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The Non-radicalisation of Muslims in Southern Europe

Migration and Integration in Italy, Greece, and Spain

Tina Magazzini
Marina Eleftheriadou
Anna Triandafyllidou

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Tina Magazzini
Interuniversity Centre for Atlantic Cultural Landscapes
Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Czech Academy of Sciences
Prague, Czechia

Anna Triandafyllidou
Toronto Metropolitan University
Toronto, ON, Canada

Marina Eleftheriadou
Neapolis University Pafos
Pafos, Cyprus

ISSN 2752-8588 ISSN 2752-8596 (electronic)
Rethinking Political Violence
ISBN 978-3-031-71995-0 ISBN 978-3-031-71996-7 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71996-7

Cover illustration: © Melisa Hasan

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

to our Muslim friends and colleagues who decide to opt in rather than opt out, and help build plural and democratic societies in southern Europe—and beyond.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by two Horizon 2020 research projects: Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE) (Contract no. 770640), and Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism and Polarisation (BRaVE) (Contract no. 822189).

Toronto Metropolitan University

Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration & Integration

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Contents

About the Authors

Tina Magazzini is an associated researcher at the Interuniversity Centre for Atlantic Cultural Landascapes, the University of A Coruña and a senior researcher at the Czech Academy of Sciences. She is also a co-founder and co-director of INTEGRIM Lab, a non-profit organisation that provides evidence-based research on migration, integration and social justice.

Her research focuses on inclusion/exclusion policies from a comparative perspective, minority rights, and how categories of belonging are created, maintained, and institutionalised in different settings.

Between 2018 and 2022 she was a research fellow at the European University Institute, where she co-led the H2020 project GREASE with Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou.

Her publications include journal articles in *International Migration*; the *Journal of Intercultural Studies; Policy & Politics*; *Ethnic and Racial Studies*; *Religion*, *State and Society*, as well as edited volumes with Routledge and Springer.

Outside academia she has worked with UNESCO, UNDP, the European Commission, and the Council of Europe on social inclusion and diversity.

Marina Eleftheriadou is an assistant professor in International Relations & Security at the Neapolis University Pafos. She is also a consulting editor at the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East, and Islamic Studies

(CEMMIS). Her research focuses on non-state armed actors and the transnational and international dimensions of political violence, with an emphasis on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Marina has served as a research associate at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute (EUI) and as a research expert at the Centre for Religious Pluralism in the Middle East (CRPME), which was established under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Prior to the Neapolis University Pafos, she has worked as a lecturer at the University of the Peloponnese.

Her publications include the book *Radicalization: types*, *causes*, *international framework* (in Greek), chapters in edited volumes and journal articles in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *International Politics*, *The Middle East Journal*, and *Small Wars & Insurgencies*.

Anna Triandafyllidou holds the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration, at Toronto Metropolitan University. She is also the Scientific Director of a $98.4 mln multi-university and multi-partner program entitled *Bridging Divides* funded by the Canada First Research Excellence Fund. Prior to joining TMU in 2019, she held a Robert Schuman Chair at the European University Institute, in Florence, Italy. She is Editor of the *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*. In 2021, the University of Liège awarded Triandafyllidou a doctorate honoris causa in recognition of her contribution to migration scholarship. Anna has published widely in the field of migration governance as well as on migrant integration in comparative perspectives. She was part of the OECD Network of International Migration Experts from 2010 to 2018 and has co-edited with Marie McAuliffe the World Migration Report 2022. She has provided expert opinions for the Senate of Canada, Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the European Parliament and the European Commission.

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1

Religiously Inspired Violent Radicalisation in Southern Europe: Why It Is Not Emerging

Abstract Following 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in western Europe over the past two decades, research on religiously inspired or attributed violent radicalisation has grown into a field of study that has developed a broad and sophisticated range of explanations, theories, and categorisations about violent attacks that are either claimed by groups linked to Islamist ideologies or individuals inspired by them. Within this field, measuring the impact of programmes designed to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) has attracted increasing interest. While significant research in this field exists in countries that have suffered the most symbolic and mediatised attacks, there is less research being conducted on countries hosting significant Muslim communities of recent arrival such as Italy, Greece, and Spain where there have either been no or very few religiously inspired violent attacks (Italy and Greece) or where such attacks have not triggered the same securitised response (Spain) as elsewhere. Bringing together the three country studies presented in this book—as well as our desk research and contribution to those—this chapter introduces the rationale for this southern European comparative analysis, presents our methodology, and outlines the contents of the chapters that follow.

Keywords Non-radicalisation · Violent extremism · Southern Europe · P/CVE · Exceptionalism

T. Magazzini et al., *The Non-radicalisation of Muslims in Southern Europe*, Rethinking Political Violence,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71996-7_1

Introduction

Following 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in western Europe over the past two decades, research on religiously inspired or attributed violent radicalisation has grown into a field of study that has developed a broad and sophisticated range of explanations, theories, and categorisations about violent attacks that are either claimed by groups linked to Islamist ideologies or individuals inspired by them (Grossman & Hellyer, 2025; Hellyer & Grossman, 2019; Magazzini & Fahmi, 2025; McNeil-Willson & Triandafyllidou, 2023; Powers et al., 2023). Within this field, addressing the root causes, building resilience among communities, and measuring the impact of programmes designed to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) has attracted increasing interest. So far, however, most attention in the European context has (understandably) focused on countries that have suffered the most recent and highly mediatised attacks—such as France or the UK—and that have responded swiftly with security laws involving the declaration of a state of emergency and a tightened scrutiny (often resulting in stigma and discrimination) of Muslim religious minorities.

There is less research being conducted on countries that host significant Muslim communities of recent arrival such as Italy, Greece, and Spain, where there have either been very few religiously inspired violent attacks (Italy and Greece) or where such attacks have not triggered the same securitised response (Spain) as elsewhere. This is despite the fact that levels of Islamophobia and discrimination against religious minorities—and particularly Muslims—are relatively high in these three countries (Gemi, 2021; Magazzini, 2021a, 2021b; Triandafyllidou & Magazzini, 2021).

Against this backdrop, this chapter offers a critical overview of the background of Muslim communities in southern Europe and their history of (non-)radicalisation. It further seeks to present an analytical framework through which to explain why this is the case.

This chapter starts by providing a brief overview of the relevant literature on religiously inspired violent radicalisation as well as more broadly on violent extremism, seeking to identify the factors that may explain those few incidents of violent radicalisation or the absence thereof in southern Europe (see the next section). Following from this discussion of relevant analytical factors, we discuss in broad strokes the role of religion in the national identity and state formation of Italy, Greece,

and Spain within which relations with religious minorities come to be inscribed. Tied to each specific case study, in the fourth part we discuss the methodology employed and its implications for this study. The final section provides an overview of the book's contents and discusses the analytical framework of our study, looking at the possible drivers of religiously inspired violent radicalisation in each country (building on McNeil-Willson et al., 2019).

Violent Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

Religiously inspired (or attributed) violent radicalisation is a complex process that includes cultural-psychological dynamics and theological considerations, as well as policing and security policies and practices (Grossman & Hellyer, 2019; Khosrokhavar, 2021; Kundnani, 2012). As showed by Grossman and Hellyer (2019), the concept of what 'radicalisation' means and entails has shifted over time, with a 'new' terrorism approach that emerged in the aftermath of 9/11 putting significant focus on the effect of ideology. Such understandings of radicalisation have been especially concerned with explaining violent radicalisation's 'root causes' in relationship with theology and psychology, at times at the expense of other (socio-economic, cultural alienation) dimensions (Kepel, 2017; Khosrokhavar, 2009). To balance such focus on the role of religiosity, in recent years the focus has slightly shifted to examine broader social, political, and cultural crises linked to violent radicalisation (Franc & Pavlović, 2021; Khosrokhavar, 2021). In *Jihad and Death*, for instance, Olivier Roy claims that it is more productive to think about the issue in terms of an 'Islamisation of radicalisation', rather than a 'radicalisation of Islam' (Roy, 2017).

Regarding the conceptual distinctions between 'radicalisation' and 'extremism', the terms have been declined differently depending on the context, with 'extremism' being framed in opposition to the democratic-constitutional state while 'radicalisation' is employed in a more preventive framework in some countries, but such concepts are always informed, to some degree, by historical legacies and political framings of in-groups and out-groups (Heine & Magazzini, 2025; Sealy & Magazzini, 2025). On the other hand, one core tenet characterising the difference between extremism, radicalisation, and their violence is that behavioural (violent) radicalisation involves physical violence—rather than symbolic, psychological, or epistemic—while cognitive radicalisation does not (Grossman &

Hellyer, 2019, p. 10, Wolfowicz et al., 2021). Where we employ the term 'jihad' or 'jihadism' in this volume, it is because it is either the official term used by institutions in specific cases (for instance, the Spanish ministry of interior keeps an official count of the instances that it classifies as 'jihadist terrorism') or because it is the term employed by experts or interviewees in the field in specific contexts.[1]

While acknowledging the multi-level nature of violent radicalisation processes and their complex dynamics, this chapter and this book focus on the structural and contextual conditions that can help us analyse the situation in southern Europe. In doing so, we build on conceptual and empirical research conducted within the framework of two EU Horizon 2020 projects that were carried out between 2018 and 2022: GREASE on Radicalization, secularism and the governance of religion, and BRaVE on Building resilience against violent extremism and polarisation.

Following the arguments of McNeil-Willson et al. (2019; see also Fig. 1.1) we look at several elements that encompass the individual and collective dimensions and that, when combined, can help understand the presence (or absence) of violent extremism/radicalisation to assess what role they play in southern Europe. Is there a conducive environment (notably Community Isolation, Relative Deprivation, and Discrimination/Racism, i.e. push factors) or is there an opportunity or drive to act (pull factors such as Positive Reward or Active Redress of injustices), enabled by a discursive rationalisation and facilitated or triggered by mobilising networks (online radicalisation or charismatic recruiters or both)?

On the one hand, community segregation from failed or poorly implemented integration practices (Jenkins, 2007; Netherlands Ministry of Justice, 2004; Silber & Bhatt, 2007) can enable the development of violence (Hoffman et al., 2007). A lack of successful integration strategies may lead to communities failing to interact and participate in meaningful societal engagement, creating community segregation or 'enclavisation', eroding the stake that some individuals hold in society. Segregation has been shown to contribute towards economic and social degradation, creating 'fertile terrain for radical mobilisation' (iCoCo, 2007). It is however important to counter any claim to a causational relationship between marginalisation/segregation and violence (Rahimi & Graumans, 2015)—particularly as this approach ignores structural limitations faced by Black and Minority Ethnic communities in Europe

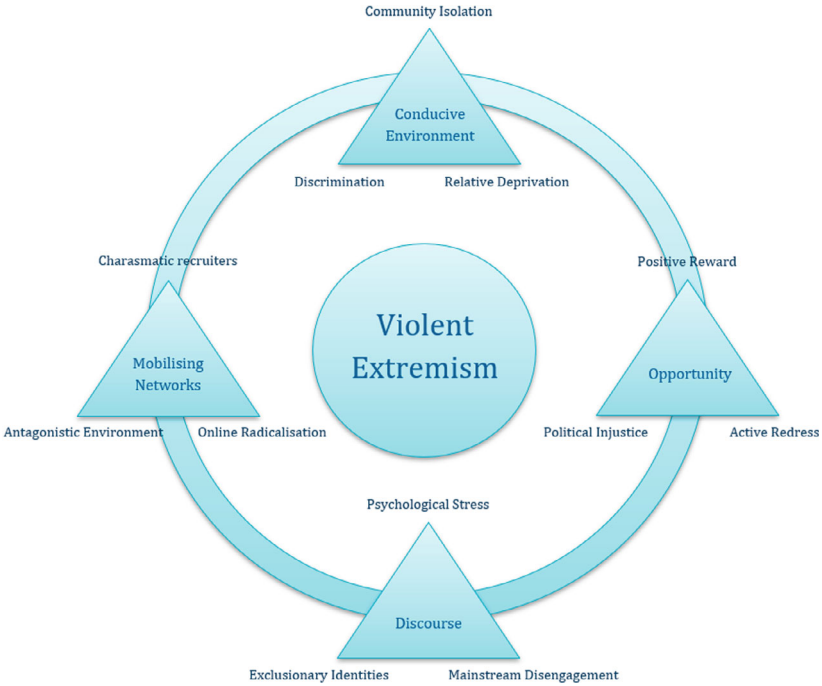

Fig. 1.1 Violent extremism *Source* McNeill-Wilson et al. (2019), BRaVE project Concept Paper, available at: https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/65664, Fig. 2: BRaVE model of violent extremism, page 19

(Cantle & Kaufman, 2016; Equinox, 2023) and risks perpetuating anti-minority and anti-immigration discourses (Hoffman et al., 2007). It is therefore crucial to conceptually distinguish between violence (which may or may not be linked to a radical ideology) and radicalism (which does not necessarily nor automatically lead to violence).

Secondly, relative deprivation is also an important contributory contextual factor for 'violent extremism' (King & Taylor, 2011). Relative deprivation is the perception that certain inequalities (material, cultural, social status) are both unjust and affect specific groups, resulting in resentment and hostility (Christmann, 2016; Runciman, 1966). It often impacts on the so-called left behinds of post-industrial society (Speed & Mannion, 2017)—those most poorly equipped to deal with the new

information economy or to compete for jobs in a globalised society with increased outsourcing and declining labour rights. This is found within some majority-White working-class communities facing both post-industrial decline and disproportionate austerity politics who have turned to the far right to salve concerns about wage labour and global capital, and the abandonment of traditional means of democratic engagement in favour of supporting sometimes violent confrontation (Burgat & Arqué, 2017).

Thirdly, racism and discrimination can also foster community violence in different ways.

On the other hand, terrorist organisations instrumentalise race relations and global injustices to recruit members and increase their societal legitimacy. A number of studies show that counter-terror legislation in Europe has tended to discriminate on grounds of race and religion (Fernandez et al., 2018; Ingham-Barrow, 2018; Patel, 2017).

A conducive environment provides the widespread grievances, or 'push factors'; the opportunity for turning to violence creates, in turn, a set of 'pull factors'. Groups can set out means of redressing socio-economic and political inequalities through engagement in violent extremism, attracting individuals who feel discontented within contemporary societies. As well as offering ways of responding to grievances, engagement in violent extremist groups can provide positive reward—such as increased standing in local communities, financial incentives, or a greater sense of self-worth and stronger identities. Such pull factors form, in some senses, a similar set of processes to what is also understood as 'opportunity structures' (Kitschelt, 1986; Kriesi, 2006).

Hanspeter Kriesi (2006) identifies three main opportunity factors: Political Injustice, Active Redress, and Positive Reward. The perception of political injustice—often on an international level or as 'distant suffering'—is a significant opportunity factor. The treatment of Muslims in Palestine since 1948, the Bosnian Genocide of 1995, the Iraq Invasion by the United States and allies in 2003, and the lack of intervention by Western forces in Syria in the 2011 civil war have all acted as key framing loci for the recruitment of foreign fighters (Hamid, 2016). Similar approaches have been used by far-right organisations that have framed, among other things, the increase in the influx of refugees over the past decade or Islamist-attributed terrorism to stoke racism at home and seek international collaboration to enable greater electoral gains. Perceptions of political injustice therefore act as a significant pull factor when

used by groups in conjunction with existing polarisation and the promise of violence as a means of resolution.

Active Redress examines the extent to which politically radical organisations can successfully present themselves as legitimate responses to formations of political injustice. One demonstration of this is Islamic State, offering an alternative to the political injustice in Syria (and wider Middle East) and to Islamophobia in Europe, with the Caliphate being framed as a means for redress. The credibility of extremist organisations in offering redress is therefore important in ascertaining the extent to which they can promote 'violent extremism'. Groups readily mobilise claims around existing (or perceived) intersecting divisions and inequalities among different groups (such as class, ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality, gender) to attract, recruit, and retain members. Joining such a group and engaging in violence therefore becomes a way of reclaiming a missing sense of agency (Grossman & Tahiri, 2013; Spalek & Davies, 2012).

Engagement with violent extremist organisations and politics may also have quantifiable benefits for the individual or the community(s) with which they identify. This can include greater individual standing within community or activist networks, financial or other material incentives, support from extremist networks (perhaps where state support reaches its limits), or a sense that it will advance the interests of the wider community. Engagement with violent groups can be seen as an 'occupational change process', with individuals following a 'career in terrorism' by evaluating its perceived 'reward, standing and recognition' (Pisiou, 2012). The reward gained from engaging in radical violence can be in the form of physical, material, social, or emotional capital (ibid., pp. 85–106) or can benefit the wider community in an act of perceived altruism (Pape, 2003; Pape & Fieldman, 2010).

On the individual level, violent extremism is also made more likely by the development of certain patterns of discourse or narratives centred on a sense of belonging in opposition to an enemy which can be found in both violent 'Islamist' groups and far-right groups (Kenney, 2018). Exclusionary identities are here taken to extremes and violence framed as the endpoint of polarisation. This is often coupled with disengagement from mainstream or more 'traditional' forms of politics and may be accompanied by psychological stresses (although the role of such factors is highly contested). Psychological stress factors—including, but not limited to, personal trauma, egoistic concerns, mental health issues, and highly gendered values—can also constitute an additional vulnerability factor

when combined with a hostile environment, charismatic recruiters, or online radicalisation (Macklin & Busher, 2018).

Based on these analytical observations and the framework developed by McNeil-Willson et al. (2019) we developed our operational framework, reorganising its four poles into a macro, meso, and micro level of social action: the structural or macro level which they identify as 'conducive environment', the micro level which refers to the individual and their immediate environment (notably the mobilising networks), and the meso level which involves the role of organisations (extremist or pro-social). The meso level is labelled by McNeil-Willson et al. as 'opportunity' and includes the level of social discourse (whether that of extremist minorities, mainstream political rhetoric, or media discourses).

We thus examine the structural factors pertaining to each country with regard to socio-economic inequalities, systemic racism, and discrimination experienced by religious (and other) minorities, past history of conflict, and radicalisation. This conducive environment is directly connected to the meso level of the institutions and organisations that operate in each country as well as to the public and political discourses—dominant and alternative—characterising the public sphere. The two levels—macro and meso—create the opportunity structure that may or may not lead the individual and their close environment to radicalise. Such violent radicalisation may be expressed at different levels, notably orally or through public statements or through violent actions taken up in the name of religion.

Our thick description of the three cases seeks to identify what type of opportunity structures emerge in the countries under study and under what circumstances they lead to violent rhetoric or violent actions (Fig. 1.2).

Following from these observations and the proposed analytical and operational framework, the rest of this chapter takes a closer look into the socio-political and historical context of the region and sketches the main factors that emerge in our framework. More specifically, we discuss the close relationship between nation-formation and religion in southern Europe, the governance of religious diversity in the three countries, the role of Muslim and other religious minorities, and the rise of the far right in recent years. The fourth section in this chapter outlines the methodology adopted in the three case study chapters while the concluding section briefly presents the contents of each chapter.

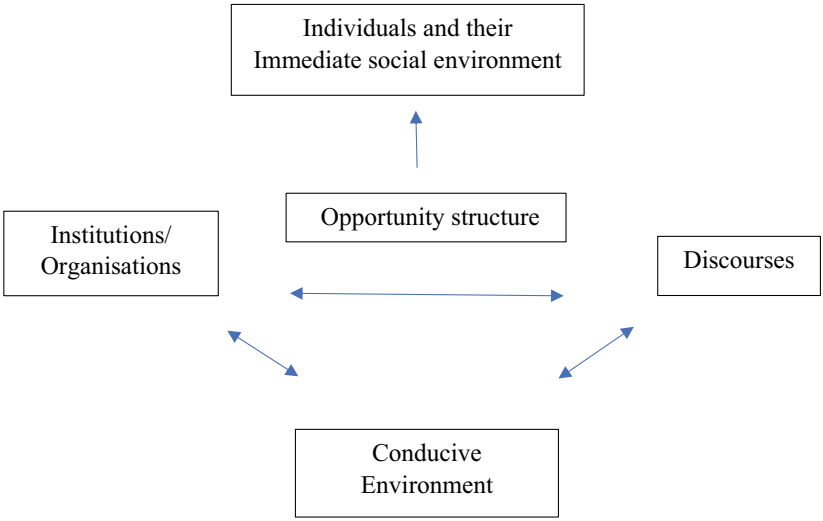

Fig. 1.2 Operational framework

The Southern European Context: Nation-Formation and Religion

Even though they differ significantly, Italy, Greece, and Spain show common socio-economic characteristics that became more salient during the 2010s as the Eurozone crisis unfolded (Magazzini et al., 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2001, 2007). While the 1990s and 2000s emphasised the challenges of reconnecting the central-eastern with the western part of Europe, the 2010s brought back the north–south division. This commonality of 'fate' was further reinforced by the 2015 (and still partly ongoing) refugee emergency or European crisis of protection (Almustafa, 2021), where these countries' geographical position and related exposure to migration pressures from Asia and Africa became an important common denominator across various dimensions: public perceptions, media narratives, political campaigns, and socio-economic consequences and dynamics (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2021; Bartolini et al., 2020).

Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox Church remain to date the two largest religions practised in the southern European region, which

however also hosts a small native Muslim population in Greece (Antoniou, 2003). By contrast, Muslim minorities were virtually non-existent in Spain and Italy between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, having been expelled, killed, or forcefully converted, but began constituting a significant minority as a result of immigration since the 1970s.

Greece emerged as an independent nation-state in 1821 through a war of independence against the Ottoman Empire; its current territorial boundaries were confirmed in 1948 with the integration of the Dodecanese islands into modern Greece. Greek national identity has been closely intertwined with Christian Orthodoxy. What has been labelled as the 'historical anxiety' of the Greek state, fuelled by geopolitical tensions in the Balkans, found expression in a dominant national discourse of ethno-cultural and religious homogeneity leaving little room for ethnic or religious minorities, particularly Muslims (Baltsiotis, 2011, p. 18). This discourse was prevalent until the 1990s when the quest of the Turkish Muslim minority for further recognition and the arrival of significant immigrant populations opened up a debate on the accommodation of religious minority groups.

The historical backgrounds of Italy and Spain differ from Greece; in both countries the Catholic religion and the Catholic Church have played an important part in state formation. Spain, one of Europe's oldest countries, was largely born out of religious struggles between Islam and Catholicism, with the latter being established as the state religion under the rule of the Catholic monarchs since the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, which were marked by the persecution and expulsion of non-Catholics (Jews, Muslims, 'Moriscos', Roma) and the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition. The Spanish Constitutions of the nineteenth century all asserted Roman Catholicism as the only official legal religion in Spain, and it was only in 1931 that the newly established Spanish Republic created a separation between the Church and the State. Such separation of powers was however short-lived. The Civil War (1936–1939) that ensued became strongly entrenched along religious lines, with the Catholic Church supporting the uprising of Francisco Franco in 1936 and ended with a four-decades-long dictatorship that re-established Catholicism as the state religion (Urrutia Asua, 2016).

Similarly to Spain, the Catholic Church in Italy has always been, beyond a religious institution, a political one. One of the most powerful entities in the peninsula, the Papal States played a crucial role in the formation of the Italian state, and it was not until 1870 that the Italian

troops conquered Rome, putting an end to the temporal power of the Pope. Catholicism, however, remained the official religion of the state within a regime of separation between Church and State based on the principle of individual freedom, as established by the 1848 Italian Constitution (Ercolessi, 2009). Following the First World War and the rise to power of Mussolini's fascist dictatorship, Italy signed the Lateran Treaty with the Holy See in 1929—which is still operative—that created the Vatican City State and restored many of the prerogatives of the Catholic Church (Kertzer, 2015).

Meanwhile, Spain, Italy, and Greece—albeit for different periods of time—all experienced far-right dictatorships centred on the pillars of anti-communism and national ideologies that presented the countries as the outposts of Christian values and civilisation against the threat of anarchism and atheism. Christianity, whether Orthodox or Catholic, played a strong political role in identifying the 'national' community. In Spain, under Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975), 'National Catholicism' represented one of the main tenets of the government's ideological identity. It was not until Franco's death in 1975, the transition to democracy, and a new constitution (1978) that a gradual separation between the Catholic Church and the Spanish State could be agreed upon in a new treaty, with Catholicism still holding a privileged position.

Similarly, in Greece, long after the end of the junta's rule in 1974 and the establishment of the Third Hellenic Republic, the view of Greece as a Christian Orthodox nation has remained, and the presence of Islam is still largely perceived as a rival cultural element that could potentially threaten and destabilise the homogeneity of the Greek 'ethnos' (Skoulariki, 2010, p. 302).

Since the mid-twentieth century all three countries have experienced—albeit at a slower pace than northern Europe—a gradual secularisation in society, with a steady decrease in church attendance and religious weddings that in turn coincided with a gradual opening to recognising religious minorities. In the early 1990s both the Italian and Spanish states reached formal agreements with representatives of minority religions; Spain recognised Islam, Judaism, and Christian Orthodox communities (1992) while Italy acknowledged Valdensians, Seventh-Day Adventists, Judaism, Christian Evangelicals, and Lutherans. The number of religious minorities recognised by the Italian state continued to widen in the 2000s (to include Greek Orthodox, Mormons, Buddhists, and Hinduists), but to date continues to exclude religions perceived to be at odds with Italian

law, namely Islam (which represents the largest religious minority in the country) and Sikhism.

During the same decades, Greece struggled to improve the socio-economic and political integration of its native Muslim Turkish minority that lives in the north-eastern part of the country (Antoniou, 2003) while also coming to terms with a significant influx of migrants from neighbouring Albania but also from other former communist countries notably Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, Ukraine as well as from south Asia. Not without contestation (Anagnostou, 2019), important openings took place including, as late as 2014, a new law (Law 4301/2014) allowing for religious minority groups to be recognised as 'religious legal entities' in civil law under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports. This in turn allows Muslims to establish and operate houses of prayer and perform religious rituals (such as marriage) without the permission of the local (Orthodox) ecclesiastic authorities, as formerly foreseen. Athens was the last capital in Europe to have a formal mosque inaugurated in 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2020).

The rise of extreme right-wing parties and related anti-immigrant and Islamophobic discourses identified in Greece are also registered in Italy and more recently in Spain too, even if with notable differences. In Italy the 2010s economic crisis favoured the rise of extreme far-right parties such as La Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, which have successfully exploited a general frustration with the lack of social mobility and economic opportunities by portraying Muslim immigrants as threatening the national values and culture—with the 2022 general elections leading to a government led by Fratelli d'Italia. Meanwhile in Spain the Vox party entered regional government for the first time in 2022, following the COVID-19 crisis. However, in all three countries, grassroots solidarity movements have also taken shape and consolidated in recent years with the aim to both promote migrant rights and fight hate discourse (Fortarezza, 2023; Magazzini & Desille, 2023). In recent years, the current Pope has been outspoken in highlighting the plight of refugees and migrants as well as promoting interfaith dialogue. Religious minorities (such as the Waldesians and Muslims) have also been active in promoting inclusion initiatives towards newcomers.

This overview paints a complex picture of light and shadows, with a certain polarisation taking place across southern Europe with developments on both the far-left and the far-right and alternative populist movements, an important role for religion and religious institutions in

public life (more in Italy and Greece than in Spain), and a certain reluctance to embrace and accommodate religious diversity and accommodate religious minorities (see also Magazzini et al., 2022). While these elements set the context within which religiously inspired violent radicalisation can emerge, it is important to look more closely into the factors conducive to such radicalisation as these have been identified by McNeil-Willson and colleagues (2019) and reviewed in the previous section.

Methodological Considerations

The data presented for all three case studies in this volume are based on both second-hand literature and policy papers as well as first-hand data.

For the Italian case, the second-hand literature includes a mapping of Italy's counter-terrorism policies and the official documents and policies on religious minority governance and Muslim representative bodies, as well as security laws and policies (including legislative proposals that were discussed in the Italian parliament but not adopted). Apart from official legislation and measures explicitly targeting either Muslim minorities or radicalisation, the chapter engages with scholarly literature and media coverage of radicalisation. Similarly, for Spain, we conducted an analysis of second-hand literature: legislation on radicalisation, white and grey papers on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and minority governance as well as scholarly literature on religious minority, security studies, and their intersection.

In the case of religiously inspired radicalisation in Greece, for which scant scholarship exists, we relied more heavily on first-hand data. Stakeholders' insights are used to corroborate, elucidate, and, equally as often, question and debunk widely held beliefs that inform the relevant discourse while putting forward an analytical framework that arguably offers a more comprehensive explanation of (the lack of) religiously inspired radicalisation in Greece. This chapter draws from interview-based fieldwork conducted between October 2021 and February 2022. In total, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including policymakers, government officials, members of the security forces, researchers, and Muslim community leaders (for a full list, including coded identifiers, see Appendix). The interviews were formulated to match each stakeholder's status (majority/non-majority)

and expertise but overall revolved around three main themes: how religiously inspired violent radicalisation is perceived, conceptualised, and discussed; what drives and what hinders radicalisation in general and in Greece in particular; and, which mechanisms and institutions exist for the prevention of radicalisation.

For the chapter on Italy, 15 semi-structured interviews were also carried out between October 2021 and January 2022 in Florence, Rome, and online with different stakeholders, including researchers and experts on violent radicalisation, religious leaders, civil society actors, one member of the security forces, and one of the media. The interviews helped complement the desk research, shedding light on the 'silences' of official documents and policies in this area, providing rich contextual data that can help us understand strengths, challenges, and contradictions in Italy's approach to P/CVE.

In the Spanish case as well, the literature and policy review was complemented by first-hand data collected through 14 semi-structured interviews with practitioners from civil society, the city of Barcelona, policymakers, and individuals responsible for the prevention and detection of radicalisation processes, as well as with a small number of Muslim individuals from different backgrounds and trajectories who held prominent roles in their communities. The profiles of Muslim interviewees differ by age, gender, ethnic-racial identity, and migratory origin, thus incorporating the voices of grassroots organisations of African descent, North Africans, Arabs, converts, women, and youth, with particular attention to those categories that are identified by Spanish C/PVE policies as being 'at risk of radicalisation'.

The access to interviewees was, in all three case studies, to some extent affected by the researchers' positionality and previous work on this subject. While the fieldwork in Greece was conducted by the second author and the fieldwork in Italy by the first author—notably both nationals and members of the 'national majority' in the two countries—the interviews in Spain were conducted partly by the first author (notably an Italian) while the remaining 12 were conducted by a PhD student of Muslim faith with extensive engagement in the relevant communities. The positionality of the student and her activism facilitated contacts with pro-Muslim grassroots organisations, researchers, and activists, but might have limited the access to governmental institutions and public officials wary of an activist, critical approach. Conversely, the researchers who carried out

the fieldwork in Italy and Greece do not belong to any religious minority, which made access to minority interviewees more challenging.

For all three cases, most of the interviews were conducted in person between late 2021 and early 2022, although some were conducted online due to either geographical distance or restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted in the mother tongue of both respondents and researchers—Greek in the case of Greece, Italian in Italy, and Spanish in Spain. In all three cases, written consent was secured from participants, and follow-up exchanges with interviewees took place in some instances in which doubts regarding the interpretation of statements emerged.

This Book's Contents

The proposed volume is comprised of five chapters: this introductory chapter outlining the scope and framework of the research, three chapters that each illustrate a country case study (Italy, Greece, Spain), and a final chapter that compares the cases and analytically reflects on the findings.

Chapter 2 looks at the case of Italy. Despite being home to the Vatican, a strong US ally, and a NATO member that sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, the country thus far has not experienced high-profile religiously attributed attacks. This chapter explores possible explanations for such 'exceptionalism' as they have been put forward in the literature, but also draws on interviews with relevant stakeholders. What emerges is that Italy is, in practice, not that exceptional regarding the presence of a conducive environment for radicalisation since it presents similar push factors (such as discrimination and relative deprivation) as other EU countries. The absence of successful attacks can instead be better understood by the fact that, to date, there have been very limited opportunity structures to act within. With such structures rapidly changing, however, the past P/CVE measures might prove unsuccessful or insufficient in the future.

Chapter 3 explores the case of Greece. It aims to interpret the lack of religiously inspired violent radicalisation and build on the same premise guiding the volume as a whole: namely that radicalisation scholarship has largely shunned the study of negative cases even though they hold great potential for our understanding of radicalisation. Drawing from interviews with relevant stakeholders, this chapter argues that Greece's resilience is replete with contradictions and does not stem from a concrete strategy

or tailored policies, but rather from the lack thereof. Hence, Greece's 'immunity' is not built on resilience-producing attributes but from the hitherto absence of key precipitating factors that could 'push' the Muslim community towards violent extremism.

Chapter 4, covering Spain, moves the debate from two cases (Italy and Greece) in which no large-scale religiously inspired violent attacks have taken place in a country that despite having suffered the deadliest attack in Europe—the Madrid train bombings in 2004—has often been seen as an exceptional case in its approach to countering and preventing religiously inspired violent radicalisation. While Spain is typically presented as a case of a 'soft' and benevolent approach towards its ethnic and religious minorities, this chapter delves into the idea of the 'exceptional nature' of the Spanish case and investigates what such an approach looks like in practice, particularly for Muslims. What emerges is that in the Spanish case, the meso and micro levels seem to have carried a significant weight, resulting in a mixed and at times contradictory approach.

By bringing together the three country studies as well as our overall desk research, the fifth chapter closes the book by reflecting on how each of the three countries has been exceptional in their own way and the reasons for that. Chapter 5 develops in more detail the analytical framework outlined earlier in this chapter for understanding the factors conducive to religiously inspired violent radicalisation and extremism. Reviewing the different elements present in each country, we conclude with specific observations about the commonalities among the three countries as well as their differences. The aim is to bring the different findings and argument threads together, considering what the findings from the southern European dynamics can contribute to our broader understanding of why and how violent religiously inspired radicalisation develops. In doing so, rather than closing the debate, the final chapter opens a reflection on how communities can prevent or address radicalisation without stigmatising minority communities and individuals.

Note

1. For an overview on the debate around the usage of the term 'Jihadism', see Sedgwick, M. (2015). Jihadism, narrow and wide: The dangers of loose use of an important term. *Perspectives on Terrorism, 9*(2), 34–41.

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CHAPTER 2

Missing in Action: Understanding (the Lack of) Religiously Inspired Violent Radicalisation in Italy Against the Odds

Abstract Despite being home to the Vatican, a strong US ally, and a NATO member that sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, Italy has not to date experienced successful, high-profile religiously attributed attacks. This chapter explores such 'exceptionalism' by employing the analytical framework put forward in Chapter 1 and by drawing on original data from interviews as well as second-hand literature. What emerges is that despite the presence of a conducive environment for radicalisation, the absence of successful attacks, so far, is likely due to very limited opportunity structures to act within. With such structures rapidly evolving, and the lack of a coordinated national resilience strategy, the past P/CVE measures might, however, prove unsuccessful or insufficient in the future.

Keywords P/CVE policies · Italy · Violent extremism · Violent radicalisation

Introduction

Against the backdrop of increasing polarisation and religiously inspired or attributed violent radicalisation in Europe, in recent years Italy has been singled out for its 'exceptionalism' (Beccaro & Bonino, 2020; Bonino &

T. Magazzini et al., *The Non-radicalisation of Muslims in Southern Europe*, Rethinking Political Violence,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71996-7_2

Beccaro, 2019; Dell'Isola, 2022; Groppi, 2017; Serioli, 2021). Despite being home to the Vatican, a strong US ally, and a NATO member that sent troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, Italy has not to date experienced high-profile religiously attributed attacks. In this chapter we look at possible explanations put forward in the literature for such 'exceptionalism' but also as they are understood and experienced by stakeholders: policymakers in charge of minority-majority relations and religious diversity governance, security forces, radicalisation experts, Muslim leaders and individuals. We then analyse the data through the framework presented in Chapter 1 of this volume to assess the main trends, peculiarities, and debates around (violent) radicalisation in Italy and how these may fit our explanatory model.

The question of why Italy has thus far not suffered jihadist attacks was aptly summarised by a 2019 *Foreign Policy* article titled 'Is Italy Immune From Terrorism?' that questioned whether Italy has simply been lucky or whether there are underlying reasons why it has not experienced religiously attributed violent attacks (Simcox, 2019).

Since Italy's formation as a nation-state in the second half of the nineteenth century, and particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War, there have been numerous episodes of terrorist violence. However, these have been associated with political terrorism, from both the extreme left and the extreme right or independentist movements rather than religious extremism. Between 1969 and 1987 the so-called Years of Lead (*Anni di Piombo*) saw around 500 people killed (Spagnolo, 2015), while the death toll of violent attacks attributed to mafia organisations range from 1000 to over 5000, depending on whether those belonging to the mafia organisations themselves are included (Libera, 2016; Puccio, 2021).

While none of the terrorist activities from those years relied on religious ideology,[1] they remain relevant insofar as they are often seen as being responsible for Italy's long history of counter-terrorist operations and the government agencies' experience in infiltrating terrorist networks—which is presented by some authors as a partial explanation for the low success rate of religiously inspired attacks in Italy in recent years (Beccaro & Bonino, 2019; Simcox, 2019).

Other proposed explanations are the 'demographic argument', which sees Muslims of migrant origin (who constitute a fairly small minority in Italy) as the demographic most at risk of radicalisation (Groppi, 2017; Scrinzi, 2023); that the lack of attacks is actually a strategic choice of terrorists; that Italy joining the coalition in Syria made it

safer (Momigliano, 2018); or a much softer interpretation of secularism, compared to France (Dell'Isola, 2022). These explanations are all plausible to some degree, yet none offers a nuanced portrayal of how the dynamics of (violent) radicalisation have been evolving on the ground over time—which is what this chapter aims to offer.

Methodology and Outline

This case study is based on second-hand literature and policy papers as well as first-hand data. While a mapping of Italy's counter-terrorism policies, legislation, and measures is crucial to situate the issue and understand how the 'jihadist threat' has played out politically, particularly since the early 2000s, the official documents and policies alone do not always reflect what effects these policies (or their absence) have in practice. Therefore, to complement the second-hand data, 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out between October 2021 and January 2022 in Florence, Rome, and online with different stakeholders, including researchers and experts on violent radicalisation, first- and second-generation migrants that identify as Muslims, civil society actors, one member of the security forces, and one member of the media. The interviews help shed light on the 'silences' of official documents and policies in this area, providing rich contextual data that can help us understand the strengths, challenges, and contradictions in Italy's approach to P/CVE and how these fit into our analytical framework.

Following this introduction and methodological note, the next section provides an overview of the particularities of the Muslim presence in Italy and the understanding of violent radicalisation as it is used in the political and public discourse. We then draw on the insights from the interviews to look at the phenomenon, or lack of, of failed violent religious radicalisation in Italy. Its explanatory elements are organised into three key dimensions informed by the analytical framework adopted in this volume (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019): macro factors (conducive environment), meso factors (institutions, discourses, and opportunity structures), and micro factors (individual circumstances and immediate environment).

In the conclusions, we offer a summary of the main findings that emerge, assessing the main theories of Italy's 'exceptionalism' and providing a few pointers for possible comparisons.

The Italian Case: Setting the Scene

As already mentioned, Italy is no stranger to terrorist violence, with the 1970s and 1980s representing a particularly polarised period marked by numerous attacks. Beyond the attacks claimed by groups with extreme political ideologies or carried out in the name of independentist claims, some cases where revindicated by international paramilitary organisations linked to Palestine. In 1973, the Abu Nidal Organisation carried out attacks at the airport of Fiumicino, in Rome, causing 34 deaths, and in 1982 the same organisation claimed an attack on the Great Synagogue of Rome, where a two-year-old was killed and 37 people injured (Drake, 1999; Regalia et al., 2015; Simcox, 2019).

As for religiously attributed radicalisation, in the early 1990s Milan's Islamic Cultural Institute (ICI), a mosque founded by a group affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and hosted in a garage, provided economic and logistical support (particularly through the sponsorship of visas) to jihadist militants from Afghanistan and Algeria. Some individuals linked to the ICI conducted suicide operations in Bosnia and Iraq, leading the US Treasury Department to label the ICI as 'the main al Qaeda station house in Europe' (Vidino, 2013). The ICI continued to expand and strengthen its network until the early 2000s with the support of radical 'traveling imams', charismatic preachers who gave 'visiting lectures' at the Centre and rallied a following (Morisco, 2025; Vidino, 2014). Such operations however did not translate into violent attacks carried out on Italian territory during this period, and in the early 2000s a step-up in counter-terrorism operations—notably the establishment of a Counter-terrorism Strategic Analysis Committee (CASA) through which agencies can share information on threats—meant that more resources were invested in tackling religiously motivated violent radicalisation (Zacchetti, 2016). In 2002, one of the Italian-based movement leaders linked to Al-Qaeda was arrested (and eventually deported to Tunisia), and in 2003 an Egyptian preacher connected to ICI was abducted in Milan by American intelligence. As a result of the growing level of surveillance in the early 2000s, many ICI affiliates moved abroad (Morisco, 2025) (Fig. 2.1).

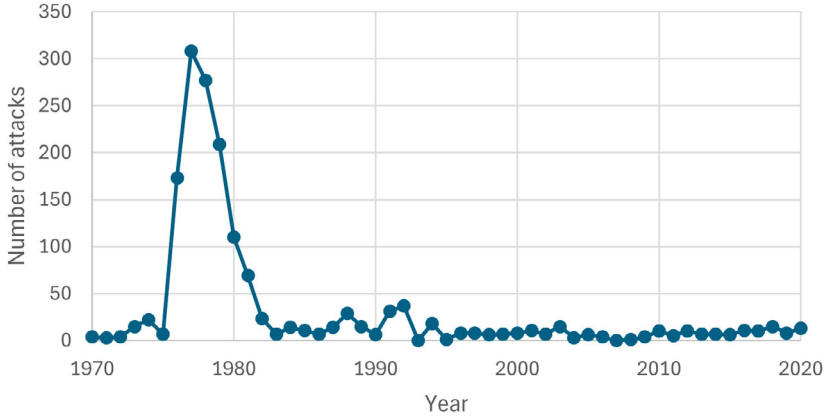

Fig. 2.1 Number of terrorist attacks carried out in Italy since 1970 *Source* The Global Terrorism Database, own elaboration

The Muslim Minority in Italy

What it means to be Muslim in Italy today can by no means be reduced to a single identity, and on the contrary has many versions, layers, and declinations. In terms of demographics and nationalities, Muslims in Italy do not have a main national group of reference, nor can there be an equivalence made between migrants and Muslims residing in Italy since most migrants in Italy self-identify as Christian, while only approximately one-third of non-nationals are Muslim. Of the 2,687,000 Muslims residing in Italy, approximately one million are Italian citizens, while varying percentages are from Morocco, Albania, Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, Kosovo, Turkey, and Tunisia, among others. While most live in northern Italy, which offers better job opportunities, Muslim communities, prayer rooms, and some form of Muslim associations can be found in all regions (Openpolis, 2021) (Fig. 2.2).

One peculiarity of Italy in its relationship with its largest religious minority—Muslims currently comprise slightly under five per cent of the total population (Ciocca, 2022)—is the lack of legal recognition, or codification, of Islam as a minority religion, a status granted to the vast majority of other religions (Magazzini, 2021). The reasons for such lack of recognition are ultimately political and reflect the fact that Muslims are seen as 'suspect communities', a distinct entity from the larger Italian

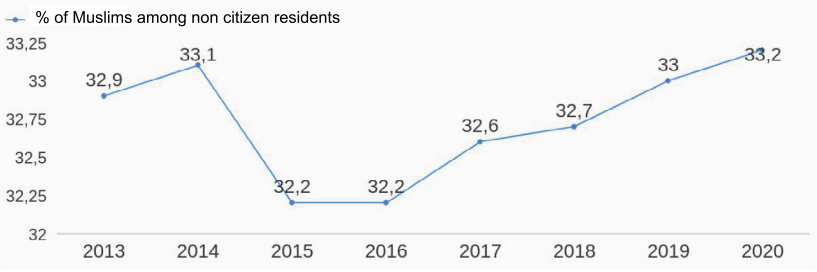

Fig. 2.2 Religious belonging of non-Italian citizens residing in Italy in 2020 *Source* Fondazione Openpolis ETS, La presenza dei musulmani in Italia, 2021

society and a potential threat by many (Alicino, 2022; Morisco, 2025; Wike et al., 2016). In demographic terms, over the past decades the Muslim population residing in Italy has gone from a very small and hardly visible one to one that has a larger presence in society but is also generally portrayed in the media and political debates at the receiving end of stigmatising narratives (Lunaria, 2019; Vidino, 2014). As an Italian journalist interviewee puts it:

> Obviously I watch my words when I author articles on the Middle East, on politics, and Islam, and I don't add the word 'Muslim' or 'Moroccan' lightly to a piece on criminality or on immigration, and I would say that most of the colleagues [at the newspaper where I work] do the same—but did we ever receive any training on this? Of course not. Also, and this is not to take the responsibility off our backs, but we're selling one-fifth of the copies we were selling in the 1990s. People don't come to us for sensationalist news on the invasion of terrorist Muslims; they get plenty of that on TV and on politicians' social media. (ME1)

Indeed, beyond media portrayals, political campaigns have increasingly featured fear-mongering, with migrants from Muslim-majority countries portrayed as an inherent liability for Italy's security as well as for its cultural identity. In 2019, then-Interior Minister Matteo Salvini claimed that 'Islamic terrorist infiltration is no longer a risk—it has become a certainty' as an argument to deny docking to a boat in distress carrying asylum seekers. But the phenomenon is not limited to the extreme right: the populist party Five Stars Movement in 2018 proposed the closure of all 'radical' Islamic places of worship as a way to deal with

'the regulation of Islam and terrorism prevention'.[2] Even the centre-left political parties, while not openly Islamophobic, have often bought into and fostered 'othering' narratives towards Muslim migrants, with the rhetoric of combatting migrant smugglers or 'helping migrants but in their home countries' (Saviano, 2017). Such comments have to some extent normalised and mainstreamed hostility towards (migrant or religious or both) minorities, against whom there has been an increase of xenophobic attacks in recent years.

According to one Muslim woman who has been living in Italy for three decades, the perception and behaviour of the majority population towards Muslims has changed significantly for the worst since she first arrived from Morocco:

> With me, people immediately position themselves, I see it on the street…and this has changed a lot over the years. I arrived in Italy when there were not many Muslims and there were not many immigrants. There was more curiosity then, a genuine curiosity, and people asked me questions. Often ignorant questions…but I understand them because I was a novelty, people didn't know Islam, they weren't malicious…Now no, now people think they already know everything about you. This has changed: now they know who a Muslim woman is, or at least they think they know—and what they think they know is not a good thing. It's always connected to oppression or terrorism. (MU2)

The fact that Muslim religiosity is at times conflated with radicalisation raises the issue of how radicalisation is defined and understood in political and public discourse. Overall, experts, researchers, and policymakers interviewed on this topic tended to use the term 'terrorists' to refer to individuals who had either carried out, or had attempted to carry out, an attack and referred to 'radicalised' individuals as those who were seduced/brainwashed by extremist ideologies, therefore distinguishing between cognitive radicalisation and behavioural (violent) radicalisation. Even though some used the term 'radicalisation' colloquially as a shorthand for 'violent radicalisation', they still made a distinction between those who had bought into radical ideology and conspiracy theories but who did not act upon them and those who represented a threat (RS4, PR1, PM1, PM2). As one policymaker put it:

> Everyone is innocent until proven guilty, and we cannot prosecute ideologies or intentions—unless the intentions are to commit a crime, and there

> is evidence of it. This [evidence of a crime] in Italy means condoning fascism, promoting hate speech, or aiding and abetting terrorism, but here we are talking about crimes, not ideology. (PM1)

While the importance of not conflating violence and radicalisation was shared across the board, a difference emerged between majority and minority interviewees. Experts and researchers (belonging to the majority) mostly used the term 'radicalised' for both extreme right-wing and jihadist ideologies (RS1, RS3, SF1), but those who either belong to, or work closely with, Muslim communities felt that 'radicalisation' is a loaded term that is disproportionately used in reference to religiously attributed cases, especially implying a negative judgement of Islam, while they see the term 'extremist' as more versatile and less stigmatising (MU1, MU2, MU3, RS4, PR1).

Understanding Italy's 'Exceptionalism'

Regarding Italy's 'exceptionalism', or its low number of incidents categorised as religiously inspired violent radicalisation, the main explanations for the lack of successful attacks tend to revolve around three axes (with some overlaps). One is the lack of a conducive environment or structural factors that might push individuals towards processes of violent extremism. The most-cited structural factor is the 'demographic argument', which considers Muslim individuals of migrant background who were born and raised in Italy but who are marginalised or denied a sense of national belonging as being more vulnerable to radicalisation (Beccaro & Bonino, 2019; Groppi, 2017; Scrinzi, 2023). From this perspective, an increase in societal polarisation (for instance the rise to power of the extreme right, which was Italy's most-voted party in the national elections of 2022) combined with discrimination and a growing number of so-called second-generation Italian Muslims is therefore likely to create a greater threat in the future.

A second explanation attributes the lack of successful attacks to Italy's experience with countering terrorist organisations accumulated from its history and its harsh counter-terrorism and deportation measures (Simcox, 2019), which are a disincentive or 'roadblocks' to carrying out attacks feasible from a practical and logistics point of view, and thus less likely to succeed.

A third reasoning is that the lack of attacks is due to a conscious, strategic choice of networks such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS not to target Italy for a variety of reasons ranging from its tactical importance as a 'logistical hub' to secret 'no belligerence' agreements with the Italian state (Giacalone, 2019; Momigliano, 2018; Musacchio, 2018; Olimpio, 2016).

Such rationales (both the second and third) can be subsumed to a matter of opportunity or lack of 'pull factors' that make a move towards violence strategically appealing for vulnerable individuals (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). Across all these explanations, the micro or individual dimension—constituted by exclusionary identities, mainstream disengagement, and psychological stress—also plays a role. While in and of themselves such individual psychological features might not be meaningful explanatory elements to the phenomenon of radicalisation, 'exclusivist identities form an important part in the process' of individuals becoming vulnerable to radical discourse, if exposed to mobilising networks (online or offline) (ibid., p. 16).

In line with this analytical framework, subsequent sections outline, firstly, the elements responsible for what can be considered the issues leading to or preventing an environment that is conducive to polarisation and potentially to violent radicalisation: community isolation, discrimination/racism, and relative deprivation.

The second section/dimension looks instead to the policies and institutions for the prevention and countering of violent radicalisation in Italy, as well as the societal dynamics responsible for the 'opportunity structures'. Thirdly, on the individual level, the role of immediate environment as well as recruitment and mobilising networks are also examined, taking into consideration the presence (or absence) of charismatic recruiters, online radicalisation, and an antagonistic environment.

Macro-Level Factors: A Not-So-Exceptional Environment

While the main concerns of the Italian population in recent years are linked to economic indicators, the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2021), the war in Ukraine, and the level of social hostilities in general, including those involving religion, have gone from 'moderate' to 'high' (Yakova et al., 2021). In particular, social hostility towards Muslim and Jewish communities and individuals has risen over the past decade, with a peak from 2015, when right-wing parties started making the religious diversity of migrants the focus of their political agenda.

This has resulted in what some authors have identified as a 'conducive environment' comprised of 'manifestations of polarisation, which form significant "push" factors toward engagement with violent groups and acts' (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019, p. 15). In practice, while no religiously claimed attack has been carried out in Italian territory in recent years, violence against minorities has been on the rise. A 2019 report on racial discrimination in Italy authored by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights identified several issues of concern related to institutional discrimination. It concluded that there was an urgent need for more commitment to investigate all allegations of racist acts and develop accountability measures related to discriminatory practices by law enforcement institutions. In response to the finding that 'discrimination against religious minorities has recently increased, because the value of diversity is being challenged' (OHCHR, 2019, p. 22), in 2019 the Italian Parliament set up an Extraordinary Commission against intolerance, racism, anti-Semitism, and incitement to hatred and violence.

Beyond the extreme cases of violent attacks, the general framework that remains in place is however one in which the threat posed to individuals belonging to religious minorities does not tend to be treated with the same seriousness with which instances of threat posed by individuals belonging to religious minorities are. The Muslim minority, in particular, continues to be addressed primarily through a securitisation framework, as emerges from a series of measures taken at both national and local levels.

At the local level, in January 2015, for instance, the Council of the Lombardy Region (Italy's most populous area, with Milan as its largest city) passed amendments to a Regional Law that regulated the planning of buildings and other structures for religious purposes. It is no coincidence that such measures were taken in Lombardy, and similar 'anti-mosque' laws were adopted in Veneto, both northern regions traditionally governed by right-wing parties that have increasingly put anti-migrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric at the centre of their political campaigns.[3] These amendments to the Regional Law made it extremely cumbersome to build new places of worship for all non-established religious denominations, particularly Muslims—while the Catholic Church remained exempted from the regulation. Such amendments were eventually declared unconstitutional and void in 2018, but it is telling of anti-Muslim measures and attacks that increased particularly since 2015.

At the national level, in 2016 two MPs put forward draft legislation that would have introduced a national Preventing and Countering Violent

Extremism (P/CVE) strategy. Draft law 3558 made it through the Lower House, but faced some opposition in the Senate, stalled, and eventually was never approved into law because of a change in government. One of the concerns raised during the debate in the Senate was the association of the term 'jihadist' with that of 'radicalisation' throughout the legislative text. Radicalisation was defined as 'the phenomenon of those persons who, even without any stable link with terrorist groups, uphold ideologies of jihadist origin, inspired by the use of violence and terrorism, even by internet and social media'. Such a phrasing meant that the scope of the law would have been limited to the prevention of violent radicalisation of jihadist inspiration and would not address Islamophobic and racists attacks.

The fact that these proposals were discriminatory nonetheless does not mean that a different national P/CVE strategy, one that also addressed right-wing extremism, might not be useful. In 2016, the same year of the abovementioned proposed draft law, a 'Study Commission on the phenomenon of radicalisation and of jihadist extremism: Towards an Italian approach to prevention of radicalisation', better known as the Commissione Vidino (from the name of its coordinator), was produced. One expert involved in the research claimed:

> Italy is indeed exceptional, but not because of lack of attacks, since there have actually been attempts [to carry out attacks in Italy], they simply weren't successful. Our exceptionalism is a structural and institutional one, in that we are practically the only EU country without a comprehensive CVE strategy. (RS4)

The importance of a coherent national framework is however seen with scepticism by some Italian Muslims, with one community leader cautioning against adopting a framework that singles out Islam in connection to radicalisation processes.

> The issue is not whether to have or not to have a national CVE strategy. The issue is who will write it and what will it include? If we end up with a CVE plan that resembles the UK's PREVENT one, where immigrant kids are singled out in schools while far-right extremists are not even on the radar, then we are better off without one. (CS3)

While discrimination and relative deprivation of Muslim minorities in Italy are clearly present, the issue of community isolation is not particularly

acute, mainly because of the demographic distribution of Italy's population more broadly, which is not as concentrated as in countries where all economic activity and opportunities tend to converge in the capital, and therefore has a lower tendency to create mass ghettoisation of newcomers (RS1, RS3).

The issue of integration and socialisation was stressed by a number of radicalisation experts (RS1, RS2, PR1), who see it as a crucial dimension to prevent radicalisation in the first place. The absence of physical ghettoes does not however translate into the absence of pockets of marginalisation and enclosed communities that are created and spread, often online through social media. In the words of one expert interviewee:

> The problem [radicalisation] cannot be addressed exclusively from a security point of view but must be addressed from a broader perspective, even with respect to the role of socialisation and group dynamics. I am talking about the sociological aspects because socialisation is an element that characterises radicalisation processes that are not talked about much outside of research: we must think that even when individuals perform solitary actions on their own initiative, the radicalised are generally part of the community. Whether real or virtual, there is a sense of belonging to group ecosystems, so those who are radicalised support and encourage each other in carrying out violent actions. Similar dynamics of belonging and identification with a movement or with a cause, as opposed to others, today run through society more generally: we live in a situation of strong polarisation, in which social entrenchment – the frequentation of closed environments in which we radicalise each other – has become the norm. (RS2)

In terms of challenges tied to community isolation, one issue that has become increasingly pressing is the phenomenon of radicalisation among inmates, often non-nationals, in overcrowded prisons.[4] As a response to a surge in the number of individuals flagged for radicalisation in prisons, the Italian government has activated some ad hoc de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation programmes carried out by authorised imams. Among the counter-radicalisation programmes in the Italian prison system financed by Italy's Ministry of Justice Penitentiary Police are trainings for prison employees to recognise signs of radicalisation among the prison population. Meanwhile, Italy has also started placing detainees sentenced for religiously inspired violent radicalisation in high-security special sections (separated from other inmates); when they have served their sentence, a growing number of individuals (66 in 2015,

66 in 2016, 105 in 2017, 112 in 2018) deemed to still be a security threat are expelled from Italy (Olimpio, 2018). This, however, according to many is not a viable long-term approach, especially if it remains disconnected from other reintegration measures. One social worker who works in a prison commented:

> The whole system is clogged. The prison I work in hosts some individuals [with diagnosed mental conditions] that should not be there…but there simply are not enough slots elsewhere, and the psychiatrists won't take the legal risk of signing someone out of the system because if anything happens, then [the responsibility] it's on them. The Basaglia Law[5] was a great civil rights conquest, but in practice we would need ten times the resources and personnel [we currently have] to offer the social services and follow-up that people need. (PR1)

Taken together, these elements show that Italy is not devoid of factors that can lead to a 'conducive environment', in particular discrimination/racism and relative deprivation. However, levels of community isolation are somewhat lower compared to western European countries because of demographic and urban distribution of the migrant population (Dell'Isola, 2022).

Meso Level: Weak Opportunity Structures Despite Fragmented P/CVE Policies

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the historical background outlined in the introduction, prior to the 2000s, special anti-terrorism police squads were trained to counter political and ideological terrorism, as well as organised crime (mafia) since those were the prevalent forms of terrorism. However, in the early 2000s Italian legislation changed in two important ways. This was largely as a response to the dozens of arrests of Italian residents linked to jihadist movements in the 1990s in northern Italy, coupled with a heightened perception of threat in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (Yakova et al., 2021). In 2001, Law 438 introduced harsher sentences for members of terrorist groups, increased police powers with regard to prevention and surveillance activities, and widened the meaning of 'terrorist groups' to include international organisations. A few years later, following the 2004 attacks in Madrid, a decree established economic

compensation for the victims of terrorist acts and two additional Laws (144 and 155 of 2005) adopted 'Urgent measures to combat international terrorism'. Such measures had significant practical consequences: on the one hand, they criminalised proselytism and providing logistical support of any kind to terrorist activities (Beccaro & Bonino, 2019; De Stefano et al., 2019); on the other hand, the new legislation equipped the Italian state with a legal tool to deport non-Italian citizens deemed to represent a threat to national security.

The application of this deportation law has been contested in specific instances by the European Court of Human Rights, as has Italy's so-called hard prison regime (Article 41-bis of the Prison Administration Act). The hard prison regime—initially introduced in the 1980s to deal with domestic terrorism and mafia bosses through an exceptional regime of isolation so that they could not continue to run criminal organisations from prison—empowered the Minister of Justice to censor a prisoner's correspondence, including correspondence with lawyers and human rights organisations. In 2002 it became a permanent fixture in the Penal Code for cases of terrorism.

Building upon the 2005 legislation, in 2015 Italy adopted a Law Decree concerning 'Urgent measures to combat terrorism, including those of an international nature […] aimed in particular at targeting the phenomenon of foreign fighters, the so-called Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF)', later converted into Law No. 43/2015. Under this new legislation, the National Anti-Mafia Prosecutor was renamed 'National Anti-Mafia and Counter-Terrorism Prosecutor'.

It is noteworthy that at each turn of a new law aimed at countering violent radicalisation, the timing and political debates suggest that they were introduced as political responses to external events (such as the 2004 attacks in Madrid or the 2015 attacks in Paris) rather than to concrete internal threats.

The result of such measures is that, overall, while the existing P/CVE legislation is fragmented, it affords security forces far-ranging powers in targeting religiously inspired violent radicalisation and foreign fighters—which might help explain, in part, the lack of significant jihadist attacks in Italy. In the opinion of a security expert, regardless of sentiments of political injustice, the opportunity for violence was severely hindered by an environment in which the 'reward' to be gained from violence was offset by the possible personal negative consequences.

These harsh CVE measures, though, present serious issues in terms of human rights violations, as well as loopholes with respect to racially or ethnically motivated terrorism (REMT), which has been on the rise in Italy over the past decade (Lunaria, 2019). For instance, in November 2019 the police arrested two individuals accused of having established a REMT terrorist cell in Tuscany where they were planning to attack a mosque. Nineteen suspects linked to a similar network and charged with attempting to build a new Nazi party were also arrested in different Italian regions. In both cases significant amounts of explosives and arms were seized and evidence of international links to other REMT groups were found (US Department of State, 2020). For these cases, however, no special decree or the above-described instruments apply, leading to significantly less harsh consequences.

Beyond the changes in laws and policies, what emerges from looking at Italy's approach to violent radicalisation is also that Islam's lack of institutional recognition means that there is a limited access of imams in prisons. At the same time, the many attempts at getting recognised have also translated into an intense and ongoing engagement of various Muslim organisations with each other and with the Italian state (MU2; Morisco, 2025). Religious leaders, in particular, tend to be very well integrated in Italian society and civically active and vocal in condemning violence. This presents, according to some experts, a missed opportunity on behalf of the Italian state: since imams play an active role in preventing radicalisation from spreading in mosques, by denying them recognition and legitimacy, the result is that they have fewer resources and a limited possibility to engage Muslim youth in religious education that could function as an anti-radicalisation prevention tool (MU1, MU3).

Overall, the 'opportunity structures' for engagement with violent extremist organisations thus seem quite different for disparate types of groups. Islamist-motivated radicalisation presents weak opportunity factors particularly in terms of financial or other material incentives against the risks associated to it, while the same does not necessarily apply to far-right organisations.

Micro Level: Discourse, Recruiters, and Mobilising Networks

While weak opportunity structures, in tandem with structural demographic elements, seem to have so far shielded Italy, according to a number of expert interviewees a worrisome trend is the disproportionate

investment in countering, rather than in preventing, violent radicalisation (RS1, RS2, PM1, PR1). The issue of the lack of prevention measures sits across different dimensions but is anchored in vulnerabilities and risks that are rooted in individual and psychological motivations. The issue of mental health—together with the growing individualisation and online radicalisation—was a widespread concern raised by practitioners and radicalisation experts. According to a radicalisation expert these phenomena are intertwined since in Italy, as elsewhere, the hierarchical and organisational structures of terrorist networks are becoming less structured and the role of the organisations themselves is no longer that of a 'recruiter' and 'trainer' but often of a 'facilitator' providing inspiration, arguments, and at times resources to the (self-)radicalised individuals. In his words:

> This [an increase of self-radicalised individuals] means two things: one, the 'activation time' is much shorter compared to members of a physical jihadist network. Two, with practically no gatekeeping, the number of cases that are on some sort of spectrum [of mental health issues] are growing. If you put these two things together and look at the consequence that Covid-19 has had and is having in terms of mental health in general, and on youth in particular, you can see that we have a serious problem brewing. (SF1)

While no structured network is currently known to be operative in Italian territory, a significant number of 'self-radicalised' individuals, with no direct connection to Muslim organisations and very low levels of religious literacy, have either been deported or arrested on counts of terrorism. In 2003, a Senegalese imam apologetic of Osama bin Laden and with links to ICI was deported, but his converted Italian wife (Barbara Farina) followed him and continued to translate and disseminate jihadist propaganda on the internet in the Italian language. It was through her blogs that the Italian police discovered a number of Italian converts (and a few non-Italians) who had radicalised online to pro Al-Qaeda beliefs (CS1; Morisco, 2025). Another individual linked to Farina by the effort to translate jihadists' materials into Italian was a young Italo-Moroccan man who was not socialised into any mosque but became very active in jihadi social media groups and was arrested in 2010 for planning an attack on a synagogue in Milan.

The internet seems therefore to play an important role in recruitment and radicalisation processes, although it has also allowed identification

of radicalised individuals and helped prevent attacks from being carried out.[6] One interesting aspect in the psychological profile of radicalised individuals discovered in Italy in recent years is that crossovers between different typologies of extremism sometimes happen: an example is the case of a young Italian far-right sympathiser who started following radical Islamist groups online and eventually converted to jihadist ideology, then attempted to establish a recruiting network in Genoa (his hometown) that failed because he was shunned by local imams and he ended up joining ISIS in Syria, according to accounts from a member of the police and by various reports (SF1; Marone & Vidino, 2018; Vidino, 2014).

Even though the number of foreign fighters who left Italy for Syria or Iraq is relatively low,[7] online socialisation played a key role for those who did as well as for radicalised individuals who chose to act locally instead. A case that raised the level of the alarm for the Italian security forces was the 2009 failed attempt by Mohammed Game, a Libyan citizen who had self-radicalised on the internet, to detonate almost five kilograms of explosives in a police station in Milan. According to ReaCT, an observatory on radicalisation and counter-terrorism, the number of individuals vulnerable to radicalisation has risen in the past few years. This is not limited to religiously motivated radicalisation but is an issue that extends to a number of ideologies (ReaCT, 2022). One interviewee who works in the security forces stated:

> There is an increasing fragmentation and autonomy among the supporters of extremist groups, groups that no longer have the monopoly of information on their message, and this makes our work to monitor the networks much more difficult because the promoters are very skilled in migrating from platform to platform and masking content. The profiles we see have also changed, they are increasingly young people who radicalise online and act on their own initiative, often adding to mental health problems and/or addictions. All this leads to a situation where we find a propensity to violence as the cornerstone of the problem, rather than an ideological motivation…We have been accustomed for two decades to talking mainly about jihadism, and this is a danger that persists, but in the meantime other types of radicalisation have emerged. (SF1)

This perspective of a 'propensity to violence' being more dangerous than any specific ideology was shared by a number of other interviewees working in civil society and experts on the topic, and is linked to growing societal polarisation (PR1, CS1, CS2, RS2, RS3). One expert

on violent radicalisation spoke of an 'acceleratory movement' caused by an increasing exposure of youths to the online narratives and tactics of groups that are often presented as antithetical, such as the supremacist right and the jihadist universe, but which in the virtual world observe each other carefully and share some common themes (RS2).

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has sought to understand whether the lack of religiously inspired attacks in Italy can be attributed to the absence of structural factors conducive to violent extremism at the macro level, such as low levels of polarisation marked by strong social cohesion, or demographic factors; the lack of precipitating factors at the individual level, such as online radicalisation and immediate environment; or some other or in-between reason, such as low opportunity or difficulty in mobilising and carrying out violent acts.

The main theories that have so far been put forward to explain Italy's 'exceptionalism' fall into three main arguments that are not mutually exclusive. One is that demography has so far played an important role as a structural factor: even though Italy shows increasing signs of societal polarisation and hostility towards its Muslim minority (therefore creating what can be seen as a 'conducive environment'), there is a small and fairly recent demographic of Muslim migrants that could become vulnerable to radicalisation. A second argument has to do with the reasoning that Italy's counter-terrorism experience and its harsh CVE measures reduced the opportunities for radicalised individuals to successfully carry out violent attacks. A third reasoning is that Italy's exceptionalism is the result of a strategic choice on behalf of terrorists because the 'incentives' to do so would be outweighed by the costs.

Regarding the 'demographic argument', which sees terrorism as linked to the number of Muslims of migrant background, this is a thesis that posits that Italy will find itself in a more vulnerable position in the future, once its Muslim population grows. This proposition is difficult to either prove or disprove. Overall, based on the interviews conducted for this study, the religious affiliation or Muslim identity of individuals does not seem to be the most relevant factor in relation to their vulnerability to (violent) radicalisation. However, what emerged is that there is indeed a correlation between the state's capacity to control the territory and the number of potential at-risk individuals it can surveil. In this sense, the

ratio between intelligence units and at-risk individuals (regardless of their ideology) is relevant and has so far played in Italy's favour. For instance, there is the case of Youssef Zaghba, a 22-year-old Moroccan-born Italian who was one of the three terrorists responsible for the London Bridge attack in 2017. He was closely monitored by the Italian authorities while he was in Italy and Italian officials had warned their British counterparts that he was a threat, but the UK apparently did not declare him a 'subject of interest' because the proportion of police force and potential threats only allows to monitor a small percentage of individuals in the UK (Kirchgaessner & Tondo, 2017). This relatively high proportion of intelligence forces versus suspects is however shifting quickly, as lamented by some interviewees, and it also coincides with a poorly funded and understaffed public system dealing with mental health and marginalisation issues.

As for the explanation that attributes the lack of violent attacks to Italy's experience with countering terrorist organisations accumulated from its history (Simcox, 2019), this is something that emerged quite consistently as playing a role in the capacity to infiltrate criminal networks. Italy's counter-terrorism experience and its structures were originally set up to counter ideological and mafia violence which meant that there is a dialogue at the operating level between intelligence and law enforcement forces, even in the absence of a national P/CVE strategy. In particular, building intelligence and controlling the territory have been crucial tools for infiltrating and uncovering organised crime historically, and continue to be important in countering current threats. However, the question hovering over the changing dynamics of violent radicalisation is how useful these tools will continue to be going forward in an environment marked more by virtual connections than territorial ones. The argument of harsh deportation measures as a deterrent for terrorist activities on the territory follows a similar reasoning: it is quite possible that Italy's draconian security measures, which make a considerable use of putting suspects in solitary confinement and deporting individuals suspected of being a security threat, have so far made it difficult for terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS to have a stable network physically present on the territory. But this is only true with respect to non-nationals and even setting aside its problematic aspects with respect to human rights, it cannot be an effective tool for tackling home-grown terrorism.

Finally, the argument that the lack of attacks on Italian soil is due to a conscious, strategic choice of Al-Qaeda and ISIS not to target Italy (Giacalone, 2019; Musacchio, 2018; Olimpio, 2016) does not seem very

solid in light of a number of unsuccessful attacks as well as the declarations on behalf of these organisations over the past years (in which ISIS has been urging lone wolves to target Rome). Even though in the early 2000s it might have made tactical sense for terrorist organisations to focus on Italy as a logistic and transitory hub rather than a main target of attacks, the landscape of violent radicalisation itself has been undergoing profound and rapid shifts, with individuals who are not an integral part of larger terrorist networks, but who are self-radicalised and characterised mainly by a 'propensity to violence' rather than strong ideological convictions, constituting the main threat. In this scenario, the theories that jihadist organisations have pursued a conscious and deliberate policy of not attacking Italy ultimately has little relevance since the emulators and individual terrorists do not necessarily take orders from broader structures and can be quick to change ideology and alliances.

What emerges is a complex and nuanced picture of a rapidly evolving situation which is indeed peculiar, and even 'exceptional' in some ways, but is also deeply interlinked with wider European and global dynamics and processes. For the future, it remains to be seen what role the Italian state will take with regard to prevention since it seems that the real Italian exceptionalism might not be the lack of violent radicalisation—in recent years Italy has experienced an uptick in xenophobic and racist violence—but rather the lack of a strategy to prevent it. This is also tied to how politicised the issue remains, given that one of the difficulties in developing CVE policies is, for instance in the issue of the recognition of Islam, the revolving door of short-lasting governments.

Notes

1. This does not mean that religion is not significant in some of the abovementioned criminal organisations. In most mafia organisations, for instance, Catholic symbolism often plays an important role in rituals of passage and what is presented as a 'moral code' of some networks to the point that in 2015 Pope Francis took the extreme measure of publicly excommunicating all mafiosi, which is now being formalised in Canonical law (Palazzolo, 2021).
2. It should be noted that as a result of this lack of legal recognition of Islam and a treaty (*intesa*) with the Italian state, Muslim associations are often registered as cultural associations and hosted in private

homes or shops. Across Italy there are only 12 actual mosques (in terms of buildings), six of which include a minaret.

3. For a detailed account on the discussion on Mosques in the Italian case, see Morisco, V. (2025). Italian Muslim communities and national counterterrorism strategy: Between normalisation and securitisation. In T. Magazzini & G. Fahmi (Eds.), *Causes and consequences of the governance of Islam and violent radicalization*. Routledge.
4. For a broader debate on the social, psychological, and institutional factors at play in the literature on radicalisation in prisons, see Haner, M., & Gibson, C. L. (2019). Examining the impact of prison conditions on inmate radicalization. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 64*, 33–44. See also Neumann, P. R. (2010). *Prisons and terrorism: Radicalisation and de-radicalisation in 15 countries*. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) and Silke, A. (2014). *Prisons, terrorism and extremism: Critical issues in management, radicalisation and reform*. Routledge.
5. Law 180/1978, better known as Basaglia Law, mandated the closure of psychiatric hospitals in Italy.
6. For an overview of online radicalisation processes, see Alava, S., Frau-Meigs, D., & Hassan, G. (2017). *Youth and violent extremism on social media: Mapping the research*. UNESCO Publishing. See also Awan, I. (2017). Cyber-extremism: ISIS and the power of social media. *Society, 54*(2), 138–149, and Bamsey, O., & Montasari, R. (2023). The role of the internet in radicalisation to violent extremism. In *Digital transformation in policing: The promise, perils and solutions. Advanced sciences and technologies for security applications*. Springer.
7. Since the beginning of the wars in Syria, the European observatory on radicalisation and counter-terrorism has gathered proof of 125 cases of foreign fighters leaving from Italy, 470 from Belgium, around 850 from the UK, 940 from Germany, and 1700 from France (Morisco, 2025).

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CHAPTER 3

Socio-economic Marginalisation, Fragmentation, and the Lack of Violent Radicalisation: Insights from Greece

Abstract Radicalisation scholarship has largely shunned the study of negative cases even though they might be far more enlightening for our understanding of radicalisation. This chapter explores and interprets the lack of religiously inspired violent radicalisation in Greece. Drawing from interviews with relevant stakeholders, it argues that Greece's resilience is replete with contradictions and does not stem from a concrete strategy or tailored policies, but rather the lack thereof. Hence, its 'immunity' is not built on resilience-producing attributes; it is the hitherto absence of key precipitating factors that could 'push' Muslims in Greece towards violent extremism.

Keywords Religiously inspired violent radicalisation · Prevention of radicalisation · Resilience · Greece · Muslims

Introduction

Religiously inspired violent radicalisation has never been high on the political and public, or for that matter, scholarly agenda in Greece, which has been preoccupied mostly with leftist political violence (Karyotis, 2007; Kassimeris, 1995) and, more recently, the rise of far-right

T. Magazzini et al., *The Non-radicalisation of Muslims in Southern Europe*, Rethinking Political Violence,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71996-7_3

extremism (Ellinas, 2013) that have been the dominant forms of domestic radicalisation. Arguably, from the mid-1970s until the mid-1990s Greece also experienced sporadic attacks attributed to international terrorism that, however, were linked to various national-liberation struggles (e.g. attacks by the PLO or ASALA) and lacked any type of religious undertones. As a result, several studies have documented the characteristics and (religious) practices of and the policies towards the (Muslim) migrants in Greece or the indigenous Muslim minority in the northern region of Thrace (Antoniou, 2003; Tsitselikis, 2012), while identifying the role of religion in the formation of the Greek state identity and its impact on attitudes and policies towards migrants and their religious needs (Karyotis & Patrikios, 2010; Triandafyllidou & Kouki, 2013). However, these studies have largely eschewed references to extremism or any engagement with the radicalisation debate and the relevant scholarship.

Starting from the late 2000s, the issue of religiously inspired violent extremism gained traction in the official and public debates. This shift was reflected in—and arguably fuelled by—a number of speculative articles suggesting that an Islamist terrorist attack was probable or even imminent (Giannoulis, 2011; Kostakos, 2010; Michaletos, 2011). The rise of ISIS, the flow of foreign fighters (of whom several passed through Greece), and the 2015 so-called refugee crisis inevitably brought Greece to the 'peripheral centre' of the debate on Islamist radicalisation. However, despite its centrality, Greece appears 'immune', with no Islamist terrorist attacks on its soil and no known cases of home-grown radicalisation. In light of Greece's 'rich history' of domestic and international terrorism spanning several decades, this lack of religiously inspired violent radicalisation appears rather puzzling and thus merits further exploration.

Most of the various explanations proposed have put forward some type of historico-political argument. For instance, it is argued that Greece has never been a colonial power (Borgeas, 2016, p. 163; Kassimeris & Samouris, 2012, p. 189), shares a common history with the Muslim world (Kassimeris & Samouris, 2012, p. 189; Kostakos, 2010, p. 3), and has traditionally good relations with the Arab states (Anagnostou & Skleparis, 2015, p. 62; Giannoulis, 2011, p. 11). Another explanation—which although drawing from more contemporary developments is based on the same premise—posits that Greece's role in the 'war against terrorism' was limited to low-profile non-military tasks (Kostakos, 2010, p. 3; Skleparis, 2015, p. 1). The underlying argument in all these explanations is that Greece is a target of low symbolic significance.

While not necessarily wrong, these explanations paint a static and incomplete picture that does not include less conspicuous dynamics and does not account for the possibly diverging views on the ground. This chapter investigates this non-radicalisation case to provide some tentative answers beyond the common references to Greece's history and foreign policy. By comprehending the less-explored parameters of the Greek 'immunity' to religiously inspired violent radicalisation and by distinguishing between universal and case-specific factors, one can draw valuable insights that might advance our understanding of radicalisation beyond the Greek case.

Methodology and Outline

This chapter draws on interview-based fieldwork in Greece (October 2021–February 2022). In total, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including policymakers, government officials, members of the security forces, researchers, and Muslim community leaders (for a full list, including coded identifiers, see Appendix). The interviews were formulated to match each stakeholder's status (majority/non-majority) and expertise but overall revolved around three main themes: how religiously inspired violent radicalisation is perceived, conceptualised, and discussed; what drives and what hinders radicalisation in general and in Greece in particular; and, which mechanisms and institutions exist for the prevention of radicalisation. Given the very limited scholarship on religiously inspired radicalisation in Greece, stakeholders' insights are used to corroborate, elucidate, and, equally as often, question and debunk widely held beliefs that inform the relevant debate while putting forward an analytical framework that arguably offers a more comprehensive explanation of the (lack of) religiously inspired radicalisation in Greece.

The remaining chapter is structured as follows. The first part sets the context by reviewing the particularities of the Muslim presence in Greece, the political and public discourse, and the institutional framework and policies addressing radicalisation. The next part sheds light on and suggests possible explanations for the lack of religiously inspired radicalisation in Greece. It begins with an outline of the analytical framework and continues with a discussion of the precipitating factors that might 'encourage' violent extremism and those that build resilience against this outcome, at both macro and meso levels.

Radicalisation in Greece: Shining Through Its Absence

Greece developed an interest in religiously inspired (i.e. Islamist) terrorism after the 9/11 attacks. This interest was nourished in the context of international security cooperation and training ahead of the 2004 Olympic Games and turned into concern after several European countries experienced terrorist attacks. The rise of ISIS, the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, and the possibility that they and other ISIS militants might exploit the refugee/migrant flows to (re)enter Europe alarmed the Greek authorities (SF1).

However, while religiously inspired radicalisation entered the political and public debate, the 'Islamist threat' has been presented as limited and, most importantly, exogenous. Thus, religiously inspired extremism is largely considered a 'foreign problem' forced upon Greece due to its geographical location and greater emphasis has been given to Greece becoming a logistical hub for radical Islamist networks (Anagnostou & Skleparis, 2015, p. 7; Mantzikos, 2016). At the height of ISIS activity, Greek officials repeatedly stressed that Greece was neither a target nor a 'source' of radicalised foreign fighters, but merely an unfortunate transit territory (Cruickshank & Kim, 2016; Polizoidou, 2017). The Greek public held a similar view, as evidenced in several polls showing that, even at times of heightened international terrorist activity, Greeks considered the possibility of an Islamist attack low and ranked the threat of terrorism below economic hardships or immigration (European Commission, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2017).

These assessments have been largely supported by data and corroborated by both majority and non-majority stakeholders interviewed for this study. Indeed, all relevant arrests involved individuals who were passing through or had only recently settled in Greece (CS1, SF2, RS2); most importantly, none developed any militant activity since their arrival, keeping a rather low profile (SF2, CS1). Moreover, all six individuals serving sentences related to Islamist terrorism are foreign nationals (five Syrian/Iraqi and one stateless) and were convicted for crimes committed outside of Greece (SF2).

The 'foreign problem' frame appears rather surprising given that Greece has an indigenous Muslim minority, largely concentrated in the northern region of Thrace. Alongside the Muslim minority, which is often dubbed as the 'old' Islam, there is a growing 'new' Islam consisting of

Muslim migrants who have settled in Greece in the past decades (Tsitselikis, 2012). There are no official data on the exact size of either community. 'Old' Islam is assumed to number roughly 110,000 people, although estimates tend to vary (Evergeti et al., 2014, pp. 352–353; Tsitselikis, 2012, p. 104). The data on 'new' Muslims is even more dubious because the national census and Greek authorities (i.e. Ministry of Migration and Asylum) do not record religious affiliation. Most estimates deduct their number from records on the country of origin which, in conjunction with the presence of undocumented migrants, can only lead to rough estimates (Evergeti et al., 2014, pp. 364–365) such as the one offered by Eda Gemi (2021, p. 90), who places their number at 150,000–200,000, not counting the 'refugee crisis' arrivals.

The two communities are distinct due to their different legal status, geographical distance, and the Greek state's systematic effort to keep them apart. Interestingly, a Greek state policy (or more accurately a non-policy) is responsible for creating opportunities for interaction between the two communities. The lack of a Muslim cemetery in Athens, where most migrants reside, means that relatives are forced to transfer the deceased to their country of origin for burial (an expensive option) or to bury them in the Muslim minority's cemeteries in Thrace. The Greek state's different treatment of the two communities translates into a dissimilar 'association' with radicalisation. Consistent with the 'foreign problem' frame, 'old' Islam is rarely conflated with the perceived 'threat'; instead, it is the 'new' Islam that is usually presented as a possible source of radicalisation in the political and media discourse (Giannoulis, 2011; Kostakos, 2010; Michaletos, 2011).

Managing 'What Is Not There': Counter-Radicalisation Policies and Structures

The 'foreign problem' frame is evident in how the Greek state approaches the issue of religiously inspired radicalisation, which is not treated as a domestic challenge that calls for wide-ranging measures and initiatives but rather an external security problem that must be addressed accordingly. However, the 'foreign problem' prism is only partially responsible for this one-sided approach. It should be noted that even though Greece has a long history of terrorism, it does not have a counter-radicalisation strategy in the sense of specific social, political, legal, educational, and economic policies and programmes designed to address the conditions that may

propel some individuals towards political violence (Schmid, 2013, p. 50). All relevant issues are dealt with instead through anti-terrorism legislation, various provisions of the Penal Code, and laws that deal with hate crime and hate speech (Anagnostou & Skleparis, 2015, pp. 9–10; Phelps et al., 2019, p. 43).

Overall, the prevention of radicalisation suffers from the absence of a comprehensive national strategy. While there have been piecemeal efforts and initiatives, those have failed to leave a lasting mark due to the lack of political will, poor institutional memory, and a deeply entrenched 'project-based approach with a defined beginning and an end' (CS4). This lack of continuity and sustained focus is also evident in the dearth of research on these topics (RS2). Indeed, despite the growing interest in religiously inspired extremism, particularly after 2015, there is limited actual research on radicalisation. Although some scholarly works have explored the prospect of radicalisation among refugees (Bossis & Lampas, 2018; Eleftheriadou, 2020a), the only comprehensive studies have been conducted in the context of a handful EU-funded projects which, as one project-related policy paper admitted, in the absence of actual radicalisation cases, fail to go beyond simple hypothesis-building (Anagnostou & Skleparis, 2017, p. 8). Limited interest and securitised approaches translate into two broad—yet highly uneven—sets of institutional or policy prongs dealing with religiously inspired radicalisation: 'soft' state or community-based initiatives, on the one hand, and 'hard' law enforcement measures, on the other.

Since the 1990s and for many years, migrants were treated as 'aliens', who had to be deterred from entering the country, leading to inherently securitised policies (Vandoros, 2018, p. 55). Even though integration was finally included in relevant legislation in 2005 (Greek National Commission for Human Rights, 2019, p. 37), the rudimentary policy framework that has been devised does not seem to link (the lack of) integration to radicalisation, as is often the case in other European countries (Magazzini, 2021). Indeed, although there are occasional references to extremism or radicalisation in relevant white papers, there is no actual framework or follow-up policies and the few 'actions' that exist in this direction are primarily focused on hate speech. For instance, the 'National Integration Strategy' published in 2019 by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum makes no reference to radicalisation or relevant strategies. The document was prepared and published under the left-wing SYRIZA-led government. The right-wing New Democracy government, which

was elected in July 2019, released an updated version in early 2022. The new 'Strategy' includes the prevention of radicalisation as one of the objectives under the umbrella of 'establishing an overall framework for prevention of violence, exploitation and abuse' (Ministry of Migration & Asylum 2022, pp. 16–17). However, most of the proposed actions refer to gender-based violence and child abuse rather than politically or religiously motivated extremism. The sole 'action' that aims at tackling radicalisation envisages—in a vague and rather outdated manner—the development of 'special educational thematic units aiming at strengthening equality and social acceptance' that target schoolchildren and front-line professionals and the organisation of anti-radicalisation workshops for refugees (Ministry of Migration & Asylum, 2022, p. 17). Hence, apart from a few initiatives that are only indirectly linked to the prevention of radicalisation such as regular meetings with representatives of different religious communities organised by the 'Directorate of Religious Affairs' at the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports, concrete 'soft' measures designed to counter politically motivated or religious radicalisation are absent in Greece.

Muslim communities do not have specific initiatives either. Personal interventions and contacts rather than formal channels and institutionalised practices are the norm. The only community that has produced 'local' and Greece-orientated material on radicalisation is the Salafi community; that is, the website 'Islam for Greeks'—a personal project of Imam Ahmed Eldin.[1] Although heavily loaded with anti-Muslim Brotherhood rhetoric, it is the only open source that discusses the issue of radicalisation under a religious, social, and political prism.

In contrast, law enforcement is by far the most developed component of the institutional framework dealing with radicalisation. This means that the focus is on behavioural rather than cognitive radicalisation.[2] As an informant from the security forces stressed:

> From a law enforcement point of view, when we talk about radicalisation we are interested in violence. Radicalisation, that is to change one's ideas, one's beliefs by moving to a more radical ideology, is not something that concerns the authorities. (SF1)

Nevertheless, the security forces do not always agree with this securitised outlook.

> The truth is that this focus on the police is widespread…It has to do with security, I understand that…but I cannot accept that other ministries do not concern themselves with this issue…Even I used to think that we police officers are the only experts, the best in the world and we are the only ones dealing with the issue of radicalisation…[Later] I realised that education plays a huge role, the prisons, the social workers, the health professionals…We can no longer discuss this issue and say that it is only the police. There is still work to be done in Greece to overcome this [mentality]. (SF1)

The conviction of individuals linked to Islamist terrorism has added a new component to the law enforcement aspect of counter-radicalisation. There is no specific policy regarding the management of these individuals largely because their number is still very low (SF2). However, there have been cases where these individuals were placed in Muslim-majority wards and ostracised or even attacked by other inmates who found out the reason for their imprisonment, forcing the prison guards to relocate them to other wards (SF2).

In practice, prevention and counter-radicalisation in law enforcement refers mainly to initiatives that aim to educate law enforcement agencies to better detect suspicious behaviour and prevent violent incidents (SF1). In this context, the Greek security forces have been involved in various project-based collaborations with their counterparts in other European countries (RS2), which in terms of religiously inspired radicalisation mainly involve projects on foreign fighters from the western Balkans (SF1, RS2). Pivotal in this regard is the work of the Centre for Security Studies (KEMEA),[3] which operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Citizen Protection and is the primary research institute that studies radicalisation and implements relevant national and European research projects (more than 15 since 2015) (RS2). However, its primary aim remains anchored to educating law enforcement agencies. This focus is best manifested in a project-related initiative, which included the publication—in cooperation with the State Security Division of the Hellenic Police—of a pocket guide to help 'frontline professionals' identify signs of radicalisation (KEMEA, 2016). As Skleparis and Augestad Knudsen (2020) note, most of the 'counter-radicalisation knowledge' outlined in the guide is borrowed from the experience of other countries and subsequently 're-framed and stretched' to fit the Greek context without producing actual counter- and de-radicalisation programmes and,

even more so, without engaging non-security-related elements of Greek society and institutions, despite paying lip service to this type of outreach.

In the past few years, there have been a couple of other initiatives that touch upon radicalisation directly or indirectly. In early 2021, the 'Office for the support of victims of terrorism' was established at the Ministry of Citizen Protection (RS2). However, this initiative was purely political and not related to religiously inspired radicalisation. Additionally, in January 2020, the Greek prime minister announced the formulation of a 'National Strategy against Terrorism and Violent Extremism' that was supposed to be ready within three months. At the time of writing, no strategy has been published, although one informant claimed that its drafting is in the 'final stages'; however, it is not certain whether it will become public (RS2).

The most 'promising' new initiative is a body called 'Directorate for the Prevention of Violence' formed in mid-2021. Nevertheless, although its stated purpose is to advance scientific study and, thus, mitigate the security-orientated approach to radicalisation and violent extremism (SF1, RS2) through cooperation with the research community and local administration (RS2), the Directorate has been formed at the initiative of the Ministry of Citizen Protection and designed to operate under the Ministry's auspices. At the time of writing, the Directorate is still 'undergoing organisational arrangements and establishing channels of communication between several actors in the field of prevention of radicalisation' (SF1) and has not produced any publicly available evidence of their work to assess this shift in approach.

While there are documented examples of inter-agency cooperation and inter-ministerial working groups (RS1) (Phelps et al., 2019, pp. 44–46), the cooperation between the security forces and other non-security institutions is largely based on ad hoc or unofficial networks and personal/professional contacts rather than institutionalised channels (SF1, CS4). Unofficial contacts and non-institutionalised channels also constitute the main conduit of cooperation with migrant Muslim communities. Some of these contacts involve regular discussions between designated members of the security forces and individuals from the community (e.g. heads of mosques or migrant associations) (SF2). However, apart from the unofficial contacts, there is little institutionalised cooperation.

A (Non-)Radicalisation Analytical Framework

There is always a strong temptation to use the 'exceptionalism card' to interpret non-conforming cases. The temptation is stronger in the Greek instance, which is often qualified as *sui generis*. The *sui generis* argument was indeed a recurring theme in the answers of the stakeholders interviewed for this article. When inquired about the lack of home-grown religiously inspired radicalisation, most were quick to reiterate some of the familiar historico-political arguments, particularly those related to the absence of a colonial past and Greece's traditionally good relations with the Muslim world (CS4, CS3, SF1, SF2). One informant noted that not only has Greece never been a colonial power, but it has much in common with the victims of colonisation—a connection that is entrenched in Greece's geographical position and which translates into an entirely different relationship with Islam:

> [Greece] does not have a history of colonialism and has never developed such rationales. On the contrary, up until 200 years ago we were in the category of 'slaves', not in the category of 'masters'…Considering that our country is a frontier country, we are between two worlds: the majority of the country is Orthodox, most of the Orthodox patriarchates are in Muslim countries. Our relations with Islam are different from the West's relationship with Islam. (CS3)

While engaging in its simplicity, Greece's history and geography offer a rather static perspective with little practical value. The Greek case merits a more systematic review of possible causes, especially because it displays many characteristics that would suggest a different outcome.

For one, Greece exhibits many polarisation indicators that render communities more susceptible to phenomena of violent extremism (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019, p. 13). Some are linked to Greece's national identity and as such are deeply entrenched, while others have been triggered or exacerbated by the 2008 economic crisis and the 2015 'refugee crisis'. At the cultural level, many have noted the exclusionary nature of the Greek national identity, particularly its strong association with Eastern Orthodoxy (Fokas, 2012; Gemi, 2021). The Greek Constitution (article 3) recognises Greek Orthodoxy as 'prevailing religion'. Although state-church relations have been the subject of debate, no government—even the left-wing SYRIZA-led—has ventured to challenge the influence of the

Greek Orthodox Church, which is often consulted or engages in semi-public bargaining with the state whenever a policy or legislation it opposes is introduced.[4] Several opinion polls have confirmed that religious identity forms an integral part of how Greeks self-identify but also how they view the 'other', effectively rejecting alternative cultures or faiths (Pew Research Center, 2018; Public Issue, 2009). A 2024 poll in fact revealed a striking exacerbation of negative beliefs and feelings towards Islam and Muslims since the late 2000s (Public Issue, 2024). Indicatively, in the 2024 poll, 59% viewed Islam negatively (as opposed to 23% in 2009) and 39% held a negative view of Muslims (as opposed to 26% in 2009) (Public Issue, 2009, 2024).

The interplay between deep-entrenched tendencies at the historical level and the new 'opportunity environment' born out of the dual 'crisis' is evident in how the far-right Golden Dawn (GD) (and the now defunct right-wing populist party LAOS before it) introduced Islamophobia into the political debate (Sakellariou, 2017) and thus not only normalised the far-right rhetoric but also elevated its political forces to agenda-setters. Likewise, at the socio-economic level, inequalities have only deepened due to the 2008 economic crisis, which among other things has led to the 'racialisation of the language of welfare' against migrants and post-2015 asylum seekers. Finally, on the communication-based level, there have been noteworthy improvements in terms of hate-speech legislation, namely the introduction of laws 4285/2014, which incorporated the EU Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia, and 4411/2016, which ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime and its Additional Protocol on the criminalisation of acts of a racist and xenophobic nature committed through Computer Systems (Gemi, 2020). However, Greek media (and social media) continue to produce a highly polarising discourse, even after the immediate repercussions of the two 'crises' have eased and despite the introduction of relevant legislation.

The question then is why haven't all these polarisation indicators produced radicalisation—or more accurately, why they have produced some types of radicalisation (e.g. far-right), but not others (e.g. religiously inspired/Islamist)? To answer this question, we should look into two sets of factors: the precipitating elements that 'push' polarisation in the direction of violent extremism and those that build resilience against this outcome (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). The first set includes a wide array of factors that can be grouped under four broad categories: conducive

environment, opportunity for violence, extremist discourse, and mobilising networks.[5] The second set includes a broader and more complex array of factors that unfolds across the four levels/categories of polarisation indicators (socio-economic, historical, cultural, and communication-based), mitigating their impact and implications. While not disregarding entirely factors at the micro level (the individual), in tandem both privilege those at the macro and meso levels. This way, they allow for a more contextual and situated assessment of (non-)radicalisation outcomes, which as the discussion below suggests, might shine some light on the paradox of the Greek case.

Macro Level: An Amalgam of Conflicting Tendencies

The *sui generis* theme is most prominent in the discussion of non-radicalisation factors at the macro level. For instance, one informant suggested that Greece should not be compared to western European but rather the Balkan states because while the former are home to Muslims of migrant origin, Greece has an indigenous Muslim population (CS1) and has only recently become a migrant-receiving country (CS1, CS4).

The presence of two distinct Muslim communities translates into different (non-)radicalisation factors. The lack of radicalisation in the indigenous Muslim minority is attributed to the peaceful Islam of the region and the suspicion with which it deals with any external influence or manipulation efforts (CS1). The 'Turkish factor' is also of paramount importance because it shapes the local Muslim political activism by elevating Greek-Turkish relations and minority rights—rather than Islam per se—as the main fields of contention (CS1). Resulting grievances can be expressed through peaceful means within the confines of the political system given that the Muslim minority has always had representation in the Greek Parliament through all major political parties. Equally important, according to an institutional actor, has been the integration—yet not assimilation—of the Muslim minority in conjunction with Greece's respect towards its cultural and religious identity, namely the preservation of Sharia in family law (CS3).[6] This image of benevolent policy towards the minority in Thrace was disputed by other informants, both from majority and non-majority backgrounds (CL3, ME1, CS4).

A related but even more controversial explanation is Greek society's religiosity, which constitutes yet another factor differentiating Greece from western Europe (CS3). In this regard, one could infer some level of

cultural bridging capital that can build resilience by generating 'trust and confidence in people from other groups' (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019, p. 21). However, this unfolds in the context of a highly exclusionary identity that fosters a hostile discourse far detached from the 'complex and flexible cultural identity' necessary for bridging capital (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019, p. 23). This contradiction was highlighted by some informants who suggested that this respect for religiosity is granted only to the Orthodox Christian majority, while the centrality and political influence of the Church in conjunction with the society's religiosity create a hostile environment for other religions (MU2, ME1).

Previous research has documented the interplay between Greek Orthodox attitudes, nationalism, and far-right politics (Sakellariou, 2015). This amalgam of ideas and outlets hinders any attempt to draw a clear line between Christian exclusivism and nationalist/far-right extremism, leading some to suggest that while there is no Islamist radicalisation, there is visible Christian radicalisation/fundamentalism in Greece (ME1, MU2) that is best manifested in the clergy's increasingly Islamophobic remarks (Iefimerida, 2021; Sakellariou, 2015, pp. 49–54).

The centrality of Christianity and the prevalence of the Christian discourse were assessed as having a different impact on different populations and generations. For the first generation of Muslim migrants who came to Greece 'knowing that they are coming to a Christian land', it is merely a confirmation that they are not included in the national narrative (MU2). For their children, though, this can lead to feelings of alienation from the dominant culture (MU2). The same reasoning, albeit reversed, was raised by another informant from the security forces who worried that the children of poorly integrated migrant families might feel culturally and religiously alienated (SF2). Hence, both accounts, although from a different perspective, viewed religiosity as hindering rather than facilitating integration and coexistence. The implication is that the contradiction between cultural bridging capital, on the surface, and the deeply entrenched ethno-religious identity remains 'under control' for the time being. However, it is expected to become unsustainable in the future when there will be greater need for intra-community bonding capital and, most importantly, when a new generation with a stronger sense of entitlement and a more fragile sense of belonging comes of age.

Indeed, the timing of the shift towards a more exclusionary discourse and harsher anti-migration policies could explain the absence of radicalisation cases in Greece in the mid-2010s. For instance, one informant

suggested that ISIS rose at the same time that these changes began but before they had taken root, claiming that 'if ISIS were to emerge 10 years from now…we would indeed have second-generation Arabs or Pakistanis in Greece or Greeks who became Muslims that would go [to fight with ISIS]' (MU2).

A similar dynamic can be traced between old and new migrants/refugees. In this regard, the lack of radicalisation among 'old migrants'—that is migrants who settled in Greece in the 1990s or earlier—was linked to the low number of second-generation Muslims of migrant origin (CS1, ME1, SF1), owing to the small size of the pre-2015 Muslim migrant community, their relatively recent migration, and the fact that contrary to post-2015 arrivals there were very few families. In the same vein, the first generation seemed less concerned with their status in Greece and more preoccupied with making a living and sending money back home or planning their relocation to other European countries (RS1). Equally important is the fact that the majority of (old) migrants in Greece are of Albanian origin, who at best are only culturally Muslim (CS1).

Moreover, informants from both majority and non-majority backgrounds claimed that 'old' migrants are generally well-integrated (CL3, CL4, CS3, RS1, SF2) and in constant contact with Greek society, which presents high levels of social mobility (CS3). This translates into a lack of pervasive feelings of relative deprivation, a key factor in fostering a conducive environment for radicalisation. The financial crisis had an ostensibly paradoxical impact in this regard: while it increased feelings of relative deprivation among the Greek Orthodox majority, in migrant populations, it created a feeling of common suffering. Important in this respect is also the absence of ghettoisation (CS3)—a claim supported by previous research (Skleparis, 2017)—which limits the impact of another key component of radicalisation-conducive environment: community isolation.

The image of well-integrated migrants appears rather counterintuitive considering that integration policies have been rudimentary at best, despite the fact that integration has been part of relevant legislation since 2005 (i.e. law 3386/2005) and a series of 'Strategies' have been issued (e.g. National Integration Strategy of 2019 and 2022). This contradiction is partly resolved if we consider the work of civil society groups, which substituted the non-existent state integration policies (Skleparis, 2017). Hence, in terms of resilience factors, while state initiatives towards equal opportunity and social cohesion remained rudimentary, solidarity

structures managed to substitute the state while building community bonds.

However, as many informants stressed, all these 'protective' elements were in danger or insufficient to deal with the refugee population that arrived in Greece, which on top of all else, were more prone to demonstrate psychological stress factors that could foster radicalisation. Indeed, many refugees' feelings that they are 'stuck' in Greece creates frustration (CS4, MU2) but also a pervasive sense that their stay is temporary, delaying and preventing their integration (SF2). In conjunction with the sheer size, prior experiences, and living conditions at the reception camps, the emotional frustration could easily foster conditions conducive to radicalisation (Eleftheriadou, 2020a, 2020b).

Interaction with State Authorities

These conflicting tendencies are nowhere more visible than in the way Muslims interact with the Greek state. There is an evident divide between members and leaders of migrant Muslim communities in how they frame their experiences of discrimination and overall grievances, which constitute another key factor in fostering violent extremism. Community leaders tended to focus on state institutions and high-ranking officials, downplaying everyday racism (CL2, CL3, CL4). Muslim individuals, on the other hand, focused equally on societal discrimination and interactions with public services (MU1, MU2). Interestingly, one informant claimed that the level of institutional racism in Greece is low compared to other European countries (e.g. Belgium, where he had lived in the past) (MU1). This claim, which has been documented elsewhere (Sakellariou, 2021, p. 33), is rather counterintuitive because it defies the reality of institutional arrangements that are highly 'unfriendly' to migrants. One possible explanation is that (until recently) there was no migration management framework. This more ad hoc approach means that there was no institutional focal point that could become the epicentre of frustration (MU1, RS2). It ingrained the perception that migration policy was strongly influenced by the priorities and preferences of specific governments, thus channelling frustration to particular parties rather than state institutions. One could also argue that the lack of concrete and well-defined policies created conditions of ambiguousness and uncertainty that kept migrants off-balance, always preoccupied with making ends meet and not losing their legal status (CS4).

This fluid, non-institutionalised approach was also apparent in the management of the over 100 unofficial prayer rooms that dotted Athens. While these makeshift 'mosques' were under scrutiny by the security forces, they provided significant freedom and a wealth of choices for practising Muslims to find a praying room, imam, and community that matched their needs. The economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and, most significantly, the Greek state's decision to regulate unofficial praying houses after the construction of the Athens Mosque have significantly shrunk the 'religious market'. Informants from the Muslim community welcomed the introduction of a regulatory framework. However, they decried the demanding process to secure a permit from the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports, as well as Greece's alleged effort to dominate the formal religious institutions, while insinuating that permits were issued to 'compliant' imams (CL2, CL3)—a claim denied by a senior government official familiar with the process (CS3). The impact of this shift to a more regulated religious market is not fully evident yet, but it might generate more frustration or create the need for underground places and groups that might act as a breeding ground for radicalisation in the future.

The aforementioned divergence of opinion is replicated in radicalisation-related cooperation with the authorities. All community leaders presented an image of regular cooperation with the security forces (CL1, CL2, CL3). For instance, many mentioned that in the very few cases that some type of extremist activity was recorded, the communities immediately alerted the authorities (CL2, CL3, CL4). This was corroborated by non-Muslim informants in the security forces and the public administration (CS1, CS3, SF1, SF2).

In general, community leaders, even those with a rather tenuous relationship with Greek authorities (CL2, CL3), affirmed that they would immediately alert the police if they were informed of any suspicious activity or individuals demonstrating signs of radicalisation (CL1, CL2, CL3, CL4). On the contrary, Muslim individuals did not appear as eager to do the same. Contacting the police was considered a 'last resort option', mainly because they feared they would get in trouble (MU1, MU2). Instead, they claimed they would first try other options, such as distancing themselves from the radicalised individual, talking to that person, or informing the imam of the mosque and the community in general.

Overall, what emerges is an incongruous image in terms of resilience-building factors. The absence of violence-related behaviours, particularly the willingness to speak out publicly against violence, is no doubt a significant positive resilience-building factor. However, the picture is murkier when it comes to one of the most important sources of resilience: linking capital, which refers to the 'trust and confidence in government and authority figures, and in community organisations' (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019, p. 21). While it is unwise to speculate a widespread dynamic, given the small sample, the difference in opinion that emerged from the interviews showed a chasm that calls for more scrutiny. A possible explanation might lie in the community's organisational fragmentation, which is explored below.

Organisational Fragmentation: A Meso-Level 'Blessing in Disguise'?

The usual focus on Greece's historical, cultural, and political particularities often conceals the lack of radicalisation factors at the meso level. One of the most striking differences between Greece and other countries that have experienced religiously inspired radicalisation is the lack of organised extremist networks that could mobilise individuals by turning their 'radicalisation potential' into violent action. This has important repercussions that affect not only factors at the level of mobilising networks, such as the presence of charismatic recruiters, but also the general opportunity structures for mobilisation.

With regard to the former, there is an external and internal dimension to Greece's 'particularity'. On the one hand, the transnational radical Islamist networks do not want to 'provoke' and 'force' Greek authorities to implement harsher measures that could jeopardise their access to a crucial transit territory linking Europe to the Middle East (CS1, CS4). On the other hand, there is no record of individuals with fighting experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia, or other conflicts who could play a key role in the recruitment and management of 'foreign fighter pipelines', as happened in other countries (SF1). Important in this regard is also the increased vigilance towards foreign imams visiting Greece on the occasion of religious festivals (CS1). More importantly, as informants from different backgrounds noted, the migrant Muslim community in Greece lacks the organisational substructures and subcultures that could pave a radicalisation path (MU1, CS2), while at the same time it does not seem

to a have noticeable presence in online radical cyber-communities either (RS2).

The lack of a 'radical milieu'—that is of the immediate social environment through which violent extremists 'share experiences, symbols, narratives, and frameworks of interpretation' (Malthaner & Waldmann, 2014, p. 983)—is directly linked to the Muslim community's pronounced fragmentation. It should be noted that while the minority in Thrace is highly organised, there is limited organisational contact with the (highly fragmented) migrant community. Fragmentation manifests in how Muslim migrants identify themselves as well as in the underlying organisational structures, links, and cooperative linkages. Rather unsurprisingly, the more religious informants focused on the shared Muslim identity, painting a picture of common goals and aspirations, even when they questioned each other's legitimacy (CL2, CL3). However, others noted that although there is some sort of defensive collective Muslim identity, especially in times of crisis (e.g. refugee crisis) and perceived or real threats (e.g. GD attacks), it is rarely purely religious (MU1, MU2).

This trend has often been discussed in terms of the primacy of ethnic identity in migrant associations and interactions (Anagnostou & Skleparis, 2015, p. 57; Kassimeris & Samouris, 2012). In practice, contacts and closer relations are usually centred on groups and individuals that share sub-regional '*natural proximity and bonds*' (e.g. Levantine Arabs/North African Arabs) (MU2). Overall, though, there is no identifiable authority or point of reference within the community or particular sub-groupings. It is rather context- and issue-specific, in the sense that individuals will seek guidance or assistance from different persons depending on the specific issue or need (MU1, MU2, CL4). This means that even if extremist groups were active in Greece, they would find it hard to set in motion an 'active redress mechanism' in the sense of successfully presenting themselves as legitimate collective responses to generalised political injustice. It should be noted, though, that the organisational fragmentation allows the transposition and empowerment of family networks, which potentially, as Marc Sageman's (2004) work on social networks suggests, could act as a 'corridor' for radicalisation (MU1) under more conducive circumstances.

Fragmentation is mirrored in the complex organisational matrix of migrant associations, where ethnic and political identities intertwine with personal differences and ambitions, leading to numerous fluid groupings (MU1). The Muslim Association of Greece (MAG), which was formed

in 2003, put significant effort into creating a unified—religious—front (CL3). In the past, MAG, which is believed to be affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and its long-time President Naim El-Ghandour were treated by the Greek state as a 'privileged interlocutor' and seemed to hold a dominant position among migrant Muslims (Anagnostou & Skleparis, 2015, p. 57). However, this does not appear to be the case anymore, primarily because MAG has been accused of promoting the 'Turkish agenda' due to its close relationship with the AKP party in Turkey, which shares its ideological affinity with the Muslim Brotherhood. By the same token, MAG, which is perceived as Arab- and Egyptian-dominated, has never been accepted by the large South Asian community, while there has been growing distrust from the Arab Muslims as well (CL2, MU1, RS2). In the early 2010s, there were efforts mainly from the younger generation, who were influenced by the Arab Spring, to explore cooperation mechanisms and platforms. These efforts failed due to disagreements about the ideological basis of the platform (including the role of religion), potential partners, and cooperation with state authorities (MU1). Overall, in terms of impact, the most successful examples of Muslim migrant organisation were not built on a religious basis but were more issue-specific (e.g. Egyptian fishermen) (MU1).[7]

The level of unity appears to have decreased and cooperation has been deteriorating (CL2, CL3, MU2) but there is no clear answer as to the reasons behind this trend. One informant suggested that low levels of cooperation do not stem from disagreements or competition, but it is simply a matter of different priorities among migrant groups (CL4). Some community leaders suggested that the increasing fragmentation is the product of a deliberate state policy (CL2, CL3), while other informants put an equal amount of blame on intra-community failings (MU2). Informants representing the Greek authorities disputed this assessment, claiming that the organisational fluidity of migrant Muslim communities and the frequent splits render their work more difficult and cooperation more troublesome (CS3, SF2). Whatever the reason behind fragmentation, it appears to be a deeply entrenched feature of the (migrant) Muslim community in Greece—one that might explain the limited impact of radicalisation-precipitating factors better than any historico-political explanation.

Concluding Remarks

Various reasons have been proposed to interpret the lack of religiously inspired radicalisation in Greece. While the most common involve variations of explanations based on historical legacies and foreign policy choices (e.g. traditionally good relations with the Muslim/Arab countries), other factors that have received far less attention might provide more useful insights. Overall, the proposed explanations remain anchored to the overarching theme of Greece being a *sui generis* case, either due to its history and outlook that has very little in common with western Europe or its special rapport with Islam and religiosity in general. Some of these claims, however, especially the role of religiosity in creating a climate of religious tolerance, are disputed.

A key—albeit under-researched—factor is the absence of a radical milieu. Previous research has shown that milieus can both encourage and constrain radicalisation, depending on the context in which they emerge and the narratives they promote (Malthaner & Waldmann, 2014). Most importantly, though, these milieus are not static, but resemble living organisms that evolve and morph to fit the necessities and stimuli of their environment (Pilkington, 2023, p. 8). In this regard, the underdeveloped radical milieu in Greece stems from Greece's geographical importance for transnational Islamist networks that render any militant activity that could jeopardise authorities' 'tolerance' counterproductive. Moreover, it is linked to the organisational fragmentation of Muslim communities. Prima facie, this would suggest less control over developments on the ground. However, it appears to also hinder the formation of networks that could enable and support the radicalisation trajectory of individuals and, most importantly, its culmination into violent activity. At the same time, though, it deprives Greece from possible constraining influences of a more organised non-extremist milieu.

There are additional factors linked to the Muslim community's characteristics. Its small size, in conjunction with Greece's recent transition to a migrant-receiving country, is central in this regard, mainly because it means that Greece does not have a sizeable second generation. Moreover, migrants in Greece appear relatively well-integrated and in contact with the wider society, largely because there is no pronounced ghettoisation. However, the post-2015 flows differ, not only because of their size but also because their experiences, living conditions, and the pervasive

feeling of being stuck in Greece might create conditions more conducive to radicalisation.

In institutional terms, it is noteworthy that Greece's more fluid migration management approach and the lack of distinct institutions seem to translate into less identifiable targets of frustration and less pronounced perception of institutionalised racism. However, the lack of institutions creates a gap between Muslims and state authorities that takes the form of distrust, especially regarding radicalisation-related issues. It is rather indicative that while community leaders presented an image of cooperation, other Muslim individuals ranked informing the security forces as a last resort option in the hypothetical scenario of encountering a radicalised individual.

If we assess these findings in light of the proposed analytical framework, we may conclude that Greece's 'immunity' to religiously inspired violent radicalisation is not built on resilience-producing attributes, but rather the absence of key precipitating factors that could 'push' its admittedly high levels of polarisation in the direction of violent extremism. In fact, much of Greece's resilience capacity is incidental and replete with contradictions. An indicative example is the coexistence of elements of cultural bridging capital, stemming from Greek society's high levels of religiosity, with a strong and highly exclusionary ethno-religious identity that is expected to become unsustainable when second-generation Muslim migrants will seek a sense of belonging. The limited impact of precipitating factors—mainly those linked to the creation of a conducive environment (community isolation, perceived discrimination/racism, and feelings of relative deprivation) and the operation of mobilising networks—are largely policy-dependent and thus inextricably linked to the relevant institutional framework.

However, the institutional and policy framework is at best rudimentary. On the one hand, it mirrors the ad hoc approach identified in migration policy. On the other, it demonstrates an entrenched securitised approach to radicalisation in general. Narrowly focused on behavioural radicalisation, policy is anchored to law enforcement, while other 'softer' components remain underdeveloped. Greece's prevention strategy is almost exclusively focused on training security forces in identifying 'visible signs of radicalisation'. Cross-institutional cooperation, particularly between security and non-security agencies, is not institutionalised, but primarily based on personal contacts and unofficial networks that operate in the absence of an overarching national policy and institutional memory,

while Muslim communities are not consulted or involved in any direct capacity. In light of the above, the lack of radicalisation in Greece seems to spring out of Zeus's head, 'fully-armoured' yet inexplicable since much of Greece's 'radicalisation-protective particularity' does not stem from a concrete strategy or tailored policies, but rather the lack thereof. This creates an implicit climate of complacency, where concerns about the future are easily shrugged off with semi-humorous references to Greece's tendency to address foreseeable problems only after they have occurred.

Notes

1. See https://islamforgreeks.org/.
2. Cognitive radicalisation refers to extremist ideas and beliefs, while behavioural is concerned with extremist behaviour (Neumann, 2013), and as such it is closer to the concept of violent radicalisation. While behavioural radicalisation is more straightforward since it manifests with criminal or violent acts or both, cognitive radicalisation is harder to pinpoint because the definition of 'mainstream' and 'extreme' ideas might vary temporally and spatially. Also, the relationship between extremist ideas and violence is neither linear nor automatic (Borum, 2011), while it can easily turn into a polemical tool, particularly when employed to attack specific convictions (Hellyer & Grossman, 2019, p. 13).
3. More information on their work can be found on the KEMEA website: https://kemea.gr/.
4. For a more detailed overview of the status and role of the Greek Orthodox Church in Greece in the constitution and political practice, compared with other south-eastern European countries, see (Magazzini et al., 2022).
5. Each category consists of three factors. Conducive environment: community isolation, discrimination/racism, and relative deprivation. Opportunity: political injustice, active redress, and positive reward. Extremist discourse: exclusionary identities, mainstream disengagement, and psychological stress. Mobilising networks: antagonistic environment, charismatic recruiters, and online radicalisation. For a detailed discussion, see McNeil-Willson et al. (2019, pp. 15–18).
6. Until 2018, Sharia law regulated all family and inheritance affairs of the Muslim minority in Thrace. A female member of the minority,

named Molla Sali, filed a complaint against Greece at the European Court of Human Rights, contesting the obligatory application of Sharia law in an inheritance dispute, despite her deceased husband's will, which named his wife as the only beneficiary. The Court ruled in favour of Ms. Sali, which led Greece to introduce law 4511/2018, which rendered the application of Sharia non-obligatory.

7. In 2010, Egyptian fishermen working in the wider Thessaloniki area in northern Greece formed the 'Union of Egyptian Fishermen of Nea Michaniona' which led a strike to demand better working conditions and wages, signalling the first—and unfortunately apparently the only—organised effort of this kind by migrant workers (Ios, 2010).

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CHAPTER 4

Navigating Shifting Narratives of Terrorism and Resilience: The Spanish Case

Abstract Spain was the first European country to suffer a large-scale jihadist attack on its territory—the 2004 train bombings in Madrid claimed by Al-Qaeda. Yet Spanish society's response at that time, as well as in 2017 following the terrorist attacks in Barcelona, did not embrace a traditional securitised 'War on Terror' approach, but rather invested significant resources in engaging civil society in its P/CVE programmes. This chapter investigates why this is so and how we can understand the relatively low polarisation levels in Spain between the institutions, majority society, and Muslim minorities.

Keywords Resilience · Religiously inspired violent radicalisation · Polarisation · Spain · Muslims

Introduction

As of 2024, Spain is the European country that has suffered the single religiously inspired attack with the highest death toll: the Madrid train bombings of 11 March 2004 claimed by Al-Qaeda in which ten bombs exploded on four trains in three stations during the busy morning rush hour, killing 193 and injuring around 2000 people (Ministerio del Interior, 2024; Reinares, 2016).

T. Magazzini et al., *The Non-radicalisation of Muslims in Southern Europe*, Rethinking Political Violence,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71996-7_4

More recently, in August 2017, a total of 16 civilians and eight perpetuators were killed, and over 150 injured, in attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, in Catalunya, that were claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Despite these attacks declaring a jihadist motive on Spanish territory, the impression of experts as well as of practitioners working on religious diversity and violent radicalisation is that Spanish society has overall responded very differently to the terrorist threat compared to the securitised 'War on Terror' approach seen elsewhere (Bourekba, 2018, 2021; Colás, 2010; Garcés Mascareñas, 2018; Magazzini, 2019). While in the aftermath of some terrorist attacks in other European countries (such as the 2005 London bombings) indiscriminate cases of harassment towards Muslims were recorded, a similar situation towards Muslims in Spain did not take place neither following the 2004 Madrid bombings nor after the 2017 Barcelona attacks. The Spanish state did not declare itself to be at war with its migrant or religious minorities or declare a state of emergency curtailing rights. In terms of public narrative and politicians' responses, the official discourse around such events has also been less polarised and not as exploited for political gains as similar terrorist attacks elsewhere (for instance, France in 2015 or Germany in 2016, where extreme right-wing parties in the opposition were more successful in turning the terrorist attacks into xenophobic and Islamophobic sentiments). As Garcés Mascareñas (2018) put it, Spain 'went off script' by not adopting an 'us-them' exclusionary and dichotomous discourse as the dominant story. In the aftermath of 11M—as the 2004 attacks are referred to in Spain—a large section of civil society turned their anger towards the government rather than 'rallying around the flag' and voted it out in the national elections that took place a few days after the attack. In 2017, a different kind of attack took place in Barcelona and Cambrils—with vehicles ramming pedestrians on the busy street of La Rambla and in a coastal town south of Barcelona—but still one that claimed jihadist inspiration and involved civilian victims. The response from civil society and institutions was again a strong refusal to blame religious or migrant minorities, with demonstrations marching under the banner of a 'triple NO to terrorism, xenophobia, and fear' (Garcés Mascareñas, 2018, p. 21). Ada Colau, Barcelona's mayor, gave a speech in the wake of these events stating in no ambiguous terms: 'Barcelona is a city of peace. Terror will not stop us from being who we are: a city open to the world, courageous and supportive' (Barcelona Municipality, 2017, in Lahnait, 2018, p. 47).

Against the background of European societies becoming increasingly polarised and of religious and ethnic minorities often bearing the brunt of such polarisation (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019; van der Tol & Becker, 2024), this chapter is interested in exploring the apparent contradiction posed by the Spanish case: on the one hand, Spain suffered serious religiously inspired or attributed attacks that are on the scale of the 2005 London bombings, the 2015 Paris attacks, or the 2016 Nice truck attack. Yet, the level of social hostilities involving religion in recent years has been assessed as 'moderate' (Yakova et al., 2021), a considerable feat if we consider that the same indicator is assessed as 'high' or 'very high' in most other European countries (including Italy, which has not suffered any similar attack).

The question that this chapter asks is therefore: how can this conundrum be explained? How have both Muslim migrant minorities and the Spanish authorities sought to not polarise or violently radicalise the debate?

A few possible explanations for Spain's 'exceptionalism' have been put forward in the literature: some scholars stress the role of Spain's international affairs and diplomacy, highlighting the high, if asymmetric, interdependence of relations with its North African 'near abroad,' especially Morocco (Colás, 2010). Another possible explanation can be found in the historical legacies of national separatist terrorism, and particularly in the longevity of ETA's campaign, which has led to a specific Spanish narrative around victimhood and around the representation of terrorism as an individual, 'apolitical' act that requires social intervention (Heath-Kelly & Fernández de Mosteryín, 2021). Others yet have traced the emergence of the concepts of countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) in Spain, and their application, to illustrate how such frameworks have broadened the scope of actors involved in countering and preventing terrorism from security forces to multiple social and civil society stakeholders (Bourekba, 2021).

While each of these possible explanations provides valuable insights into specific aspects of Spain's response to terrorist attacks, this chapter builds on this body of work to bring these different strands together and complement them with first-hand data to explain how they can be understood in terms of precipitating factors that 'push' polarisation in the direction of violent extremism and of those that build resilience against this outcome (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019).

Following the introduction, this chapter is structured as follows: we start by presenting the specific methodological context of the study and then offer a critical overview of the Spanish context regarding both its history of violent attacks and its governance of religious minorities. Secondly, possible explanations for explaining the (relative) continuation of 'politics as usual' (Colás, 2010)—despite the cases of violent radicalisation—are explored as they have been put forward in the literature and as they emerge from the interviews' material.

Focusing on the shifting narratives around terrorism, P/CVE, and resilience over the past two decades, the analytical framework outlined in Chapter 1 is employed to make sense of the precipitating factors that might have 'pushed' some individuals towards violent extremism, and those that build resilience against it, both at the macro and the micro levels. Finally, the conclusions summarise the Spanish response to the terrorist attacks and attempt to evaluate how and why this has developed differently from what could have been expected, presenting a complex picture of a 'civil-society-engagement' approach that is built on resilience-producing attributes but that has the side effect of eliciting a degree of securitisation of civil society itself.

Methodology

This chapter builds upon extensive desk research on the scholarly literature and policy documents and grey materials including some media sources on the issues of violent radicalisation attributed to religious ideology in Spain. Such materials relate to the country's recent history of violence, the presence of Muslim minorities, and the development of strategies, measures, and policies to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE). The analysis of such materials is complemented by 14 semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders including practitioners at the local and national levels, representatives of civil society organisations, policymakers involved in the governance of religious diversity, and individuals responsible for the prevention and detection of radicalisation processes, as well as with a small number of Muslim individuals from different backgrounds and trajectories who hold a relatively prominent role in their communities. Twelve interviews were conducted between October and December 2021 by a graduate student, supervised by the authors, who is both a researcher and an activist against discrimination and Islamophobia in Spain. Two interviews were conducted by

the first author of the book in 2019 (for a full list of interviews, including coded identifiers, see Appendix). Most of the interviews were conducted in person in Barcelona and its environs, although some were conducted online, either because of geographical distance or due to limitations arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Situating the Spanish Context of Violent Radicalisation and Religious Governance

Until the early 2000s, terrorism and violent extremism in Spain had been mainly associated with secessionist and political claims and organisations rather than religiously inspired ones. In particular, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA, 'Basque Country and Freedom'), a Basque separatist group engaged in a violent campaign of bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations throughout Spain dominated much of the political, mediatic, and counter-terrorism efforts for half a century. Founded in 1959 (under Franco's dictatorship) initially by a group of students frustrated by the moderate positions of the Basque Nationalist Party, it became the most prominent group within the Basque National Liberation Movement and the main actor in the Basque conflict, killing 853 people (among which 340 civilians) and injuring thousands between 1968 and 2010 (Lopez Romo, 2023; Magazzini, 2019). In the 1980s, the Antiterrorist Liberation Groups (Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación, GAL) death squads were illegally established by the Spanish government as a reaction to ETA. GAL was involved in the kidnapping, torturing, and murder of ETA members in the years of the so-called Dirty War (Carnevali Rodríguez, 2015) and is now officially recognised as a terrorist organisation itself.[1] After a series of cease-fire declarations in the 1990s, ETA announced the cessation of armed activity in 2011, the surrender of all its weapons in 2017, and in May 2018 published a letter declaring that it had completely dissolved all its structures and ended its political initiative (Ormazabal, 2018).

This does not however mean that religiously inspired or attributed violent radicalisation did not make its appearance in Spain until the twenty-first century: in 1985, the year prior to Spain's referendum to join NATO, El Descanso, a restaurant on Madrid's outskirts known for being frequented by American military personnel that worked at the close-by Torrejón Air Base, was bombed in a terrorist attack that killed 18 and injured 82 (Aizpeolea, 2010; Jordán, 2005). The attack was claimed by

Wa'd (a front of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—Special Command) and the Islamic Jihad Organisation (Cembrero, 1985), but this was complicated by multiple attributions and claims.[2] The case was archived in 1987 due to the lack of known perpetrator (Aizpeolea, 2010).

Despite this important case, the collective memory around terrorism in Spain continued to revolve around separatist, rather than jihadist, terrorism until two decades later; violent extremism and radicalisation were associated with political rather than religious motives. One informant with a long career as a NATO radicalisation and terrorism analyst stated:

> In Spain we had a terrorism problem, which was ETA's independentist terrorism. And everyone was focused on this. What was happening with the Muslims and others was something distant, except for that [1985] attack in Torrejón, at the North American base, in which some people died…Suddenly 9/11 happened, but it was still something far away, it was the Americans, and although we got involved in the infamous Iraq war, no one thought that it [Spain's military involvement in Iraq] could make us pay a toll. And then it did. And it caught us a little, forgive my language, with our pants down. Despite our political situation, with the invasion of a Muslim country, despite our history and our traditional friendship with the Arab people, we were unprepared, we had no idea. And I think that the State Security Forces, with all my respect, entered like a bull in a china shop. (PR2)

The 2004 attacks in Madrid played a crucial role in shifting the narrative. At the time, José Maria Aznar's second mandate was coming to an end, with national elections scheduled for March 14. Aznar, the first openly conservative prime minister since Spain's transition to democracy in 1975, had leaned heavily in his political campaign on pushing a hard line of combatting and eradicating ETA[3] without engaging in any kind of negotiations. In the wake of the attacks, the Spanish government's initial attempt to blame ETA, even though the evidence pointed elsewhere, generated a huge backlash, resulting in Aznar being voted out of office.

The generalised feeling was that not only had the security apparatus been incompetent and grossly failed at protecting civilians, but also that the government was trying to capitalise on the tragedy for political gains. Civil society, possibly as a reaction to this context, thus did not point the finger towards Islam or Muslims in Spain. On 14 March 2004,

the socialist party won the elections with almost 40% of the votes, and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero took office as prime minister in April. Commenting on this reaction, the NATO radicalisation analyst cited above, observed:

> In general, I think that we Spaniards can be happy with our reaction. Whoever had [Islamophobic] prejudices, they already had them, and it was not that they developed them because of the attacks. And also, the Islamic community, the Muslims, reacted very well. The attacks in Madrid shocked us…but compared to what I have seen in other countries, I think we have reacted well, we have not seen major attacks against the Muslim population. (PR2)

Corroborating this view, one imam's experience of the 2004 attacks was that both the majority population and the Muslim minority were traumatised by the events, but that Al-Qaeda made no real gains with the massacre, either in terms of polarisation or in terms of attracting followers in Spain:

> I believe that, on the 11M, the general reaction of Spanish society has been very mature, because there were no speeches of reprisals against the Muslim community, there were no discussions of revenge; rather the debate was about the lies of the government to the attributed responsibility to ETA, so then the Muslim community was somewhat freed from that feeling of guilt or the feeling that society saw it as an enemy. (MGR4)

While 11M did leave some degree of stigma and increased suspicion towards Muslim individuals, in the opinion of this Muslim leader this was a minority reaction, while the Muslim population also strongly mobilised to condemn the attacks:

> What took place, was a tremendous concern from the Muslim community itself, in fact there were demonstrations against these attacks, there were statements from practically everyone, repudiating the attacks and also in general, the Muslim community did not understand those attacks at all. The murders of 11M, those attacks had no logic: why attack trains packed with hard-working people, among whom there were also Muslim people, Moroccan people, etc.? So there the terrorists lost, they gained nothing. If it was an expression of revenge for the Iraq war, they did what they wanted, but if their goal was to cause a schism, a division or a divorce

> between the Muslim community and the general society, it didn't work. (MGR4)

At the same time, the attacks also fostered an important spike in interest in issues of security and terrorism that took central stage in both media and politics. A Muslim youth leader voiced his frustration for the fact that there had not been enough prevention at an earlier stage:

> So, I could say that yes, the response of the State and of the institutions was all very good, ensuring coexistence and social cohesion and defending the Muslim community, but I think that is not the case, or not enough, because that work had to be done much earlier, and not when something like this happens. (MGR2)

Despite this initial reaction, with time, the paradigm of radicalisation in Spain has shifted to become closely linked to its Muslim population, and both discourses and policies have tended to identify Muslim youths of migrant origin as the most vulnerable to radicalisation processes (Bargados, 2016). This development, however, appears to be more tied to general trends in Europe, and globally, than to specific Spanish events.

In 2005 the EU adopted a Counter-Terrorism Strategy structured on four pillars: prevent, protect, pursue, and respond (Bourekba, 2021, p. 90). In the aftermath of 2004, and partly tied to these broader European policies, Spain also developed a series of counter-terrorist initiatives aimed at bolstering the capabilities of its National Intelligence Service (CNI), recruiting more police officers and civil guards, and creating a National Counter-terrorism Coordination Centre (ibid., p. 89).

A few years later, in 2012, a Comprehensive Strategy against International Terrorism and Radicalisation (EICTIR) acknowledged violent radicalisation as one of the main risks for national security. In 2014, the Intelligence Centre against Terrorism and Organised Crime (CITCO) was created by royal decree 873 to oversee the implementation and development of the EICTIR, and in January 2015 the National Plan was approved by the Spanish government.

However, it is noteworthy that even though the 2004 terrorist attacks and international developments triggered rapid security transformations, with religion becoming problematised in the public sphere, Spain's response was not limited to one of securitisation politics. Raising Spanish policymakers' awareness of the country's increased and growing Muslim

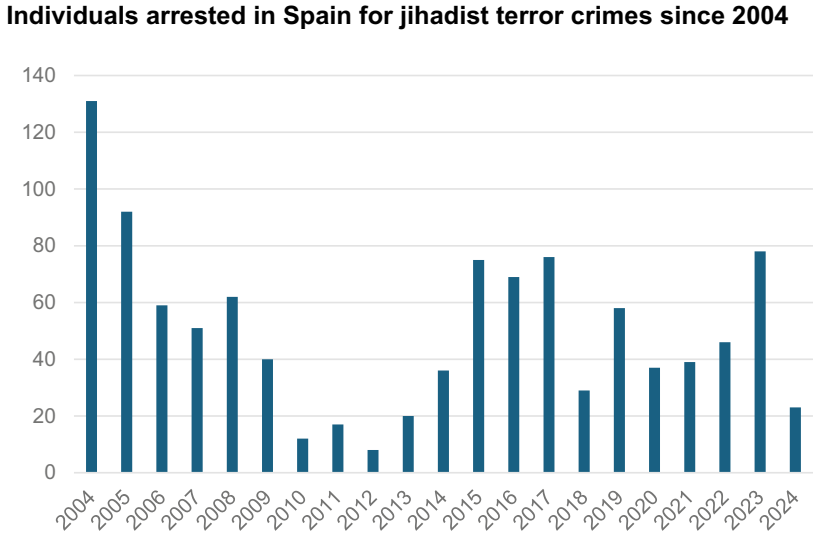
population generated a heightened interest towards religious minorities more broadly. Spanish authorities' perception of religious governance as a public issue shifted and was included in the public agenda which, in turn, in 2005 led to the creation of the Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation (Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia) to complement the pre-existing institutional arrangements between the state and the Islamic Commission—the representative organ of Muslims with the Spanish administration[4]—that had come to be perceived as insufficient to manage religious diversity (Starr-Deelen & Pazos, 2018, p. 16; PR3, RS5).

While from 2015 Spain equipped itself with a Comprehensive Strategy against International Terrorism and Radicalisation (EICTIR) and the number of counter-terrorist operations increased, compared to the previous decade (as can be seen in Fig. 4.1), the governmental approach also shifted over the past decade from 'traditional' counter-terrorism centred on security measures (that one informant had termed the 'entering like a bull in a china shop' approach) to a strategy centred on the idea of detecting and preventing violent radicalisation by engaging with civil society. In line with this understanding, in 2015, legislation and amendments to the Penal Code were adopted to expand the behaviours classified as 'terrorist offenses,' while a whole network of political and social mechanisms to prevent radicalisation began to be developed, calling for the collaboration of non-police agents as well as of society as a whole. Such mechanisms intensified after the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils in 2017—also the year in which Spain began the implementation of its national CVE plan, led by the Intelligence Centre for Countering Terrorism and Organised Crime, which had been approved in 2015 but had lacked funding and political support for close to two years (US Department of State, 2017).

It is noteworthy that the plan for the EICITIR's 'prevention' pillar was developed in 2015 into the Strategic Plan against Violent Radicalisation (PEN-LCRV) as a multistakeholder, multilevel plan produced by the Intelligence Centre against Terrorism and Organised Crime (CITCO) in collaboration with a broad range of ministries, external experts, and civil society representatives.

One difference between the PEN-LCRV and the EICTIR is that while the EICTIR explicitly referenced Muslim minorities, the involvement of a range of actors in the drafting of the PEN-LCRV meant that this reference was removed. As explained by one practitioner from the Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation who was involved in the process:

Source: Interior Ministry of Spain, own elaboration



Source: Interior Ministry of Spain, own elaboration

Fig. 4.1 Arrests and operations conducted in connection to jihadist terrorism in Spain

> Of course, the implementation of such a Plan is not easy. But it is important that there is no dog-whistling about specific religious minorities. The way I see it, what frames and what gives sense to this plan is the use of violence. Radicalism per se is not a problem: being a radical can be a positive thing, in many instances. The difference is in the use of violence to claim a stance. (PR3)

The distinction between cognitive and behavioural radicalism[5] also emerged from various informants as a dimension that is particularly important in building trust and establishing a workable cooperation between the security forces (RS4), Muslim religious leaders (MGR1; MGR4), and practitioners from religious diversity governmental offices (PR1; PR3). An expert on religious diversity who also worked in the security forces noted that 'ideological extremism may pose a problem for coexistence, but not for security' (RS4).

The conflation of the two concepts (cognitive and behavioural radicalisation) can become an issue if strong religious engagement is misread by the authorities as a sign of violent radicalisation. The leader of a grassroots Sufi Muslim organisation felt that this had happened in some instances, with Muslim youths of migrant origin being mistakenly identified as a threat (MGR1). Another informant relayed that as a spokesperson for a specific Muslim community within a local administration, he often felt the need to reaffirm the difference between religion and religious extremism, on the one hand, and between religious extremism and violence, on the other:

> Because someone may consider themselves to be very orthodox in religion, and religion may be very central in their lives, and [the person in question] may even be very isolated from the rest of society, this does not mean that they are going to be violent. This orthodoxy has nothing to do with violence and is not exclusive to Islam. Radicalism exists in all religions and it does not equate violence. (MGR5)

While the wide range of experiences and approaches to defining and understanding what constitutes violent extremism and radicalisation can therefore not be subsumed to a generalised consensus, what is clear is that over the past decade there has been a vibrant, evolving (and at times heated) debate in Spain among and between security forces, practitioners, and Muslim activists accompanying the increased interest and resources

invested in measures countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE).

Against this backdrop, after the 2017 attacks that killed 16 in Cambrils and Barcelona, the reaction displayed again, even more strongly than in 2004, on behalf of both institutions and Muslim leaders was fundamentally a solidaristic message to ensure that Muslim minorities were not conflated with violence:

> There was a very quick reaction from the city council and other administrations to try from minute zero to separate the attack from religion. There was a statement from the city council very quickly; the communities also took a position very quickly and condemned the attacks. And I think that has helped prevent polarisation at the societal level or more Islamophobia or anything. (PR1)

The same practitioner working in the Barcelona city council also pointed to the presence of the existing structures as useful sites that enabled for exchange and cooperation to take place together with Muslim minority representatives:

> I think that the existence of our office [at the Barcelona City Council] and the contact work we carried out made it possible to convene the communities two days after the attacks [of 2017] and work together on how they felt, what needs they had, and what things they were detecting, and we gave a message of unity as a society. In the demonstration against the attacks, it was decided to carry banners against Islamophobia. In other words, we wanted to say one thing is the rejection of the attacks and another is the rejection of the Muslim religion, which is not justified, and we do not want one thing to lead to the other. We were also able to accompany the communities thanks to the previous work we had been doing, and I think this helped to establish links and detect possible needs and to be very attentive to ensure that there was no direct impact. (PR1)

Some Muslim activists (RS3, RS5) voiced discomfort in feeling that Muslim communities were expected to repeatedly condemn the attacks; however, the kind of political narratives that aimed at polarising society often transposed and mixed xenophobic tropes with a better-rehearsed nationalist rhetoric that centred regional separatism as a threat. With the Barcelona attack in August 2017—and tensions between Catalunya and the central government especially high in the build-up to the

Catalan independence referendum in October 2017—despite having been declared unconstitutional, the extreme right-wing party Vox attempted to link the two issues, but with little success. In the words of one imam based in Catalunya:

> They [Vox] talk that there will soon be a Catalan Islamic republic, or that the Muslim population in Catalonia supports independence, or that the majority of the Muslim population in Catalonia would like an independent Catalonia. That's your problem. If no one identifies with your project for Spain, that is a political question. But there is no boom [of polarisation], in Spain the attacks of March 11 and August 17 have not led to a significant increase in Islamophobia. Nor has it played any role in the radicalisation of the Muslim population. (MGR4)

The Muslim Minority/ies in Spain

Based on the literature as well as the interviews, what we gather from the experience of the attacks that took place in Spain is that 2004 and 2017 were quite different in nature. The 2004 attack seems to hold fairly clear links to a perception of a specific political injustice on the international level—the war in Iraq—that represents a significant opportunity factor. On the other hand, in the case of the attacks of 2017, while a conducive environment in terms of 'distant suffering' can also be found, the attackers have been labelled 'lone wolves'; they were not really embedded in any organisational structure and their radicalisation can more likely be explained in terms of individual vulnerability factors.

To build resilience towards opportunity structures that might lead to violent radicalisation, the Spanish government has attempted to rethink its governance of religious diversity following the 2004 attacks. The most noticeable development that resulted from such attempt, in terms of institutional structures to address religious diversity, was the *Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation* (Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia). Created at the request of the Ministry of Interior but nested under the Ministry of Justice, the Foundation was founded to promote the integration of religious minorities, particularly 'to encourage the recognition and the accommodation of religious diversity as basic elements to fully guaranteeing freedom of religion and to enabling an appropriate environment for living together' (Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia, 2024), with the goal of addressing the Muslim (mainly migrant) population.

Who, though, constitutes the Muslim population in Spain? One important factor to take into account, and which renders the picture more complex, is the internal diversity of Muslims in Spain that cannot be subsumed to one country of origin or tradition and is broadly scattered across the country. While exact statistics are not available because religious affiliation data is not collected in the national census, according to a demographic study carried out by the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE) and the Andalusian Observatory (2024) there are currently around 2,400,000 Muslims residing in Spain (UCIDE, 2024, p. 9). Thus, Muslims account for approximately 4% of the total population. Of this population, around 45% are Spanish nationals (a little over one million), of which around 29,000 were naturalised between 1968 and 1997, around 61,000 obtained Spanish citizenship between 1998 and 2007, and 480,000 became Spanish citizens between 2008 and 2022. Among foreign Muslim residents, the predominant nationality is Moroccan (representing 36% of the total Muslim population in Spain), followed by Pakistani (4%), Algerian (5.6%), and other citizenships. Of the 17 Spanish regions, the one that hosts the largest number of Muslims by a significant margin is Catalunya, with over half a million Muslim residents, followed by Andalusia. Barcelona, Madrid, Ceuta, and Melilla are the municipalities with the highest number of Muslim residents. The fact that no city from Andalusia appears on this list is because the majority of Muslims in the region are scattered across the large areas of agricultural land where many migrants (especially Moroccans, Senegalese, and Gambians) are employed.

Given this picture, it is unsurprising that a recurrent theme emerging from the interviews has been the diversity of Muslim communities present in Spain (MGR3, MGR1, MGR2, MGR5, RS2). In the words of a youth leader of a grassroots Muslim organisation:

> Starting from the fact that the Muslim community is not a homogeneous community, obviously the Pakistani Muslim-majority mosque is very different and has a different reality than the Moroccan reality, the Senegalese reality, and so on….There are spaces for collaboration, but if you go to a Pakistani mosque in Besós, it will be hard to find Moroccans, and vice versa…There is a diversity of currents, of Islamic thoughts, a diversity of ways of living and understanding Islam and that is reflected in Muslim society. But something important to note, I think, is that the faithful do not go to a specific mosque responding to any affiliation or belonging to

> a specific [religious] current…people go to their neighbourhood mosque, they go to the mosque where they have always gone. (MGR2)

In terms of institutional recognition by the Spanish state and its relations with Muslim minorities, the main legal instrument in place remains the 1992 Cooperation Agreement of the Spanish State with the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE). The agreement mirrors the same laws adopted in 1992 with the Jewish and Evangelical communities and regulates the right of Muslims to establish places of worship and be allocated land for burials. It also allows for religious assistance in military facilities and schools and includes exemptions from taxation for religious purposes, among its main features (Magazzini, 2021). The desire to have one single interlocutor on behalf of the Spanish state led to the agreement being signed with the Islamic Commission of Spain as the representative of all Muslims (as with the Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities of Spain, and the Jewish Communities of Spain). The CIE is however seen by some Muslim leaders and activists as insufficiently independent to effectively defend the Muslim community in its internal diversity because of a certain artificiality in having to represent a vastly diverse population as a whole in public administrations (RS1, RS3).

In 2005, as mentioned, the *Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation* (FPC) was established with the explicit mandate to promote religious pluralism and respond to the demands of Spain's Muslim religious minorities. However, the collaboration between the Foundation and the Counter-terrorist Intelligence Agency (Centro de Inteligencia contra el Terrorismo y el Crimen Organizado, CITCO) in P/CVE raised some misgivings among Muslim leaders. In practice, while the FPC is premised on the protection and promotion of religious diversity, how government institutions have set up and developed the Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation—which reflected the existing narratives about minorities in Spain—seems to involve its branding and promotion of interfaith dialogue theories rather than developing practical tools for resilience of Muslim communities against radicalisation processes through the empowerment of grassroots Muslim communities.

In terms of the recognition of religious diversity, inequalities in the status of majority and minority religions also persist, with an unspoken hierarchy that sees Catholicism as a 'default' national feature. As one expert on religious diversity in Spain put it:

> I believe that in terms of respect for religious diversity, the Spanish state is not France, where secularism is understood as the right to prohibit individual religiosity, but it is somewhere in the middle because we respect religious plurality with the 1992 agreements, but then we do not comply with them. I believe that the fact that Spain is not entirely non-confessional is something positive because there is greater respect for religion…but at the same time we know that there are hierarchies between the different religions and the agreements with religions other than Catholicism are not complied with. (RS5)

Possible Explanations for Understanding Spain's 'Exceptional Normalcy'

In discussing Spain's unique societal and policy responses to the manifestation of global jihadist terrorism on its own soil, various possible explanations have been put forward. Alejandro Colás, in 2010, stressed the role of international relations and diplomacy—particularly of Spain's external relations with its North African 'near abroad,' Morocco, alongside the Spanish state's political relations with the representative organisations of its own Muslim populations and the juridical-institutional reactions of the state to the 11M attacks. In each of these domains, he argued, the continuation of what he termed 'politics as usual' can be seen as the result of a certain degree of securitisation of civil society rather than of grand shifts in counter-terrorism policy, which has in turn been associated with the country's overseas development strategy (Colás, 2010). In practice, in Colás's view (that draws on Duffield's 'new development-security terrain,' 2001), civil society and development policies have gradually become 'sites of state intervention'—both discursive and juridico-political—in the name of counter-terrorism and national security' (Colás, 2010, p. 315). Despite a 'soft,' developmentalist approach, such dynamics have migration at their core and therefore involve, and reinforce, structural racism and the perception of the Arab migrant as dangerous since 'jihadist terrorism has facilitated the framing of North African immigration to Spain as a potential threat' (ibid., p. 317; see also Collyer, 2006).

Looking instead at national, historical dynamics, Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Laura Fernández de Mosteryín (2021) argue that because of ETA's heavy legacy, Spain has engaged, over the years, in an effort to narrate and represent terrorism as a fanatical, and importantly, *apolitical* violent type of crime. If terrorism is framed as a non-strategic, non-instrumental form

of violence, pathologising the violent militant as deficient in rationality or social capital means that terrorism 'should be fought on the terrain of the social – incorporating a variety of different actors and professional fields, including social media companies, multi-agency partnerships, and victims themselves' (ibid., p. 5). With violent radicalisation increasingly understood as a societal problem (Moreras, 2018; Ruipérez Canales et al., 2023), it is therefore natural to seek to address this threat in terms of social policies and not only of securitisation or policing.

Indeed, Spain seems to have embraced, at least to some extent, the view that socio-economic variables overlap with cultural ones in the radicalisation process: if radicalisation and violent extremism are seen in terms of individualised failed integration, they therefore require 'a mapping of the human geography of radicalisation (terrorist networks, places of socialisation, family ties)' that are intimately linked to the individual urban, social, and emotional trajectories of radicalised individuals (Bourekba, 2018, p. 11). The retracing of the development of P/CVE policies and measures, and their overlap, by Moussa Bourekba (2018, 2021) claims that this represents a step forward in the approach to terrorism since it aims to address the causes leading to it. However, in promoting 'detection' and 'prevention' the state also assigns an ambiguous role to vulnerable groups and individuals that, because of their identity, become associated with being seen both as victims and threats: as both 'at risk' and 'risky' (Bourekba, 2021, p. 97, see also Heath-Kelly, 2013).

A Foreign Component Among the Structural 'Push Factors'?

In our operational framework in Chapter 1, building on the analytical approach of McNeil-Willson et al. (2019), we identified the structural or macro level with a conducive environment that provides widespread grievances, or 'push factors,' to polarisation and violent radicalisation. Such factors can comprise community isolation, discrimination, and relative deprivation. In the case of Spain, with Islam being strongly associated to an 'other' foreign religion despite its secular presence in the Iberic peninsula, the feeling of discrimination among Muslims, especially those belonging to a visible migrant minority, was a theme that often came up in conversation with interviewees. The spokesperson and former president of a Muslim Sufi organisation of mainly Senegalese migrants commented in this regard:

> We often have visits from the security forces, and I wouldn't call them courtesy visits. Since September 11, 2001, we have been controlled, we have been living in Big Brother. That doesn't stop me from living my life. If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear. Our Sufi branch has taught us that if you have nothing to hide you have nothing to fear. There was a time when there were surveillance cameras focused on the door. I don't know if they were for the street, or whatever, but there were. The police contact us every now and then. We have a good relationship with them. (MGR5)

Despite assurances that there is cooperation and mutual respect between Muslim leaders and the security forces, the feeling of being singled out because of their faith is palpable and widespread. In the words of the same Muslim representative:

> They don't ask directly, but the way they talk, is to say, 'we are here': it is their way of seeing things, their job is not to control, but it is something they do to protect citizens. Yes, but if you direct it [surveillance] towards me, I would like to know why? Why are you directing it towards me? Why don't you go to the church door and sit there instead. (MGR5)

One imam who has a long trajectory of being involved in community work, especially with youth considered to be at risk of radicalising, was harsher in his assessment of the state's policies, considering them not only useless, but harmful:

> In reality, there is no radicalised person who has stopped being radical through the institutions of the State, not one. What's more, the State's anti-terrorist policy has generated more terrorists. *The repression has generated more radicalism*. Prisons are a good example of this. People go to jail for drugs, or something else, and they come out radicalised. Then, Mr. State, with this Anti-terrorist Pact signed by Rajoy as president of the government and Pedro Sánchez[6] as head of the opposition, has also shown a brutal disregard and contempt for the Muslim community because the Islamic Commission of Spain [was not consulted]. (MGR4)

The risk of a vicious cycle of discrimination and structural racism, with young migrant men from North Africa disproportionately ending up in prisons, is part of a wider pattern of intersectional deprivation that sees Muslim migrant communities often occupying the margins of urban spaces, the housing market, schools, as well as lower paying jobs, while

the Iberic peninsula no longer represents that 'exception' that until the mid-2010s seemed to make it immune to populist radical right (Bargados, 2016; Heyne & Manucci, 2021; Peña Ramos et al., 2012). A case in point is a 'surveillance' web page called 'Stop Radicalisms' (*Stop Radicalismos*) launched in 2015 by the Ministry of Interior. Devised as a tool to facilitate citizens to denounce/alert the authorities regarding suspicious behaviours, it instead had the effect of fostering suspicion towards Muslims citizens and was eventually shut down.

At the same time, according to some interviewees, in the past decade there has been a worrisome process of Wahhabisation of Muslim-majority countries particularly in the Arab Muslim world, which has resulted at least in part from geopolitical dynamics and the failure of the Arab left. Such international developments end up having repercussions in Spain as well (MGR5, RS3, PR2). According to the spokesperson of a Muslim Sufi organisation:

> Saudi Arabia is beginning to prepare its cultural hegemony in the Islamic world by investing millions in Wahhabi literature that is sent to Islamic centres in different countries around the world. The M30 [the mosque on the M30 highway beltway is the largest in Madrid] is an example of this, where these books reach the Muslim community free of charge, and people, in an effort to recover a life with more spiritual meaning, begin to become 'radicalised' (in a rigorist sense), confusing Islam with the Wahhabi tendency. (MGR5)

Similarly, the imam who articulated his concerns regarding the effects of structural discrimination on Muslim youth also expressed preoccupation regarding foreign interference:

> There is clear interference by several states in the affairs of the Spanish Muslim community. I am talking about the Spanish State…but not only, also the interference of Morocco, mainly. Morocco grabs many of its citizens by the neck, the ear, or wherever, who are generally cowardly people, they are usually interested people, there is everything, there are those who do it out of fear, those who do it because they want to take a photo with the Consul, or to facilitate business, but there are many who are supervised by the Moroccan regime, and who lead Muslim communities in our country. I am referring to many mosques: there is even financing from the Moroccan regime. Not only Morocco, but also Saudi Arabia, with its

> great influence, with its large centres such as the M30, such as the Marbella Mosque, conditions the Muslim reality of the country. (MGR4)

Another Muslim leader pointed to the fact that while Spain had been too permissive, in his view, in allowing into the country imams from countries that are trying to push their own, strongly conservative interpretation of Islam, it has at the same time started to exercise an excessive policing of speech of Muslim leaders, expecting them to conform to liberal values (MGR2).

This ambivalence or idiosyncrasy of the Spanish approach towards its Muslim population in relation to P/CVE is not unique to its policies towards Muslims but echoes its broader approach towards marginalised communities, such as the Roma, for whom policies are developed through an 'explicit but not exclusive' lens (Magazzini & Piemontese, 2016). In practice, the target population that is seen as needing integration is singled out as a 'vulnerable group,' albeit with an effort not to make such measures explicitly discriminatory or 'exclusive.' The result is that 'the vulnerable groups and those at risk of radicalisation are at once *cooperating actors* and *targets* of the plan' (Bourekba, 2021, p. 95).

Radicalisation as (Individual) Failed Integration: Resilience Building at the Micro Level

Against the backdrop of Spain's shifting policies to address violent radicalisation from counter-terrorism to P/CVE, Heath-Kelly and Fernández de Mosteryín (2021) have observed how these have been accompanied by efforts to operationalise victimhood in collective memory as a tool to 'individualise' the issue and render apolitical any kind of grievance that turns violent. In this sense, it seems that there has been an active, and to some extent successful, attempt to delegitimise violence as a means of responding to grievances, reducing the 'pull factors' that might attract individuals who feel aggrieved within contemporary societies to engage in violent extremism as a tool to redress socio-economic and political inequalities.

The personal and individualised dimension of radicalisation becoming central to its understanding can be seen also in the language used in local protocols for the prevention, detection, and intervention of processes of Islamist radicalisation. The Catalan PRODERAI, (later changed into PRODERAEV), for instance, defined radicalisation as 'the result of a

complex process of a multifactorial nature. At its origin it is necessary to consider risk factors that refer to different areas: factors linked to personal development, the school context, the family environment, and the social context, and which are often interrelated' (PRODERAI, 2015, p. 4, cited in OPEV, 2017, p. 6).

While it is always difficult to make a clearcut distinction between personal attributes and societal influences, the micro level as identified in this volume's analytical framework refers to the individual and their immediate environment (notably the mobilising networks). In this respect, some informants who work with individuals considered to be at risk of radicalising have raised the issue of the need for strengthening community ties to build resilience:

> For me, the community is key because when an individual feels part of where he or she lives, whether through a cooperative, a collective, an association, it is much more difficult to want to harm that community. Therefore, it is very important to strengthen the community fabric. (PR3)

The risk is that otherwise the atomisation of youth that feels like it doesn't belong to a community can turn to violence through charismatic recruiters and online radicalisation. This can happen also to those individuals who might be considered 'well integrated' because of having a job or speaking the local language, but do not feel a sense of belonging. One researcher and activist commented, in reference to the perpetuators of the 2017 attacks in Barcelona:

> With the kids from Ripoll, for example, it was said that they were very integrated and felt good here when, in their own words, 'they felt like shit'…These kids spoke Catalan and were part of the football team, but they came from family situations of deep disengagement with the social and community fabric. They didn't feel that they were from Ripoll or Catalonia. They didn't feel part of a 'we'. (RS4)

Concluding Remarks

Differently from the other two chapters in this book which ask and answer why Muslims are not radicalising in Greece and Italy, this chapter has explored the exceptionalism of Spain that registers limited polarisation on

behalf of its Muslim migrant communities but also as regards the Spanish authorities' approach to preventing violent radicalisation and extremism.

Considering that there have been terrorist attacks on Spanish territory, how can we explain the relative low levels of polarisation on behalf of institutions, civil society, and Muslim minorities?

By tracing the violent attacks that have taken place, the main stakeholders and actors involved one element that emerged is that the political context tied to the legacy of ETA terrorism and the specificities of the 2004 attack itself resulted in both the government and civil society (including Muslim minorities) choosing to engage in building processes and structures centred on preventing violent radicalisation through a social, in addition to a security, approach.

Contrary to the cases of Italy or Greece, Spain has equipped itself with a P/CVE National Strategy, with a National Plan, and with multiple regional as well as local strategies and protocols to address the phenomenon of (violent) radicalisation. The infrastructure of these plans has put significant emphasis on the involvement and mobilisation of civil society and on Muslim minorities themselves in the prevention efforts, especially at the local level.

In this sense, there has been a real effort to set up institutional structures geared towards the accommodation of religious diversity and the involvement of civil society organisations. This effort has however built on a society and on structures that are still deeply embedded in majority bias, and the resulting arrangements have been characterised by an 'explicit but not exclusive' approach that identifies Muslims as both collaborators but also as constituting a potential threat. Such ambivalence has kept a high level of engagement alive between majorities, minorities, and institutions, but it has also done so within highly asymmetrical structures. The lack of resources for religious minorities has also meant that some mosques are increasingly accepting the support of foreign countries pushing a conservative agenda (MGR4, MGR5).

On the whole, we see that Spain presents a complex and layered picture of a 'civil-society-engagement' approach that, having recognised the dangers presented by opportunity structures for violent radicalisation, has invested political resources in building resilience-producing attributes. The ways in which the legislative and policy measures have been developed, however, have also had the side effect of making a number of

Muslim individuals and community representatives feel that their acceptance hinges on their collaboration with the security forces, eliciting a degree of securitisation of civil society itself.

Notes

1. The Spanish Ministry of the Interior identifies these five main categories as types of terrorist organisations that have engaged in acts of terrorism in Spain: radical and independent nationalist (ETA, responsible for the death of 853 people between 1968 and 2010); GAL (responsible for 27 deaths between 1983 and 1987); jihadists (attacks on El Descanso restaurant in 1985, Madrid in 2004, and Barcelona and Cambrils in 2017); extreme left (responsible for around 80 deaths); extreme right (responsible for around 60 murders). See https://www.interior.gob.es/opencms/pdf/archivos-y-documentacion/documentacion-y-publicaciones/publicaciones-descargables/victimas-del-terrorismo/Proyecto-Educativo-Memoria-y-Prevencion-del-Terrorismo./02_EL-TERRORISMO-EN-ESPANA_2-BACHILLERATO_eng_126220151.pdf.
2. There has been a lot of speculation around responsibility for this attack. The Minister of the Interior at the time, José Barrionuevo Peña, initially pointed to ETA, and both ETA and GRAPO (a Spanish clandestine Marxist-Leninist pro-republican group) claimed the attack at first, before denying involvement. Due to conflicting entanglements between different groups and ideologies, there was never a definitive answer on who carried out the attack, even though the government concluded that the Islamic Jihad Organisation and Wa'd had the most credible claim of responsibility following investigations by the National Police.
3. By the late 1990s, what had begun as fairly small pacifist demonstrations and organisations in the Basque Country had turned into a widespread national social movement that protested ETA's violent actions, held regular demonstrations and silent vigils, and involved (and were often led by) family members of people murdered by ETA. A turning point in this movement can be seen in 1997, when after having scaled up its targeting of civilians, ETA assassinated M. A. Blanco, a conservative politician of Aznar's party whom it had held hostage when the government did not give in to its demands that ETA prisoners be moved to jails in the Basque Country. This

murder was a tipping point that triggered massive peace mobilisations and demonstrations so that by the early 2000s rallying the anti-ETA public sentiment was a winning political strategy (Funes, 1998; Heath-Kelly & Fernández de Mosteryín, 2021).

4. The Islamic Commission signed State agreements adopted in Law 26/1992. For more on its role see the subsection 'The Muslim minority/ies in Spain.'
5. See Neumann (2013) for a detailed conceptualisation and framing.
6. The Anti-Jihadist Pact referred to is the 'Agreement to strengthen unity in defense of freedoms and in the fight against terrorism' signed in 2015 by the two main Spanish political parties. This took place in a climate of fear after the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris and represents an important step in Spain's intentions regarding the reformulation of the typologies of crime within the scope of terrorism. While this was the fourth Spanish anti-terrorism pact, it was the first that did not explicitly address ETA. See https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/news/Paginas/2015/20150211-rajoy-terrorism.aspx and also Tellez (2018).

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CHAPTER 5

A Southern European Exceptionalism? Opening the Debate

Abstract This chapter brings the threads of the previous ones together and compares among them. It reflects on how Italy, Greece, and Spain have been exceptional in their own way and the reasons why. Starting with a comparative overview of the different approaches that each country has adopted, we turn to discuss the possible explanations for each type of exceptionalism and weave them together in relation to our analytical framework of factors facilitating or impeding violent radicalisation. In conclusion, we consider the lessons learnt from the southern European dynamics that can contribute to our broader understanding of why and how violent religiously inspired radicalisation develops and how communities can prevent or address it.

Keywords Southern Europe · Comparative studies · Non-radicalisation · Exceptionalism · Resilience · Prevention

Introduction

As discussed earlier in this book, each of the three countries studied—Italy, Greece, and Spain—is exceptional in its own way. However, all can be related to a common analytical framework that speaks about the factors facilitating or impeding violent radicalisation among Muslim migrant or

T. Magazzini et al., *The Non-radicalisation of Muslims in Southern Europe*, Rethinking Political Violence,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71996-7_5

native populations. This chapter brings the threads of the previous ones together and discusses possible interpretations in relation to our proposed analytical framework. After presenting a comparative overview of the different approaches that each country has adopted, the chapter then seeks to explain each type of exceptionalism. In the concluding section, we consider the lessons learnt from the southern European dynamics that can contribute to our broader understanding of why and how violent religiously inspired radicalisation develops and how communities can prevent or address it.

Southern European Experiences of Violent Radicalisation and Extremism

The three southern European countries discussed in this book present several similarities and differences that complicate our analytical and operational framework. Indeed, Italy, Greece, and Spain have had very different experiences in terms of violent radicalisation and violent extremism. While Italy has experienced significant terrorist violence inspired by left- and right-wing political extremism as well as organised crime, Spain has struggled with nationalist separatist terrorism, while Greece has experienced mostly left-wing extremism in the past and right-wing and anti-religious minorities extremism in recent years. Of the three countries, Spain is the only one to have had religiously inspired terrorist attacks perpetrated on its territory (in 2004 and 2017). This section aims to provide some more details on the individual contexts and on how these contexts have shaped each country's policies and political approaches towards violent extremism and violent radicalisation.

Italy has been marked by the so-called Years of Lead (*Anni di Piombo*) between the late 1960s and the 1980s. Violent attacks, kidnappings, and bombings were frequent, albeit not tied to religious motives but to political terrorism, both 'red' (the far-left Red Brigades and Lotta Continua) and 'black' (the far-right Blackshirts, New Order, and National Vanguard). Estimates hover at around 14,500 attacks over two decades that caused 500 deaths between 1969 and 1987 (Spagnolo, 2015).

Other groups that engaged in political terrorism in the second half of the twentieth century were independentist movements in South Tyrol: the South Tyrolean Liberation Committee (BAS) between the 1950s and 1960s and later in the 1970s and 1980s, and the neo-Nazi Ein Tirol, which between 1986 and 1988 carried out 40 attacks. In Sardinia the

far-left Barbagia Rossa operated between the late 1970s and early 1980s, carrying out a number of attacks against the military and judiciary, and killing two individuals in 1981. In these same years international paramilitary organisations linked to Palestine were also operative on Italian territory: the Abu Nidal Organisation carried out attacks at Rome's Fiumicino airport in 1973, causing 34 deaths, and at the Great Synagogue of Rome in 1982, where a two-year-old was killed and 37 people injured (Drake, 1999; Regalia et al., 2015; Simcox, 2019).

Additionally, since the 1980s mafia criminal organisations' attempts at controlling judicial and political events have been responsible for terrorist attacks resulting in hundreds of deaths, with estimates that have ranged from 1000 to over 5000 if those belonging to the mafia organisations themselves are included (Libera, 2016; Puccio, 2021).

While none of these terrorist activities relied on any religious ideology, they remain relevant insofar as they are often seen as being responsible for Italy's long history of counter-terrorist operations and the government agencies' experience in infiltrating terrorist networks, which is presented by some authors as a partial explanation for the low success rate of religiously inspired attacks in Italy in recent years (Beccaro & Bonino, 2019; Simcox, 2019). Meanwhile, since 2015, the number of racist and xenophobic hate crimes recorded by the police have been on the rise (ODIHR, 2022).

Turning to the case of Greece, the data produced by the Hellenic Police and Racist Violence Recording Network have shown a gradual uptrend in racist violence in the country since 2010, with a peak in 2015 in the aftermath of the influx of refugees. The largest increase was observed between 2011 and 2012, a period during which the extreme far-right party Golden Dawn gradually established itself in the Greek political arena. This spike is attributed to the rise of incidents of racist violence motivated by biases against the national or ethnic origin of the victims (Anagnostou & Skleparis, 2017, p. 49). Since 2014, the characteristics of racist violence in Greece gradually started to shift towards 'milder' (i.e., verbal rather than physical) abuse—a development that might be related to the conviction of the Golden Dawn's MPs and leadership, the party's failure to meet the threshold for election to parliament in 2019, and the closure of its offices in Athens and Piraeus by the authorities.

Nevertheless, there have been incidents of attacks on mosques and synagogues, vandalism of monuments, and desecration of cemeteries that carry symbolic meanings of intolerance, anti-Semitism, and anti-Muslim

sentiments (Galariotis et al., 2017, p. 8). Pakistanis, one of the largest Asian communities Greece, have been especially targeted by xenophobic attacks, with vandalism against their properties intensifying over the past two decades. Islamophobia and anti-Muslim stances can be seen as motives for attacks against believers, and assaults on them often take place during their visits to unofficial places of worship to fulfil their religious duties (ibid., p. 10).

In public discourse, at times the radical rhetoric has been articulated by some high-ranking Orthodox Church clergy including not only the far-right Archbishop Anthimos of Thessaloniki but also the moderate Archbishop of Athens Ieronymos and their Islamophobic statements in February 2016 and April 2016, respectively.[1] While the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church has never formally taken a hostile stance against Islam and Muslims on the whole, it has also never condemned or even strongly disapproved of such statements and declarations (Sakellariou, 2015, p. 54).

Anti-Muslim sentiment has been expressed not only by the far-right party Golden Dawn, but also by moderate conservative as well as socialist leaders including, for instance, the former Prime Minister Andonis Samaras and former cabinet minister and leading socialist party figure Andreas Loverdos (Gemi, 2021). This sense of threat and danger expressed by several political and religious leaders with regard to the presence of Muslims in the country is particularly striking given that there are no recorded cases or signs of religiously inspired violent radicalisation in Greece (Skleparis, 2017).

Turning to Spain, the situation is quite different from both Greece and Italy. Until the early 2000s, terrorism and violent extremism in Spain were mainly associated with secessionist and political claims rather than religiously inspired ones. In particular, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA, 'Basque Country and Freedom') was a separatist group engaged in a violent campaign of bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations throughout the country that dominated much of the political, mediatic, and counter-terrorism efforts for half a century. Founded in 1959 (under Franco's dictatorship) initially by a group of students frustrated by the moderate positions of the Basque Nationalist Party, it became the most prominent group within the Basque National Liberation Movement and the main actor in the Basque conflict, killing 829 people (among which 340 civilians) and injuring thousands between 1968 and 2010 (Magazzini, 2019). In the 1980s, the death squads Antiterrorist Liberation Groups

(Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación, GAL) were illegally established by the Spanish government as a reaction to ETA and involved in the kidnapping, torturing, and murder of ETA members in the years of the 'Dirty War' (Carnevali Rodríguez, 2015). After a series of cease-fire declarations in the 1990s, the announcement of the cessation of ETA's armed activity in 2011, and the surrender of all its weapons in 2017, on 2 May 2018, ETA published a letter in which it declared that it had completely dissolved all its structures and ended its political initiative (Ormazabal, 2018).

This does not mean that religiously inspired or attributed violent radicalisation did not make its appearance in Spain until the twenty-first century: in 1985 (the year before Spain's referendum to join NATO) El Descanso, a restaurant on the outskirts of Madrid known for being frequented by American military personnel that worked at the close-by Torrejón Air Base, was bombed in a terrorist attack that killed 18 and injured 82 (Aizpeolea, 2010; Jordán, 2005). The attack was claimed by Wa'd (a front of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—Special Command) and the Islamic Jihad Organisation, but the case was archived in 1987 due to the lack of known perpetrator (Aizpeolea, 2010).

Despite this important case, the collective imaginary around terrorism in Spain continued nonetheless to revolve around separatist, rather than jihadist, terrorism until two decades later. Indeed, as of 2024, Spain is the European country that has suffered the single religiously inspired attack with the highest death toll: the Madrid train bombings of 11 March 2004, claimed by Al-Qaeda, in which ten bombs exploded on four trains in three stations during the busy morning rush hour, killing 191 and injuring around 2000 people (Reinares, 2016). More recently, in August 2017, 16 civilians and eight terrorists were killed and over 150 injured in attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, in Catalunya, that were claimed by the Amaq News Agency linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Despite these attacks declaring a jihadist motive on Spanish territory, the impression of experts working on religious diversity and radicalisation is that overall Spanish society has responded well to the terrorist threat (Bourekba, 2018; Garcés Mascareñas, 2018; Magazzini, 2020). While in the aftermath of some attacks in other European countries (such as the 2005 London bombings) indiscriminate attacks and cases of harassment towards Muslims were recorded, this did not occur in Spain after the 2004 Madrid bombings or the 2017 Barcelona attacks, nor did the Spanish state declare itself to be 'at war' with its migrant or religious minorities.

In terms of public narrative and politicians' responses, the official discourse around such events has, in general, also been less polarised and not as exploited for political gains as similar terrorist attacks elsewhere (as in France in 2015 or Germany in 2016, where some extreme right-wing parties in the opposition attempted to turn the terrorist attacks into anti-migrant sentiments, for instance), even though this has been changing in recent years. As Blanca Garcés Mascareñas (2018) put it, both Madrid and Barcelona 'went off script' by not adopting an '*us* against *them*' exclusionary and dichotomous discourse as the dominant story. Ada Colau, Barcelona's mayor, speaking in the aftermath of the attack in Catalunya, stated: 'Barcelona is a city of peace. Terror will not stop us from being who we are: a city open to the world, courageous and supportive.'

At a domestic level, the 2004 attacks played an important role in raising Spanish policymakers' awareness of the country's increased and increasing Muslim population and generated a heightened interest towards religious minorities more broadly as well as in their demands for real equality. Spanish authorities' perception of religious governance as a public issue shifted and it was included in the public agenda as the institutional arrangements between the state and the Islamic Commission became perceived as insufficient to manage religious diversity (Starr-Deelen & Pazos, 2018, p. 16).

Taking the three countries together we note a complex picture: they all experienced ideologically motivated terrorism, but Italy and Spain developed a much harsher and more muscular approach to combatting such terrorism compared to Greece. At the same time when it comes to policies and discourses towards Muslims, all three countries are marked by significant anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiment. Interestingly, Greece is probably the most extreme case and yet has experienced no jihadist violent radicalisation, while Spain that did experience religiously attributed violent radicalisation did not see a significant rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric or a particularly repressive policy. Italy, on the other hand, stands somewhere in between, marked by a strong legacy of anti-terrorism institutions and policies and an absence of religiously inspired violent attacks. In the next section we critically consider the explanations provided to date in the literature on this southern European 'exceptionalism' and offer a more in-depth analysis of some factors that have so far been overlooked relating to the nature, size, and role of Muslim communities in each of the countries, the emergence or not of a radical milieu, and the type of counter-radicalisation policy approach adopted.

Explanations Pertaining to Each Country

Considering the religiously inspired or attributed violent actions that have been taking place in Europe over the last two decades, southern Europe registers a lack of such incidents. A closer look into the explanations provided so far paints an incomplete picture.

In Italy the main explanations for the lack of successful religiously attributed or claimed violent attacks tend to revolve around three axes (with some overlaps among and subdivisions within them). One often put forward is the 'demographic argument,' which sees Muslims of migrant background as being more vulnerable to radicalisation, and according to which Italy is therefore likely to face a greater threat in the future, once the number of Muslim individuals who were born and raised in Italy, but who are excluded from citizenship and a feeling of truly belonging to the national community, increases (Beccaro & Bonino 2019; Groppi, 2020; Scrinzi, 2023).

A second explanation attributes the lack of violent attacks to Italy's experience with countering terrorist organisations accumulated from its history and its harsh counter-terrorism and deportation measures (Simcox, 2019). Others argue that the lack of attacks is due to a conscious, strategic choice of Al-Qaeda and ISIS not to target Italy because of a variety of reasons ranging from its tactical importance as a 'logistical hub' to secret 'no belligerence' agreements with the Italian state (Giacalone, 2019; Musacchio, 2018; Olimpio, 2016). Regardless of the reasons for the lack of successful attacks on Italian territory (which will be explored below and resumed in the conclusions), the low success of terrorist violence does not however necessarily mean a lack of religiously inspired terrorist activity. This is demonstrated by the terrorist support activity of Milan's Islamic Cultural Institute (ICI) in the early 1990s, which led to the establishment of a Counterterrorism Strategic Analysis Committee (CASA) (Zacchetti, 2016) and by the increased number of individuals who self-radicalised online in recent years.

Overall, in Italy the structural conditions linked to violent extremism (push factors or macro level) as identified above, are present, as are—at least to some extent—charismatic recruiters and online radicalisation (mobilising networks or individual/micro level). However, it's at the 'operationalising' phase (opportunity, pull factors or meso level) that the violent radicalisation process in Italy encounters a lack of sufficient support or of 'enabling tools' to be successfully carried out.

Turning to the case of Greece, religiously inspired violent radicalisation has never been high on the political and public—or scholarly for that matter—agenda, which has been preoccupied mostly with leftist political violence (Karyotis, 2007; Kassimeris, 1995) and, more recently, the rise of far-right extremism (Ellinas, 2013). Starting from the late 2000s and particularly since the mid-2010s, the issue of religiously inspired violent extremism, however, has started to gain traction in the official and public debates. This shift was reflected in—and arguably fuelled by—a number of speculative articles suggesting that an Islamist terrorist attack was probable or even imminent (Giannoulis, 2011; Kostakos, 2010; Michaletos, 2011). The rise of ISIS, the flow of foreign fighters, of whom several passed through Greece, and the 2015 'refugee crisis' inevitably brought Greece to the 'peripheral centre' of the debate on Islamist radicalisation. However, despite its centrality, Greece appears 'immune,' with no Islamist terrorist attacks on its soil and no known cases of home-grown radicalisation.

Various explanations have been proposed, with the majority putting forward some type of historical-political argument. For instance, it is argued that Greece has never been a colonial power (Borgeas, 2016, p. 163; Kassimeris & Samouris, 2012, p. 189), shares a common history with the Muslim world (Kassimeris & Samouris, 2012, p. 189; Kostakos, 2010, p. 3), and has traditionally enjoyed good relations with the Arab states (Anagnostou & Skleparis, 2015, p. 62; Giannoulis, 2011, p. 11). Another explanation—which draws from more contemporary developments but is based on the same premise—posits that Greece's role in the 'war against terrorism' and the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were limited to low-profile non-military tasks (Kostakos, 2010, p. 3; Skleparis, 2015, p. 1). The underlying argument in all these explanations is that Greece is a target of low symbolic importance.

While not necessarily wrong, these explanations paint a static and incomplete picture that does not include the presence of well-documented grievances on the ground (such as relative deprivation and discrimination/racism aimed at the Muslim minority). However, similar to the Italian case, while the push factor to radicalise may be present, the pull factors (opportunity and economic incentives or increase in status) do not seem sufficient for religiously motivated violent radicalisation to take hold, nor are the mobilising networks or recruiters sufficiently well-established to carry out major attacks in the absence of such opportunity structure.

As for Spain, the picture—and the question at hand—is quite different from that being asked in the cases of Italy and Greece. Despite having suffered two deadly attacks claimed by Al-Qaeda (in Madrid in 2004) and by ISIS (in Barcelona in 2017), the Spanish state and society did not follow the pattern of harsh clampdown on mosques seen in France nor—a recent rise in a xenophobic and Islamophobic right-wing political representation that had been absent or marginal until a few years ago notwithstanding—is the issue of religious minorities seen as the core driver of polarisation or threat. In this sense, one can argue that even though Spain has indeed suffered from jihadist violence, the reaction to it has been an attempt at not worsening the existing structural conditions (or push factors of discrimination/racism), but rather has sought to engage with them and to reduce them. This, however, has in turn normalized the involvement of civil society organisations with actions aimed at securitise and control, within a preventive framework.

Comparing Cases: Explaining the Southern European Exceptionalism?

While each country owes much of its current approach to religiously inspired or attributed violent radicalisation to its own context and specificities, some patterns emerge from looking at southern Europe as a whole.

At the macro level, one explanation for lack of jihadist attacks in Italy and Greece or for the relatively mild reaction to the attacks in Spain that is often put forward for all three countries is the demography argument: meaning that, compared to northern Europe, there is still a relatively small Muslim 'second generation' population. Other explanatory factors that may apply to the whole region are the absence of marked ghettoisation of migrants (at least to the same degree as western northern countries and partly due to the lower numbers of migrants); and the lack of strong revindications tied to historical legacies. (While both Al-Qaeda and ISIS have put out statements reclaiming 'al Andalus' in Spain as land of the Caliphate, creating a narrative of Spain as a stolen land from Muslims, and ISIS has identified the Vatican in Rome as a target, grievances tied to the colonial past of Italy and Spain have not been directly connected to this threat.)

However, in all three countries what has been identified as a 'conducive environment' (McNeil-Willson et al., 2020) is present in the form

of relative deprivation and discrimination experienced by ethnoreligious minorities. For instance, since the 1990s, Muslim migrants arriving with little resources typically have not had access to state-supported places of worship and therefore to set up mosques might recur to external funding (i.e., Pakistan, Saudi Arabia) that comes with a degree of ideology.

It is noteworthy that such structural discrimination might however play out in different ways: in Italy, for instance, the fact that the state does not recognise Islam as a religion (among other religious minorities) is highly problematic for the rights of Muslims, but it also means that the efforts of the different Muslim communities have been concentrated towards achieving recognition, with Muslim leaders fully aware that any attack would jeopardise such prospect.

At the meso level, or the operational or 'opportunity' dimension, one aspect that emerged in both Italy and Greece was their role/status as 'transit countries' that might make them more appealing places in terms of hosting logistical hubs rather than as direct targets. Another is the fragmentation of Muslim communities due both to internal differences and to deliberate state policies.

In both Italy and Spain, the legal and narrative framework for dealing with terrorist attacks is grounded in a historically different (political) kind of violent radicalisation (ETA in Spain; 'black' and 'red' terrorism as well as organised crime in Italy), which means that they benefit from intelligence that has many decades of experience and training in countering terrorism. It also means that both countries have specific legislation in place allowing the state to take quite extreme measures (such as deporting any non-national deemed to constitute a potential terrorist threat, even in absence of hard evidence). In Italy, in particular, the repatriation of non-nationals is very heavily employed for those deemed a national risk so relatively few individuals convicted for terrorism remain on the territory once released from prison.

Overall, it can be said that the relatively weak 'pull factors' that constitute the opportunity for a conducive environment to turn into processes of violent radicalisation have been the main obstacles in all three countries.

However, some 'organisational' or practical issues that emerge across southern Europe and are a potential weakness is the 'projectification' or 'fractioning' of prevention and control of violent extremism (P/CVE) activities, albeit with different peculiarities. In Greece, P/CVE activities are mainly tied to European projects (that comprise the main funding

of research on P/CVE activities), therefore there is a lack in continuity, documentation, and institutional memory tied to such efforts. In Spain, the fraught and at times contentious relations between the central government and some regions translate into patchy collaboration across different counter-terrorism bodies or lack of communication and intelligence-sharing between the different levels of government. In Italy, specific political agendas and a reality of short-lasting governments make it difficult—if not impossible—to establish continuity in C/PVE efforts and policies, as happens for many other realms (such as religious diversity governance).

At the micro level, migration management and reception in Italy and Greece is highly fragmented and allows for a high degree of arbitrariness (and especially expulsions from Italy), which leaves no single institutional 'target' as the epicentre of frustration. At the same time, all migrants—and Muslim migrants in particular—across southern Europe are too preoccupied with making a living in often exploitative jobs and sending remittances to be 'socialised' into violent radicalisation or extremism movements.

One important element at the individual level in all three countries is the absence or small number of people who had fought in foreign conflicts or were trained abroad in the past, which translates into a low presence of charismatic recruiters. On the contrary, the Muslim leaders that we interviewed were well-integrated in society and engaged in cooperation with the state. If imams constitute an important and positive presence in all three countries, it should however also be mentioned that in all three cases we noted a disconnect between the official minority discourse (presented by imams) and the general Muslim community: while the religious/community leaders tend to paint a positive picture of the relationship with the police and with authorities in general, individuals belonging to Muslim minorities are more wary of authorities and often recount personal stories of racism and discrimination.

Our analytical and comparative reflections in this chapter and in the three case study chapters point to the need for investigating the dynamics of violent radicalisation at multiple levels—notably macro, meso, and micro—distinguishing between pull and push factors that are conducive to violent actions. The southern European 'exceptionalism' suggests that pull factors, particularly opportunities and conducive structures, are more important than push factors such as grievances and marginalisation. They also however point to the importance of internal vs external dynamics,

i.e., the role, size, and organisation of Muslim communities in a country, but also the role of that country as a potential transit node or target pole in terrorism networks. An element that remains open for future research is the so-called demographic argument: how will the 'second' and 'third' generations of Muslim citizens in southern Europe react to socio-economic marginalisation or political exclusion? Will they channel claims and grievances through the political system or will persistent grievances lead also to pockets of religiously attributed extremism?

We believe that the cases analysed in this volume could usefully integrate the growing academic focus on non-radicalisation (Cragin, 2013; Pilkington, 2023; Powers et al., 2023). Studying non-radicalisation seems all the more relevant at times of growing polarisation and multiple crises, yet this emerging field also opens up reflections that are both conceptual and empirical. What are the criteria for the comparisons we can make between cases of violent radicalisation and of non-radicalisation? Can they be understood within a same explanatory model, or should we address them separately? In pushing forward this research agenda, how can communities prevent or address radicalisation without stigmatising minority communities and individuals?

What we observe in the case of southern Europe is that the governments of Italy, Greece, and Spain are actually enjoying, paradoxically perhaps, a second chance for including and incorporating their religious minorities, countering the potential for violent radicalisation.

Note

1. See https://www.dogma.gr/ellada/thessalonikis-anthimos-kindynos-plithysmiakis-alloiosis-tis-elladas-logo-tis-elefsis-mousoulmanon-prosfygon/20462/ and https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2016/11/02/archbishop-ieronymos-shocks-those-who-thought-he-was-a-progressive-spiritual-leader/.

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Appendices

Chapter 2 Interviews

1	RS1	Researcher/Expert
2	RS2	Researcher/Expert
3	RS3	Researcher/Expert
4	RS4	Researcher/Expert
5	CS1	Civil Servant
6	CS2	Civil Servant
7	PR1	Practitioner working in a prison
8	CS3	Muslim leader/(former) Local administration official
9	PM1	Local Policy Maker
10	MU1	Member of the Muslim community
11	MU2	Member of the Muslim community
12	PM2	(Former) Policy Maker (national level)
13	MU3	Member of the Muslim community
14	SF1	Member of security forces
15	ME1	Journalist

T. Magazzini et al., *The Non-radicalisation of Muslims in Southern Europe*, Rethinking Political Violence,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71996-7

Chapter 3 Interviews

1	CL1	Imam/Community leader
2	CL2	Imam/Community leader
3	CL3	Community leader
4	CL4	(former) Community leader
5	CS1	Senior government official, Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports
6	CS2	Civil Servant, Ministry of Migration and Asylum
7	CS3	Senior government official, Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports
8	CS4	Civil society actor/(former) Local administration official
9	ME1	Journalist
10	MU1	Member of the Muslim community
11	MU2	Member of the Muslim community
12	RS1	Researcher
13	RS2	Researcher
14	SF1	Member of security forces, State Security Division, Hellenic Police
15	SF2	Member of security forces, Special Violent Crime Squad (Counter-terrorism unit), Hellenic Police

Chapter 4 Interviews

1	RS1	Researcher/Expert on religious diversity
2	RS2	Researcher/Expert on religious diversity
3	RS3	Researcher on Islamophobia/Muslim activist
4	MGR1	Leader of grassroots Muslim org. (North African group)
5	PR1	Practitioner responsible for religious policy at the local level
6	MGR2	Leader of grassroots Muslim org. (Youth group)
7	MGR3	Leader of grassroots Muslim org. (Women converts)
8	MGR4	Leader of grassroots Muslim org. (North African group)
9	MGR5	Leader of grassroots Muslim org. (Afriodescendant group)
10	PR2	NATO Radicalisation and terrorism analyst
11	RS4	Security Advisor and expert
12	SC1	Social educator in prison
13	PR3	Practitioner responsible for religious policy at the national level
14	RS5	Researcher/Expert on religious diversity

Index

T. Magazzini et al., *The Non-radicalisation of Muslims in Southern Europe*, Rethinking Political Violence,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71996-7