

Anti-Muslim Attitudes in Andalusia and Conspiracy Theories Concerning the ‘Invasion’ of Islam: The Role of Intervention in Fighting Stereotypes and Rumours

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Abstract: The recent refugee crisis and terrorist attacks in various European cities may have contributed to increasing feelings of Islamophobia and the stereotypes commonly associated with Muslims as invaders and terrorists. Through this paper, we attempt to know Andalusian attitudes towards Muslims and Islam and to identify the sociological profile underlying those attitudes. Our work is based on the administration of a survey to a representative sample of Andalusians, resulting in the completion of 1,103 questionnaires. The results show some polarization of Andalusian society with regard to attitudes towards Muslims and Islam, with a clear emphasis on greater anti-Muslim attitudes in older, less educated, and right-oriented populations.

Keywords: Islam. Muslims. Attitudes towards Immigration. Conspiracy Theories. Andalusia.

Anti-Muslim Attitudes and Conspiracy Theories

The proliferation and consolidation of far-right wing parties in various European countries have infused recent electoral campaigns with discourses of racial, ethnic and religious intolerance. This has been happening in a context in which new fascism movements, organisations and political groups represent political options in European democracies and have representatives in the European Parliament and the parliaments of different countries (García, 2018). Today, extreme right ideology seems clearly connected to xenophobic discourses characterised by their anti-immigration, anti-immigrant or anti-refugee rhetoric.

The prominence of the immigration issue in several electoral processes in Europe has not gone unnoticed in European public debates. News from the ultranationalist and Eurosceptic Golden Dawn in Greece; the connections between immigration and the Leave EU and Brexit campaigns in the UK; the anti-refugee discourse and presence of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) or the Freedom Party, FPÖ, (Austria) in the German and Austrian Parliaments, respectively; the increase in votes obtained by Marine Le Pen and the National Front in France; the rise in votes of the Northern League in Italy; and the recent re-election of Viktor Orbán in Hungary represent examples of the significant recent increase in discourses of racial, ethnic and religious intolerance that have been circulating throughout Europe. In addition, through different social networks and mass media, parties termed as far-right, ultra-nationalist or populist have been capitalising through this type of discourse on the fears and threats of immigration and refugees across Europe.

The rhetoric of the “invasion” of immigrants has been revisited in the light of the refugee crisis and has taken on great prominence in the speeches of some political leaders following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. At the same time, the media have played a crucial role in developing the contemporary discourse on terrorism (Aly, 2007), as have social networks in recent years.

Frequently, the *invasion* argument takes the form of conspiracy thinking about the “Islamisation of Europe”. One recent example is the headlines by several journals reporting on some recent statements by Viktor Orbán: *Orbán claims Hungary is last bastion against 'Islamisation' of Europe* (Boffey, February 18, 2018); *Refugees are 'Muslim invaders' not running for their lives, says Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán. 'Multiculturalism is only an illusion,' leader claims* (Agerholm, January 9, 2018).

The perception of immigrants, refugees, and particularly Muslims as ‘enemies’ has also been reinforced after different terrorist attacks in various European cities (those, for instance, that happened in Madrid, London, Norway, Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Berlin and, more recently, in London, Manchester and Barcelona) in addition to the vast list of terrorist attacks that occurred in other parts of the world. These incidents may also have contributed to increasing feelings of Islamophobia and an increase in the stigma associated with Muslims as invaders and terrorists, especially when negative or hate discourses that mix immigration and terrorism are disseminated to the public.

Nevertheless, with regard to perceptions, opinions, beliefs or attitudes, it seems that context matters. As Garcia-Faroldi (2017) noted after analysing the 2009 Eurobarometer 71.3, national contexts in Europe are relevant to understanding attitudes towards immigration. Garcia-Faroldi explains that in the particular case of Spain, it is remarkable that even after suffering the experience of a very difficult economic crisis, Spaniards showed fewer prejudices towards immigrants than the citizens of other countries less affected by the crisis. A recent survey study in the European Union, Eurobarometer 469, also shows that 83 per cent of Spaniards “feel comfortable having social relations with immigrants”, including any of the types of social relationships asked about in the study (TNS opinion & political, 2018:11). Spain and Sweden stand out in Europe as the countries that are most accepting of immigrants. Based on an analysis of other surveys conducted in Spain, Cea and Valles (2018) argued in support of the notion that there is a greater global openness to racial and ethnic diversity in the Spanish population than in the populations of other European countries. However, the same authors clarify that this openness is not as evident with regard to the acceptance of the religious diversity of Muslims, who are perceived in Spain as culturally distant and in a generally more negative way than other immigrants. These researchers also observed a polarization in the Spanish population in terms of opinions for and against issues such as mosques and the use of the veil.

These findings directly connect with our research interests in anti-Muslim attitudes and beliefs about Islam in southern Spain. To contextualise, Andalusia is one of the Spanish regions with greatest number of immigrants in the country. The Padrón Municipal de Habitantes [Municipal Population Register] recorded 599,879 foreigners (7.17% of the total population) residing in Andalusia in 2017 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2017). Among foreigners who reside in Andalusia, people of Moroccan nationality represent the majority group. Coexistence between Spanish and Moroccans has not been exempt from problems in the past. The economic crisis had a harsh impact on Spain, especially Andalusia, one of the country’s traditionally poorer regions, and it increased the sense of labour competition perceived by native citizens with respect to immigrants (Fernández et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, as Rincken’s article (2016) suggests, based on survey data in the region from 2008 to 2013, explaining the anti-immigrant sentiment in Andalusia is not easy. On the one hand, negative sentiments towards immigrants did not increase with the economic crisis, as only 11 per cent of Andalusians displayed antipathy towards immigrants (14.3 per cent in

2008, at the beginning of the crisis). This occurred even though the perception of economic group-threat was greater. In fact, in 2013, 52.4 per cent of Andalusian's spontaneously declared that the labour market represented a negative aspect of immigration (Rinken, 2016:82). According to Rinken, "few Andalusians expressed antipathy towards immigrants", and "immigrants have not been converted into scapegoats for economic misfortunes" (Rinken, 2016:81). However, similar to previous findings for Spain in general, negative stereotypes of specific populations such as Moroccans exist in Andalusia. These negative stereotypes towards Moroccans have a long history in Spain (Ramírez, 1996; Pereda et al., 2010). On the other hand, the invasion discourse has also had a long history in Andalusia; from the end of the 20th century, the invasion discourse has typically been connected to illegal immigration and to border issues between Spain and Morocco (without forgetting some political confrontations in the past). However, in recent years and following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the concept of invasion in the public discourse seems to emphasise religion and terrorism, and there is a stronger focus on Islamisation, which seems intensely associated with conspiracy theories that have arisen from different mass media and social media sources. As Fekete (2011:40) argues, after September 11, 2001, 'new' frameworks have been created "that essentialise Islam and demonise Muslims".

Simply put, a conspiracy theory is regarded as a theory or explanation that provides an alternative explanation to the established official version regarding a historical or current social event (Bruder et al., 2013; Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Given the difficulty in knowing whether some explanations are true or false, it is not uncommon to report that there are secret powers or conscious manipulations involved in hiding or altering the facts available to the public (Brotherton et al., 2013; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). Some conspiracy theories have a clear ideological bias and state their rejection of different segments of the population.

The Islamic conspiracy theory asserts that Muslims are attempting to Islamise and conquer Europe through, for example, efforts to introduce Sharia. At the same time, there is a stereotyped and not very kind way of describing Muslims that sometimes demonises them by using descriptors such as rapists, traitors, criminals, invaders, paedophiles, and violent individuals, etc. For Islamic conspiracy theorists, other risks associated with Muslims include the high birth rates of Muslims or even their ability to sabotage our society from within by camouflaging themselves among us (Fekete, 2011; Fallaci, 2006; Carr, 2006).

In this conspiracy theory, multiculturalism itself, as a policy designed to achieve the integration of immigrants in western societies, is perceived as a threat that will ruin European societies (Fallaci, 2006). In this context, Western societies are understood as belonging to a superior civilization based on the idea of the ‘clash of civilisations’ (Huntington, 1993). At the same time, Islam is presented as a criminal and essentialist religion without any potential for change, and Muslims are perceived as “unassimilable” into European societies due to their beliefs. The invasion of Islam is also a threat to Christian Europe, which encourages the defence of Israel as well as actions associated with that goal (Fekete, 2011).

As Carr (2006) explained, another element of the Islamic conspiracy theory relates to the idea of “Eurabia”, a term coined by Bat Ye’or in 2005 in her book *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*, in which Europe is converted into a colony of Islam following years of immigration and the physical, mental and cultural invasion associated with that immigration (Ye’or, 2005; Fallaci, 2006). The basic notion of Eurabia is that there is a secret conspiracy between European (leftist) politicians and the Arab world to Islamise Europe and destroy ‘Judeo-Christian’ civilisation. In the words of Oriana Fallaci (2006:156), “it is immigration, not terrorism, that is the Trojan Horse that has penetrated the West and transformed Europe in Eurabia”.

As some authors have recently noted, especially following the massacre in Oslo carried out by Breivik (Fekete, 2011), the concept of a secret Islamisation of Europe is gaining increasing support in some countries (Uenal, 2016). The mere idea that Breivik “was motivated by a belief in a Muslim conspiracy to take over Europe” (Fekete, 2011:30) seems to us to be sufficient reason to attempt to determine the degree to which people in Spain share the notion of Islamisation. This is especially interesting with respect to Andalusia, as the southern border region of Europe has had some tradition of distrust with regard to Islam and to Muslims (“the Moors”) while it has simultaneously, and paradoxically, been a friendly place for Muslims to live because of not only its physical proximity to Morocco and other places in Europe but also aspects such as the friendly region’s social and migratory policies towards immigrants. Therefore, due to the importance of understanding the beliefs held by the Andalusian population regarding Islamisation and the implications that this knowledge may have for social integration and cohesion in the future, we use quantitative data in this paper to inquire into Andalusian attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. We also aim to identify the sociological profile behind anti-Muslim or anti-Islam attitudes in Andalusia by specifically assessing the degree of support that the invasion conspiracy theory has in the region.

Objectives and Methods

1. Objectives

As noted above, through this paper, which is based on quantitative survey data, we attempt to know Andalusian attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. We also aim to identify the sociological profile behind anti-Muslim or anti-Islam attitudes in Andalusia. After determining the degree of agreement or disagreement with the statement ‘*Many Muslim immigrants plan to impose Islam in Spain*’, we try to identify the factors that are related to a stronger perception of Muslims as invaders. As we have explained, the invasion perception has been strongly associated with some conspiracy theories found in various mass media and social media sources and in the scientific literature. Our main hypothesis in this paper, based on previous studies on attitudes towards immigration, is that older people, people with lower levels of education, people who are right-wing inclined, and people with stronger religious beliefs and practices in Andalusia, Spain, are more likely to hold anti-Muslims attitudes and to believe in the invasion theory of Islam.

2. Methods¹

This research was conducted as part of the 5th Wave of the Citizen’s Panel Survey for Social Research in Andalusia, PIE 201710E018 [Panel Ciudadano PACIS, IESA-CSIC², www.pacis.es]. Our work is based on the administration of a survey to a representative sample of Andalusians. The sample was composed of 1,103 questionnaires. The survey universe of this research was defined as all individual residents in Andalusia aged 18 or over, and a sample of 1,103 interviews was achieved. For the data collection, the sample was selected from among the individuals who are part of the PACIS panel. The PACIS panel was recruited through several channels: email, SMS and phone. After contacting the individuals to be interviewed, the questionnaire was completed by combining two data collection techniques using a mixed mode design: for the online mode, the interviews were conducted with the assistance of CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing), and the telephone interviews were conducted via a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) system. To obtain the

¹ Technical information about the sampling process, calibration, and fieldwork was provided by the IESA-CSIC, Spain.

² Institute for Advanced Social Studies, Spanish Research Council.

sample of 1,103 interviews, 2,008 people were selected from the PACIS panel. The maximum margin of error for the survey was +/- 3%.

To select the sample, a stratified selection of individuals was conducted according to the age group and sex of the members of the 5th Wave of the PACIS panel. The strata were proportional to the Andalusian population aged 18 or over. In addition, the sample was calibrated using the 'raking' method according to Andalusian population parameters. The raking process was accomplished with the rake module of SPSS [Statistical Package for the Social Sciences], which implements raking adjustments. The raking procedure adjusts a sample to a population so that marginal totals match control totals on a specified set of variables through an iterative procedure³. The variables used for the calibration were (1) sex and age group (combined) from the Municipal Register of Population, January 2016 and (2) educational level, from the Active Population Survey [EPA] (annual average of 2016), and size of municipality, also from the Municipal Register of Population, January 2016. The sample was adjusted to the Andalusian population through a weighting variable.

This survey project was the winner of a competition for inclusion in the 5th Wave of the Citizen's Panel Survey for Social Research in Andalusia⁴. An interdisciplinary team of researchers from three Spanish universities (Universidad de Huelva, Universidad de Granada, and Universidad de Vigo)⁵ designed the questionnaire for this study, and it was adapted and pretested for administration via CAWI/CATI by the Technical Unit for Applied Studies (UTEA, IESA-CSIC), the executor of the PACIS panel, in coordination with our team. With regard to the fieldwork, the survey interviews took place between 20 September and 18 November 2017 under the responsibility of the IESA-CSIC. The average duration of the interviews was 27 minutes. The statistical processing and analysis were conducted in SPSS. For this paper, we have used only one main question from the larger questionnaire to assess the degree to which Andalusians believe in the invasion conspiracy theory, as well as several

³ See <https://www.ibm.com/developerworks/community/files/form/anonymous/api/library/b5bb8a42-04d2-4503-93bb-dc45d7a145c2/document/93e2e5a5-05b2-49c3-9df9-4c199040d511/media/Raking%20with%20IBM%20SPSS%20Statistics.pdf>.

⁴ In <http://www.iesa.csic.es/blog/?p=2435>.

⁵ Estrella Gualda, Principal Investigator, Joaquina Castillo Algarra, Teresa González-Gómez, Elena Morales Marente, Marisol Palacios Gálvez, Carolina Rebollo, and Iván Rodríguez-Pascual (from the Universidad de Huelva); Alejandro Romero Reche (Universidad de Granada), and José Rúas Araujo (Universidad de Vigo)—names are listed according to alphabetical order.

sociodemographic questions to sketch a sociological profile of the supporters and detractors of this theory.

Results

The wording of the main question used for this paper was, *Please indicate your agreement level with each of the following statements by selecting a number from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree): "Many Muslim immigrants plan to impose Islam in Spain"*. In this paper, the 7-point scale was sometimes used as it was originally presented and was sometimes recoded from 1 to 3 to synthesize our results. When the response categories were recorded from 1 to 3, a value of 1 corresponded to a “Low (1,2)” level of belief in the invasion conspiracy theory, 2 represented a “Medium (3,4,5)” level of belief, and “High (6,7)” corresponded to the highest level of belief in this conspiracy theory. Table 1 shows the results in percentages for this recoded question, together with the median, mean and standard deviation.

Table 1. “Many Muslim immigrants plan to impose Islam in Spain”.

	Degree of agreement (%)			Median	Mean	Standard deviation
	Low (1,2)	Medium (3,4,5)	High (6,7)			
Many Muslim immigrants plan to impose Islam in Spain (N=1,095)	30.0	34.1	36.0	2.00	2.06	0.81

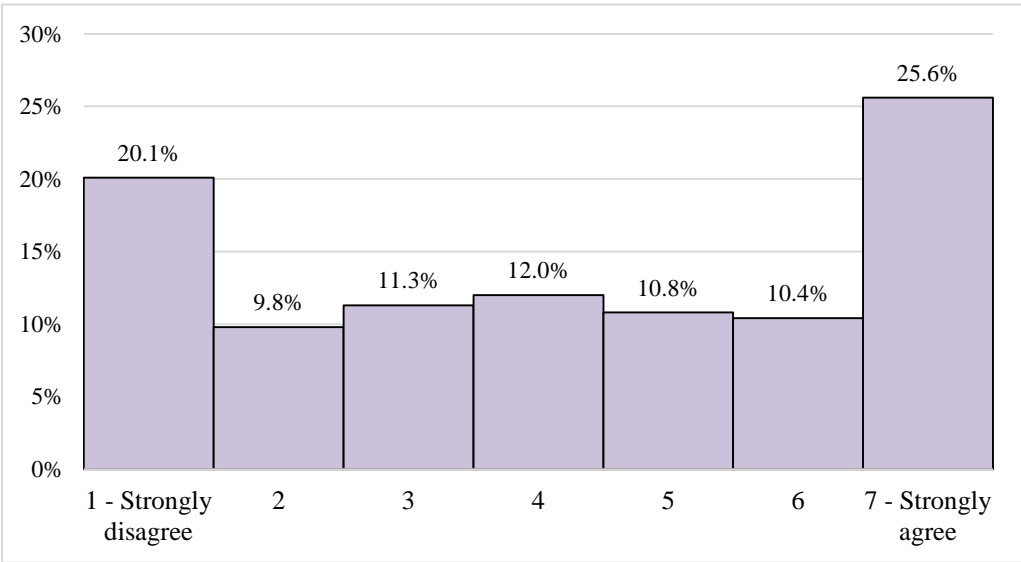
For the calculation of the descriptive statistics, the values corresponding to the categories Do not know and Do not answer have been deleted.

Source: Authors from the research project “Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation”, *5th Wave of the Citizen’s Panel Survey for Social Research in Andalusia* (2017).

With regard to degree of agreement with the statement, “*Many Muslim immigrants plan to impose Islam in Spain*”, the Andalusian population appears to be clearly divided into three groups of similar size, with the predominant group—nearly 40 per cent—representing the participants who expressed a high degree of agreement with the invasion theory. Given that approximately one-third of the participants opposed this idea, this division could symbolize the polarization that exists in Andalusian society regarding attitudes towards the immigrant Muslim population. This result also shows that there is a substantial group in the region that holds conspiracy beliefs.

Andalusian society is divided between those who believe and those who do not believe that there is a plan for imposing Islam in Spain, and between these two groups lies a third group that neither agrees nor disagrees with that notion based on the intermediate scores they reported. Additionally, the results of the descriptive statistics reinforce this result: taking into account that the scores were calculated from the recoded scale (the scale from 1 to 3), the average shows an intermediate value (2.06), but the standard deviation is nearly 1 point, indicating a high degree of dispersion in the answers. When descriptive statistics are calculated for the scale without recoding it (the scale from 1 to 7), the mean is 4.17, and the standard deviation is 2.26. Figure 1 shows this polarization or extremism more clearly, as near fifty per cent of Andalusian are concentrated at both extremes ends of the scale.

Figure 1. Percentage of degree of agreement with "Many Muslim immigrants plan to impose Islam in Spain" (N=1,095).



Note: The values corresponding to the categories Do not know and Do not answer have been deleted.

Source: Authors from the research project “Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation”, *5th Wave of the Citizen’s Panel Survey for Social Research in Andalusia* (2017).

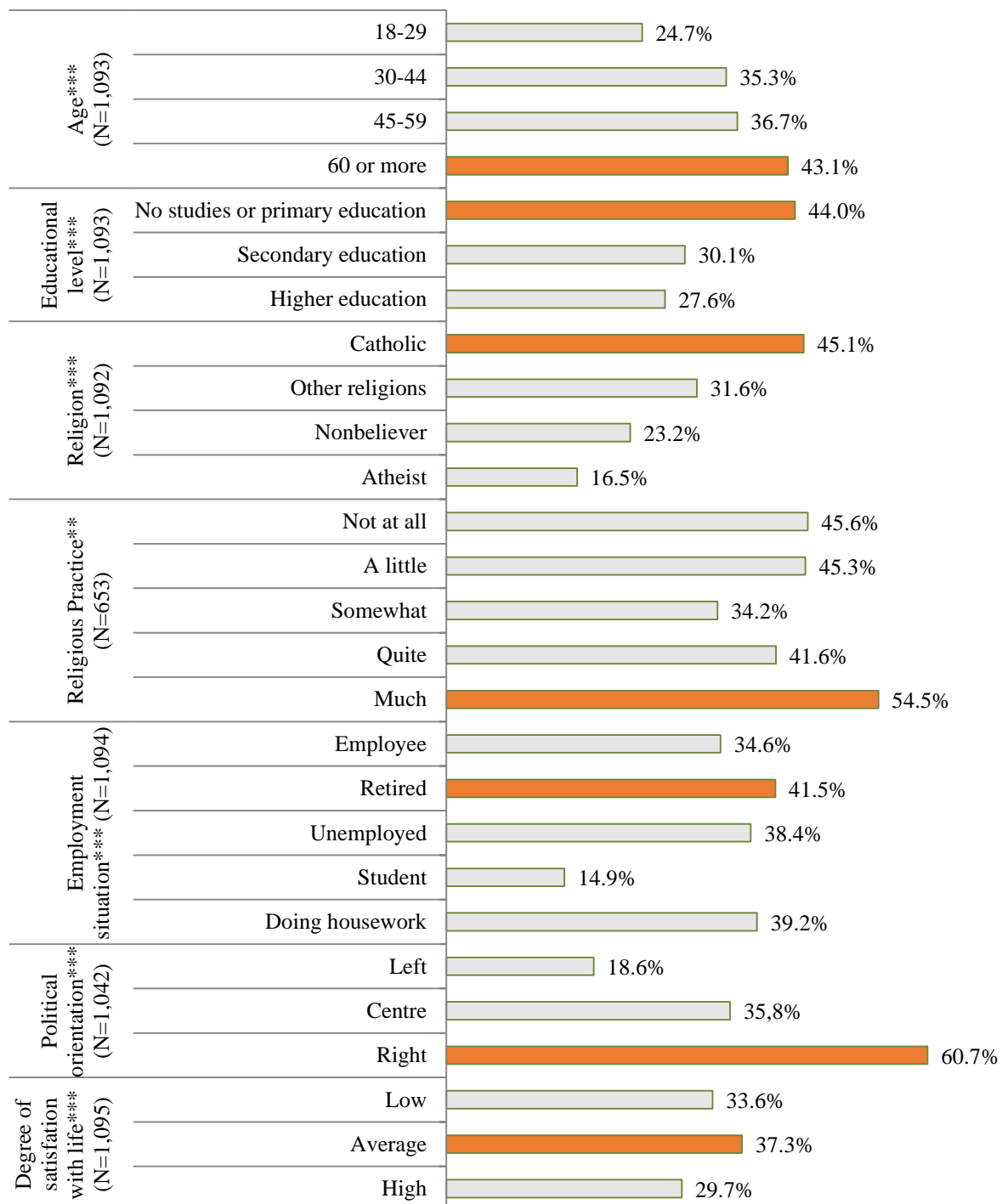
The bivariable analysis found significant differences in the responses to this question according to different sociological characteristics. On the one hand, after applying different Chi-square tests, we observed that the sociodemographic variables sex, province, municipality, habitat, income level, self-positioning of social class and occupation did not exhibit a statistically significant relationship with belief that many Muslim immigrants plan to impose Islam in Spain. However, other variables displayed a statistically significant relationship with the invasion idea after the crosstab tests were run. The results are shown in Figure 2. To highlight important results, this figure shows only the response percentages for the participants who expressed a high degree of agreement with the invasion idea. Interestingly, support for this theory seems to be clearly connected with age, education, religion or religious practice, employment situation and political orientation, variables that in previous research in Spain have been typically highly connected with opinions about migration issues. Satisfaction with life, as subjective variable, also exhibited a connection with the invasion idea.

The results by ‘age’ show a clear trend that older people (43.1% of population over 60 years old) were the main supporters in Andalusia of the perception of invasion, contrasting with younger people, who seemed to have a more tolerant attitude towards Islam. Similarly, maybe as education and employment situation are linked to age, we found also that Andalusians with lower levels of education showed a high degree of support for the invasion conspiracy (44%). Regarding employment situation, only 14.9% of students supported the invasion idea, while at least one-third (or even more) of retired individuals, as well as employed and unemployed people agreed with the idea of the invasion of Islam.

With regard to religion, those who declared themselves to be Catholics were clearly the main supporters of this belief (45.1%), while only one-third of people belonging to ‘Other religions’ supported the belief. The figures are even lower for nonbelievers or atheists. Andalusians who engaged in higher levels of religious practice (typically Catholics) were also consistent supporters of the invasion idea. Similar to religion, another variable that is

associated with aspects of mentality is political ideology. We found that perception of the invasion of Islam increased the more a person self-identified to the right in terms of political orientation (60.7%), reaching a difference of more than forty percentage points with participants who self-identified with the left politically (18.6%).

Figure 2. Percentage of people with a high degree of agreement (6, 7) with "Many Muslim immigrants plan to impose Islam in Spain."



*** $X^2 < 0,001$ ** $X^2 < 0,01$ * $X^2 < 0,05$

This figure shows only those participants who reported a high degree of agreement with the statement (6,7). Higher values in the graph are presented in colour.

Source: Authors from the research project “Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation”, *5th Wave of the Citizen’s Panel Survey for Social Research in Andalusia* (2017).

For the last two variables, we asked, on a scale from 0 to 10, how satisfied or dissatisfied the participants were with their current life. The responses for ‘satisfaction’ were recoded on a Low (0-3), Average (4-6) and High (7-10) scale. The results show that a low or medium level of satisfaction with life was associated with a higher degree of agreement with the Islamization conspiracy theory or the belief that Muslims plan to impose Islam in Spain.

Discussion and Conclusions

Unfortunately, the conspiracy theory of the Islamisation of Spain seems to have a substantial number of followers in Andalusia, confirming what Rincken (2017) and Cea and Vallés (2018) noted regarding worse attitudes towards Muslim or Moroccans in Spain compared with attitudes towards immigrants in general. The present study confirms this assessment and suggests the importance of factors such as age, employment, religion and political orientation in the belief of the Islamisation theory in Spain. Additionally, satisfaction with life was found connected to the agreement with the Islamisation theory.

The Spanish population has, in general, exhibited more tolerant and welcoming attitudes towards immigrants than the populations of other European countries less affected by the crisis. Nevertheless, according to the Observatorio Permanente Andaluz de las Migraciones (2017), Spaniards accept cultural diversity, but most of them show also preferences for an assimilationist model of integration, which prefers that immigrant populations renounce to some cultural characteristics or traditions that are not very common, where the practice of Islam may be included, as it is a religion that is not practiced by a majority of Andalusians. However, the question in the survey extended beyond accepting or not accepting the practice of Islam in Andalusia by the immigrant population. It also implicitly included a perception of Muslim immigrants as actors who actively want to impose their religion on the rest of the population. This idea links to the conspiracy theory of the Islamization of Europe that was developed earlier.

It is remarkable, as well as worrisome, that one-fourth Andalusians completely agree with the idea of the invasion of Islam considering that immigrants of Moroccan origin are the majority immigrant group in Andalusia. This perception varies according to sociodemographic characteristics. We identified that older people, people with low levels of education, Catholics, people with stronger religious practices, people who are retired, people who are right-wing inclined, and people with a medium or low satisfaction with life hold stronger anti-Islam attitudes and beliefs regarding the invasion of Islam in Andalusia than other people hold. These results confirm our main hypotheses about the sociodemographic profile of people not welcoming Muslim immigrants and confirm what different studies on attitudes towards immigration have already established. In future research, we will employ multivariate analysis to gain a better understanding of the relations between these variables.

The recent refugee crisis and the threat of terrorism may have increased Islamophobia and the fear of the loss of identity supposedly implied by the increase of foreign populations in our countries. Faced with this situation, we find a substantial space for interventions combatting stereotypes of the immigrant population and the conspiracy mentality that, through misinformation, fake news or rumours, renders coexistence difficult. In addition, interventions could aid in preventing an increase in hate crimes and instances of cyber-hate in social media contexts. Understanding the sociological profile of people who hold anti-Islam attitudes helps us to identify which social groups could be a critical focus of interventions. In this sense, it is important to promote intercultural dialogue to encourage social cohesion among groups and to reduce the racism and prejudices that lie behind the anti-Islam and anti-immigration sentiments in Europe and the growing right-wing political groups. Additionally, it seems crucial to reinforce what other official institutions have been endeavouring to accomplish in this field, for example, the Common Basic Principles for the Integration of the European Union (2004) or the Intercultural Cities programme that supports cities in the revision of their policies towards an intercultural perspective and the development of integral intercultural strategies to help cities manage diversity in a positive way (Council of Europe, 2017).

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