just after the 11-M train bombings confirmed that the public mood was generally peaceful and calm (Zapata and Diez-Nicolas, 2012). However, two years later, another survey showed “stronger prejudices against Muslims and a stronger attachment to authoritarianism and conservative values” (Echebarria-Echabe and Fernández-Guede, 2006) and qualitative studies pointed out how the Atocha bombings had re-awakened historical fears toward Moors (Moreras, 2005). Such mistrust is expressed by some of the reporters who visited Lavapiés days after the attack – describing the neighborhood as a “nest of jihadists”, giving voice to neighbors (while Muslims remained voiceless) who were convinced that there were “dormant cells of some terrorist group ready to become operative at a moment’s notice” (El Mundo, 16/03/2004).

Attacks in Atocha motivated a first wave of Muslim youth collective organization and mobilization for a public perception of Islam as a religion of peace. Ethnographic studies (Téllez, 2008, 2011; Lems, 2016; Madonia, 2018) point to this critical event as the turning point when Muslim youth (converts, born in Spain or abroad) began to search for public spaces of participation outside of mosques. Not feeling represented by Islamic umbrella organizations that they perceive as coopted by the state, the new generations are developing new grammars of action, through interpersonal, reflexive, non-cohesive and informal patterns of political engagement, differentiated by gender. Young men, unconsciously practicing political Islam, claim for Muslim representative leaders to stop
institutional abuse and discrimination and demand religious rights. Young women’s new capillarity approach aims to move away from the “ghetto mindset” and participate in mainstream civil society to claim their rights in complex (and even hostile) contexts as citizens, not as Muslims. Young women are engaging in a broader and more inclusive activism, drawing inspiration from their religious affiliation to reinforce their external solidarity in mainstream political structures. For them, religion is a vector of participation, while for their male peers it is a form of participation (Eseverri-Mayer and Khir-Allah, 2022).

As we will see in section 3.3., stigmatization related to international terrorism would dominate analyses by security experts, and would intensify with the new preventive model approved in 2015. This in turn would give a new anti-islamophobia turn to youth activism. Meanwhile, it tainted public debate about Muslim religious practice and its public symbols.

**Religious symbols as a threat to security and cultural cohesion**

The emergence of international terrorism gave a new turn to public debate in Spain about Muslim religious markers. Mosques were now framed in terms of security in the media, as sites for the radicalization of believers via an intensification of religious practice and fundamentalist indoctrination by particularly radical imams. Veils were signified as part of a backward movement towards starker gender differences and religious influence on public life, and face veils were discussed as part of the fundamentalist threat. Academics criticized such media portrays, investing in a more balanced and socially embedded account of mosque activities and focusing attention on Muslim women’s social agency.

After the critical event in Atocha, unfounded suspicions about mosque activity mixed with actual evidence that one of the perpetrators had briefly served as imam in a prayer room in Madrid – evidence that later became reinforced when the mastermind of the attack in Barcelona on August 17th, 2017, recruited his cell at the mosque at which he led prayers. Soon after the bombings, the Ministry of the Interior announced a new law to control small mosques, banners in local protests against new temples included the word “terrorists” – like in the case of Sevilla in November 2004 –, and the priming of the issue in the press raised, combining a general discourse which conflated terrorism and Islam with more positive pieces giving voice to imams.

In *El País* and *El Mundo* mosques were constructed as hubs for violent Islamist threats in general pieces which described dark lives of Muslim men who lived “from home to the mosque and back”, never learning the local language nor establishing contact with mainstream society, hiding the presence of Al Qaeda from security forces. *El País* pondered which mosques were more “open” and which “more traditional or radical”, and quantified the number of radical mosques up to 90 – according to unquoted experts. The fact that imams were self-proclaimed, or community chosen and not selected by a central organization that could be held responsible for their acts was presented as worrying. Their foreignness and lack of Spanish language skills were often underlined.
Small mosques were suspect because of the lack of control over imams’ preaching, large ones because of their foreign funding.

A few press articles counterbalanced this prevalent framing of mosques as threatening and characterized nativist protests as xenophobic or racist. They sided with Muslim communities that brandished their legal rights before neighbors’ opposition to their building plans and highlighted the social assistance function of mosques. They gave voice to a few imams to explain the meaning of *jihad* as personal effort, not violence against others, and the peaceful message of the Prophet. Some imams complained that they felt surveilled, while others demanded more police control over proliferating prayer rooms and attributed terrorism to poverty and ignorance, fertile soil for extremist discourses. A few articles called to distinguish Islam from Islamism, and Muslims from terrorists.

Attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, perpetrated by youngsters raised in Spain, motivated new research on integration, belonging and radicalization in places of worship. Jordi Moreras (2018) evaluated the risk of radicalization within Salafi mosques and concluded that, although these communities were promoting their conservative vision of Islam, their religious activities could not be related to new processes of radicalization. He criticized Kepel’s (Moreras, 2017a) linking of religious dogmatism with potential extremism in France. Together with other researchers (Eseverri-Mayer, 2021), he warned of the negative consequences that a combination of personal and political isolation generates: young people from deprived neighborhoods may identify with this new conservative Islam to counter their feelings of “not belonging to the world”. As against explanations based on religion and the influence of the mosque, dominant in the press, these academics focused on how the vulnerable social position of youngsters with Muslim background made it difficult for them to identify with fellow citizens, with neighbors from other cultural traditions and with political leaders.

By the end of the decade public debate on Islamic religious symbols turned to hijabi women, who had attracted little attention in the 1990s and early 2000s, when scholars and the media approached Muslim women when concerned with migration related issues like worker exploitation in the agricultural sector, migrant networks, and family reunification (Aubarell, 2000). Conflicts around girls wearing a hijab in schools had made the national news since 2002, but most salient was one that of Najwa Al-Malha in Madrid in 2010, fueled by the heated debate on the banning of the niqab in French public spaces (Khir-Allah, 2021). The recurrent issue of the veil was never to become as controversial as in France, but also related to deeply felt values. The ideals of gender equality and a secular State school system – devoid of the long-standing dominance of the Catholic Church over women’s mores and education, which had been reinforced during Francoism, and outlived it – were brandished by participants in the public debate as recent conquests to be defended against the traditionalizing practices of religious newcomers.

Najwa Al-Malha, a veiled 16-year-old student, was suspended from classes for 10 days in February 2010 for breaking internal regulations forbidding head coverings, briefly reaccepted when media pressure began, expelled again, enrolled in a second high school which dictated head covering bans just in time to exclude her, and enrolled in a third high school. The president of the local mosque association, her father promoted legal
action with the support of the two Muslim religious umbrella organizations, obtaining a Constitutional Court decision for the readmission of Najwa in recognition for her right to education. This case was the first to deserve priming in the national press, and public engagement from high level representatives of political parties, the Catholic Church, the feminist movement, and national Muslim organizations. It started media attention to a series of similar cases since decision-making was left to each educational center, allowing some schools to include hijabi girls and others to exclude them.

Press coverage gave voice to the school, family, and friends, and to Najwa herself, but most populated was the camp of feminist interpretation of the hijab as a sign of gender oppression and a too timid separation of Church and State. The teenager’s motivations for covering her hair were central to the debate: whether it was voluntary or imposed by male members of the family or the community, and whether it expressed submission or rebellion. In arguments against control of feminine dress in public spaces, miniskirts and bikinis were mobilized as symbol of efforts by Spanish women to break with Francoist mores in the 1960s. Catholic nuns’ headdress, in turn, was mentioned in arguments against the dictatorship’s legacy of religious influence on the educational system. In trying to come to terms with the event of veiled girls in schools, such metaphors of a past to be superseded outnumbered calls for the recognition of the present and future multicultural reality of Spanish society.

Media portrayals of veiled Muslim women deserved unanimous criticism from academics, who condemned it as deeply and negatively othering (Moreras, 2002). Only non-practicing westernized Muslim women deserved attention for their professional and personal agency, while veiled women were presented as passive and submissive, lacking personal autonomy, their attire constructed as the symbol of a monolithic, anti-Western and threatening religion (Navarro, 2012: 142-147; El-Madkouri, 2004: 173, 185-186). Hijabi schoolgirls were framed either as victims of their parents’ traditionalism, or as undisciplined teenagers, in articles in which ex-Muslim women spoke on behalf of hijab wearers – who remained invisible – and Islamic tradition was presented as patriarchal and oppressive, while the ban on religious dress was not (Khir-Allah, 2021: 215).

Academic observers explained such negative framing of veiled women in the mass media as a result of the prevalent type of feminism’s tendency to gendered islamophobia. European feminism framed hijabis as ignorant women in need for liberation, and imported from the countries of origin the feminist critique against illiberal political regimes which – to a lesser or greater extent – imposed dress codes on women, adding the conclusion that women who comply after migrating do not deserve equal citizenship and threaten cultural homogeneity (Mijares and Ramírez, 2021: 122-128). With this (post)colonial outlook, hegemonic feminists were deemed unprepared for the intersectional challenge posed by immigration (Adlbi, 2018: 55).

Demoscopic analysis shows that the debate on the media was reflected in public attitudes towards cultural diversity. Opposition to the use of hijab in public schools had increased even among the more educated members of society in the upper and upper middle classes, traditionally more tolerant of diversity, an effect of diffusion from the inflamed French debate on the niqab (Cea D’Ancona and Valles, 2011: 191-224; Cea D’Ancona et al., 2014).
Public debate about female Muslim dressing was fueled also by events involving face veils. The niqab and the burka made the national media when, also in 2010, the Catalan city of Lleida banned them from all municipal spaces and public transport – a ban also proposed in the Senate. Promoters of the ban argued in terms of liberal rights and secularization, but also intensified the security taint to public discourse on Muslim attire. They blamed face veils in the street on the fundamentalist Islam of the Salafist Mosque in the city, which was bringing home practices typical of distant archaic countries and inspiring terrorists (Burchardt et al., 2015).

Profiling in the preventive model

The reinterpretation of Islamic religious symbols in 2010 signaled the way terrorist violence had transformed the historical mistrust towards “Moors” into a more suspicious attitude towards “Muslims”, incarnated in police schemes of terrorist prevention which profiled risk in terms of religious markers. Muslim communities and certain Muslim populated neighborhoods progressively became portrayed as a threat to the nation, to be thwarted through preventive measures (Moreras, 2017b: 228; Mijares and Lems, 2018; Lems et al., 2018). However, it was not until 2015, just after the attacks on Charlie Hebdo in Paris, that the Spanish Parliament approved the first Anti-Jihadist Pact and launched the Strategic Plan Against Violent Radicalization (PEN-LCR), in a shift towards proactive management of Muslims after the politics of fear had been activated. Academics were divided among security experts developing indicators of risk of radicalization and their critics, who doubted the effectiveness of such markers and underlined the risk of resentment they implied. The first had some more impact on the press, even if limited, a press which tended to amplify police reports, often without independent fact checking.

Two new crimes were the backbone of the new preventive model. One was “integration and collaboration with terrorist cells” (enacted in 2010) and the other, “self-indoctrination” (in force in 2015). The first allows the police to imprison a subject if there is proof of belonging to a terrorist organization, without participation in a terrorist action. The second is based on several indicators of self-indoctrination, such as consulting extremist websites, retweeting or giving “likes” to violent content or having a suspicious profile on social media. No hard evidence is needed – only the internet browser history.

Academics were mainly critical of the plan, despite appreciating its local focus and preventive approach (Moreras, 2018). They claimed that the strategy was fragile and lacked theoretical coherence due to the limited sociological and psychological comprehension of radicalization processes behind it (Bargados and Ramírez, 2015). It led to mistakes in detecting radical attitudes by following questionable indicators of extremism, based on the principle of “the more visible the religious practice was, the greater the suspicion of radicalization” (Douhaibi and Amazian, 2019). It hindered the construction of a trustful relationship between law enforcement, institutions, and civil Muslim society because it generated fears of stigmatization among Muslim community...
members (Eseverri-Mayer, 2022; López Bargados, 2011; López Bargados and Blanco 2014; Moreras, 2017b; Mingella, 2017; Carrasco and Pàmies, 2017).

Security experts used indicators of “jihadism risk”, such as social segregation, presence of Salafi jihadist groups and a lack of police surveillance to evaluate the threat posed by specific urban areas in Spain (Jordán and Trujillo, 2006; de la Corte, 2015, 2007; de la Corte and Blanco, 2014; Llamas, 2011). In their account, some of the poorest neighborhoods of Melilla and Ceuta, where police detained the largest number of jihadist suspects during the period 2012-2016 had become a hive of terrorist activity “partially or totally controlled by radicals” (Jordán and Trujillo, 2006). This quantitative and evaluative kind of research contrasts with the results of the ethnography carried out by Michel Kenney (2011) in one of these areas. He called into question this system of indicators and stated that “the meager results of the (police) raids, as well as delays in the ensuing criminal investigation, raised troubling questions about the alleged terrorist plot and outsiders’ perceptions of the Muslim community [...] The community I experienced did not match the neighborhood I had read about”.

Academics have pointed to the disparity between the number of arrests and the final number of successful prosecutions as symptom of the difficulties that arise from arresting suspects before the crime is committed is. The fact is that only 203 of the 748 detained between 2004 and 2014 were finally found guilty, less than 30% (García-Jaén and Escudero, 2022).

On several occasions, the press contributed to the validation of false accusations published in police reports. Such was the case of an alleged terrorist cell, Nusra and Daesh, supposedly selling arms to terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq, and disguising these monetary transactions as humanitarian aid (El País, 07/02/2016). The Audiencia Nacional (Spanish High Court) found the accused not guilty: “There is no evidence that there had been goods other than clothes, shoes, and toys. No record either that the recipients of these goods were terrorist organizations operating in Syria and Iraq, such as the Islamic State or Jaghat Al Nusra” (Audiencia Nacional, Sala de lo penal, Sentencia 11/2021, May 7th).

A piece in El País (07/02/2016) on this case, based on police sources alone, deserved over 200 comments online about the need to expel Muslims from Spain, the violence associated with Islam and the urge to reinforce the preventive model. It was reproduced by at least another five widely read media, fueling perceptions of a potential threat. No correction in print refuted the police version or spread news of the Court’s final decision, which proved the innocence of the detainees and implied their immediate acquittal. As in other cases, the narrative of threat by Muslims was validated by the press without fact-checking, on the basis of police reporting and political statements. The perspective

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6 La Vanguardia, RTVE, El Diario, La Razón and El Correo.
7 From 2004 to 2012, 500 individuals were imprisoned but only 50 were condemned (Reinares and García Calvo, 2013), mostly for “belonging to a terrorist organization”. Others spent months or years in prison before being released (and normally deported). Salient were Operation Plomo (which imprisoned two Chechens and one Turk who were found innocent after 9 months), the operation of the Raval 11, accused of planning an attack on the Barcelona metro (imprisoned for 6 years until the Court found insufficient evidence) and Operation Tigris (in which ten of the twelve accused of recruiting jihadists for Iraq were acquitted).
that an individual is not arrested for having committed a crime, but rather for the possibility of committing one in the future, attends to collective security in a context of international terrorism, but casts doubt over the observance of *habeas corpus*. Mistakes made may have extremely negative consequences, through the feelings of rage and exclusion by Muslim youth (men, in most cases) unjustly imprisoned for years.

Resentment for being unfairly suspected and surveyed has nurtured a new kind of democratic participation by Muslim youth, inspired by a “daily and Spanish Islam” (Madonia, 2018), connected to international Muslim activism, and “creating new spaces of solidarity and cooperation” (Lems, 2020). They denounce the negative consequences of Counter Violence Extremism Strategies on their daily lives, in online publications such as *Afrofeminas*, platforms like *Plataforma contra la Islamofobia* and online campaigns against counter extremism training in universities (Eseverri-Mayer, 2022).

**Ceuta in 2021: the far right instrumentalizes cultural and religious differences**

By the turn of the decade, in 2021, two events of very different nature and scope evidenced the coexistence of the two main categories and several tropes in Spanish public debate on the presence of populations from Muslim majority countries. The first followed the unprecedented opening of the border around the exclave city of Ceuta, with a massive entry of Moroccan and sub-Saharan countries’ citizens, which was framed by politicians and journalists as an issue of immigration and sovereignty, leaving to the margins Islam and Islamist terror. The second was the also unprecedented participation of a veiled politician in a national electoral act, which led to a furious discussion in social media about religion, ethnicity and gender relations, with the terrorist threat as backdrop. By this time, the structure of public debate in Spain had been transformed by the emergence of a far-right party with an explicit antiimmigrant and anti-Muslim discourse, the loudest actor in both events. Although the two debates had partially different participants and developed on different media, their juxtaposition in this section aims to illustrate how categories and controversies around Muslim presence in Spain have accumulated and intertwined along the last four decades.

**Massive migration and sovereignty over Ceuta**

On May 17th, 2021, Moroccan police officers opened the gates in the border fence surrounding Ceuta, letting in up to 16,000 irregular migrants in the following day and a half. World media broadcasted pictures of tanks on the beach, teenagers swimming around the tips of the fence with the help of plastic bottles, or a female NGO worker hugging an exhausted sub-Saharan man. Three people lost their lives. Most adults voluntarily walked back across the fence or were pushed back by the police, but about 1,500 minors stayed and were precariously accommodated in public facilities or wandered the streets. Moroccan authorities blamed the crisis on the hosting at a
Spanish hospital for Covid treatment of Brahim Ghali, leader of the Saharan movement for independence Polisario Front, explicitly pressuring Spain to change its stance on the future of this territory. Explicitly and successfully: on March 20th, 2022, the Spanish government relinquished its long-standing position for a referendum for self-determination in its ex-colony, in favor of Morocco’s project to make if an autonomous region within its fully centralized state. This change of stance later merited such forceful action by the Moroccan police to protect the fence around the other Spanish exclave in North Africa, Melilla, in the following June, that NGOs counted 27 casualties and over 70 missing persons (BBC, 02/11/2022; El Diario, 05/11/2022).

Political elites chose not to mobilize issues of religious difference or terrorist threat before public opinion when framing the mass inflow into Ceuta, a city divided by half among locally called “Christians” and “Muslims” and often the site of police preventive action against terrorism. They rather framed the situation as questioning the territorial integrity of Spain and the EU, and competed to champion Spanish sovereignty over the exclave. Most salient in this contest was the extreme right party Vox, with minoritarian representation in the Madrid Parliament but winner of national general elections in the city. Its national leader travelled to Ceuta, to speak at a rally which was prohibited by the central government and outnumbered by a counter demonstration informally convened by Muslim civil society organizations. Later he accused Muslim deputies in the local assembly of Ceuta of constituting the fifth column of Morocco, an argument repeated by local VOX representatives in a plenary session at the end of May, generating such a level of conflict that it was suspended under the focus of national mass media. But these transitory political upheavals did not hinder a pervasive consensus across the political spectrum for a quick return of all adult migrants across the border – and as many minors as an ambiguous implementation of international regulations permitted – in the name of national sovereignty.

The media gave events in Ceuta an extremely high priming and framed them as an issue of national security. El País covered governmental action in detail and gave voice to social actors and migrants, while El Mundo accused the government of putting the country at risk by hosting Ghali and drew up a binary Spain versus Morocco picture. A few articles in the first paper attended to the migratory and humanitarian crisis, while framing as a security crisis was the only approach in the second. Both used metaphors of flooding and avalanches, but language in El País (challenge, arm-wrestle, blackmail) was milder than in El Mundo (invasion, ammunition, weapon). None questioned the government’s returning potential refugees without further investigation.

Academics promptly identified the critical events in Ceuta in May 2021 as a case of Coercive Engineered Migration in which migrants were instrumentalized by Morocco in its strategy over the Western Sahara (Greenhill, 2021; Ferrero-Turrión, 2021; Garcés, 2022; Barreñada, 2022: 11-18; Amirah-Fernández, 2021; Del Valle, 2022). Their religious affiliation or their possible links to international terrorist networks were not an issue, in line with previous academic work on the exclaves cities which focused on the paradoxical relationship of the wire fences to the daily flow of labor migrants (Planet, 2002; Ribas-Mateos, 2005), their “gated community” and “limbo space” or “territory of exception” character as regards the observance of international migration regulations (Ferrer-Gallardo, 2008a, 2008b; Ferrer-Gallardo and Albet-Mas, 2016; Castan Pinos, 2009a, 2009b; Ferrer-Gallardo and Gabrielli, 2018), not always complying with international
rules on minors and asylum seekers at the border, in screening processes and retention centers (López-Sala, 2020; López-Sala and Moreno-Amador, 2020). Academics very seldom mention the fact that prospective migrants at the border around Ceuta are mainly of Muslim tradition and when they do, as in Ferrer-Gallardo (2008b) and Castan Pinos (2009a, 2009b), they stand on the shoulders of foreign authors who have been more sensitive or outspoken about the anti-Muslim taint to the border preoccupations of Spain (Driessen, 1992; Huntington, 1996) and the EU (O’Dowd and Wilson, 1996; Walters, 2002; Houtum and Pijpers, 2007).

This consonance among journalists and academics in not placing religious categories at the center of public debate when accounting for events in Ceuta, and focusing on issues of national sovereignty and the instrumentalization of migrants in international relations, allowed little space for the far right’s attempt to politicize the religious cleavage in the city at national level. Only in social media did their anti-Muslim arguments have an impact, as was the case with Fátima Hamed’s veil.

A veil in politics

Public debate on the hijab, this time mixing categories of Muslimness (religion), Moorishness (ethnicity and race), and Moroccanness (nationality), erupted again in Spain in November 2021, with the participation of the veiled member of the local assembly of Ceuta Fátima Hamed – a lawyer and the leader of the local political party Movimiento por la Dignidad y la Ciudadanía Política (Movement for Dignity and Political Citizenship) – in a national event called Otras Políticas (Other Politicians). This feminist political rally brought together representatives of left-wing political parties to promote Yolanda Díaz, Vice-president of the Government and Labor Minister, for the upcoming presidential election in 2023.

Fátima’s hijab became a national debate issue through a very small number of press articles but dense exchange on social media. An analysis of Twitter and Instagram with Gephi software over the three weeks following the rally showed how right-wing political parties (VOX and PP) used the case of Hamed not only against Muslim women’s political engagement but also against the Left.8

VOX groups were very active on Twitter and launched a campaign against Hamed, led by women’s groups and groups linked to the Guardia Civil (“Chicas VOX@” and “Progrestona@”, “primero VOX”). Calling Hamed La Mora (The Moor), they spread a video (with 2,353 retweets) of her, in a pro-Palestine protest, close to a man making anti-Semitic statements such as “Jews will be scared till the Final Judgment!”. Zionist organizations on Twitter also shared a photograph of Hamed with Tariq Ramadan as her partner (with 3,090 retweets mainly by VOX followers). They described her as an Islamist, associated her with photographs of ugly witches, and claimed that as candidate at national level she would exorcise and pervert Spanish Catholic values and liberal and

8 In contrast to the European far right, VOX has been late in including into its ideological framework the topic of “Muslims” and “immigrants” (Cassals, 2004), having focused their accusations on Catalan and Basque nationalists and left-wing political parties, as threat to national unity.
democratic principles. All in line with their polarizing strategy of attacking Hamed in the local assembly as “promarroquí” (pro-Morocco) or “jihadist”, a strategy now endorsed in Madrid when the President of the Community, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, accused the Left of fundamentalism: “Now, it seems that the modernity they propose is for us to live trapped by the burka or by communist freedom”.

Fatima’s hijab also stirred controversy among Muslim and non-Muslim feminists. Debate on Instagram was launched by the award-winning writer from Barcelona Najat El Hachmi (a secular and laic feminist of Moroccan origin) who accused feminist politicians: “you brought the symbol of our oppression into your ranks...”. Her voice was seconded by other influencers on Instagram such as Saharawifeminist@ (with 21K followers on Instagram) and @Mim_Rif (with 15,4K followers on Twitter), members of the movement No nos taparán (They shall not cover us), who claimed that fundamentalists were introducing the veil in Spain by way of modern influencers on social media, politicians like Hamed and anti-Islamophobia movements. For them, Islamophobia was a way of normalizing reactionary religious practices (especially those based on gender) and silencing the most progressive Muslim voices. They were seconded by feminist writers, intellectuals and activists who fought against the norms and morals imposed by the Catholic Church for centuries and reinstated during Franco’s Regime.

Of the four opinion articles written by women in the press, only one (in left-wing El Diario), signed by academics and activists, uphold Fatima’s political participation by highlighting her professional career and political ideas, as well as her continuous challenging of the far right. The other three, published in El País, were ambiguous. On the one hand they criticized Hamed’s harassment on Twitter, but on the other they underlined the incompatibility between feminism and the hijab. They gave voice to feminists who no longer practice the Muslim faith but did not refer to counter arguments by practicing Muslim feminists on Instagram.

On Twitter, only individuals disproving the veracity of information (such as that linking Fatima to anti-Semitic groups or to Tarik Ramadan as sentimental partner) intervened on Fatima’s side. Groups from the art and cultural worlds, activists, members of the Muslim community, Muslim women intellectuals (Adlbi, 2018; Mijares and Ramirez, 2021) and some female leftist leaders accused both the Right and the mainstream feminists of placing religion at the center of debate, denying Muslim women their right to be considered normal citizens. Hijabi Muslim women on Twitter do not want to be considered as Muslim participants in the debate, but simply as ordinary citizens and politicians, as research in the field has shown (Eseverri and Khir-Allah, 2022).

Around this social media event, Ceuta was again in the national spotlight. This time, “otherness” was created through both ethnoracial (the Moor, the Moroccan) and religious categories (Islam, Islamism and Muslimness). On the one side, Hamed was pictured as an Islamic fundamentalist threat and, on the other, as a foreign intruder who came from a frontier city situated in North Africa. The debate, led by women from different ideological backgrounds, turned into a discussion about feminism and about Muslim male domination, covering up the exclusion of Hamed from the media and political arena.
Conclusion

Our chronology of journalistic coverage and academic commentary on events in which individuals or groups originating from countries of Muslim tradition play a main role traces the turn from national, ethnic and racial (Moroccans, Moghrabi’s, Moors) to religious terms (Muslims) to categorize them – a shift that we have metaphorically presented as the latest knot in the long braid of social classifications assigned to these populations in Spanish history. It describes the accumulation of controversies in public debate, with original preoccupations about irregular immigration topped by issues of urban transformation, gender relations, secularization and terrorist prevention. It maps a public sphere where academics lack the impact it has in France, Britain or Norway, and take more sympathetic stances to Muslims and Muslimness than most journalists, often reacting to the latter’s reporting as othering, diminishing or serving the politics of threat.

In the 1990s, Spanish commentators popularized new denominations to describe the proliferating risky crossings of the Mediterranean, justify restrictive legislation on foreigners, and interpret violent nativist reactions, which became linked to categories of ethnic origin and race. They defined early conflicts over religious symbols, like mosques, as issues of migrant incorporation to urban spaces, with notions of otherness based on race and class rather than religion. As in other Western countries, the turning point from labels related to ethnicity and legal status to religious categories came to the fore with the emergence of international terrorism in the 2000s, and became associated with an atmosphere of threat. Mosques were now discussed in terms of security, and intense religious practice or public expression of religious belief became markers of radicalization within the anti-jihadist preventive model of the 2010s. Suspicion of Muslims gave rise to a low-key and fragmentary Spanish version of the affair du foulard, with hijabs framed as part of a regression towards gender oppression and religious influence on public life, and face veils as symbols of fundamentalist threat. By 2021, both ethno-racial and religious categories coexisted in public debate; while Islam remained at the margins of the discussion on the massive but short-lived entry into faith divided Ceuta, it was at the heart of the online debate on Fatima Hamed’s political participation.

If the timing of the turn towards the distrustful use of the religious category Muslim in the Spanish public sphere coincided with that in other European countries, with the shared external shock of 9/11 and its European sequels, the intensity, saliency, intellectual articulation and emotional tone of the debate was lower than in France, Norway or the United Kingdom. Concerns salient in other countries about the opportunities of ghettoized second generations, the line between blasphemy and freedom of expression, the reception of conflict in the Middle East among local Muslims, or the risk of nativist terror acts are absent from the Spanish media. Politization of the issue is modest in comparative terms, despite living and historical memories of violent conflict with neighbors across the Strait of Gibraltar. Politicians at the national level have very seldom been involved in debates about Islam, with the far-right party making only an occasional use of anti-Muslim arguments in its campaigns, in the context of a public comparatively untroubled by the issue of immigration as against European averages. But Spain shares in the common trend to amalgamate extremely diverse groups within the religious category Muslim, and to infuse it with mistrust in arguments about disparate
kinds and spheres of threat. The experience of other European countries – and the local case of Ceuta – shows that such category is easily instrumentalized in strategies of political polarization over immigrants and their descendants.

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