

# Searching for the ‘Muslims’ in Czech Islamophobia and the Effects of Intergroup Contact in Challenging the ‘Fear of the Unknown’\*

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**Abstract:** Since at least 2014, cross-national surveys have measured the most negative attitudes towards ‘Muslims’ in the EU among Czech respondents. These attitudes have often been attributed to few contact opportunities with actual Muslims in the country and, thus, public overreliance on the highly negative representations of ‘Muslims’ in public discourse. However, empirical qualitative assessments of the stereotypes which guide many Czechs’ anti-Muslim prejudice and the effects of intergroup contact have been neglected. In an epistemological shortcoming, the survey category ‘Muslim’ has often been treated as one of analysis rather than of practice. Contrarily, I argue that Czech participants’ contingent understandings and racialisation of the category need to be reclaimed as the ontological basis of prejudice. In this study, I relied on the results of a larger constructionist thematic analysis of 31 semi-structured interviews with non-Muslim Czechs and, regardless of citizenship or ethnicity, Muslims living in Czechia conducted in 2020 and 2021. The results show that, in line with public discourse dynamics, ‘Muslims’ in Czechia are commonly understood as immigrants racialised through their perceived Arabness, Middle Easternness and non-Whiteness. Furthermore, perceptions of Western European ‘Muslims’ as highly conflictual are juxtaposed with the fragility of Czechia in the face of immigration. Against this backdrop, I examine the mechanisms through which intergroup contact enriches participants’ social cognitions of ‘Muslims’ – namely, subgrouping, positive stereotyping, reduced perceived intergroup threat and anxiety, and (re-)humanisation.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, social cognition, intergroup contact, stereotypes, public opinion

*Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, 2023, Vol. 59, No. 3: 315–338

<https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2023.037>

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\* This project received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 765224.

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## **The Czech Context**

Since 2014 (and until at least 2019) (Kantar, 2019; Linek, 2014), several cross-national surveys have measured the most negative attitudes towards 'Muslims' in the EU among Czech respondents (e.g. Marfouk, 2019; TNS Opinion and Social, 2015). However, little attention has been paid to empirically studying who those 'Muslims' are towards whom negative attitudes are directed. As I argue, survey designs generally aim to measure different respondents' attitudes towards Muslims qua category of analysis – that is, as an ontologically objective social group. Contrarily, in survey respondents' situated processing, 'Muslims' is a category of practice that cognitively invokes a contingent subjective group (see Brubaker, 2002). In other words, such cross-national surveys are better at describing how nationally clustered individuals think and feel about their discrete stereotypes of 'Muslims' rather than actual Muslims.

The above-mentioned surveys coincided with the highly mediated rise of the so-called Islamic State (and other militarised jihadist groups), several jihadist terrorist attacks targeting civilians in Western Europe and the so-called European refugee crisis of 2014 and later. In Czechia, these events substantially increased the media coverage of 'Muslims', introducing them as social actors in regular political discourse. This newly acquired salience influenced Czech survey respondents' interpretations of who the 'Muslims' mentioned in the questionnaires were. For example, Savelkoul et al. (2022) found that Czech respondents became significantly more restrictive towards the immigration of 'Muslims from other countries' in the wake of the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo shootings, which occurred during the Czech fieldwork period of the 7th Wave of the European Social Survey. While actual Muslims remained mostly the same after the attacks, the stereotypes which this survey item evoked had probably changed (Shoshani & Slone, 2008).

It has been argued that a lack of intergroup contact with ethnically diverse migrants in the east of the EU has led to public overreliance on the negative depictions of 'Muslims' in public discourse (Pickel & Öztürk, 2018). An expression regularly used in Czech public discourse to explain widespread anti-Muslim prejudice in the absence of contact is 'fear of the unknown'. As the Muslim population in Czechia was estimated to stand at 0.2% of the total by 2013 (Topinka, 2015), contact opportunities with Muslims in the country, which, according to the contact hypothesis, could have reduced prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998), remained rather limited in 2014. A 2018 Czech survey found that respondents reporting personally knowing a Muslim person not only had more positive attitudes towards all 'Muslims' but also imagined 'Muslims' coming to Czechia as significantly more educated than did respondents without such contacts (MEDIAN, 2018). As a secondary effect, Czech respondents reporting contact with people of different races and ethnicities also had significantly more open attitudes towards the immigration of 'Muslims' (Pickel & Öztürk, 2018). Nevertheless, the cognitive processes through which intergroup contact with Muslims may foster more positive stereotypes of and attitudes towards 'Muslims' in Czechia remain underexplored.

Czechs' attitudes towards different Muslim-majority national groups vary. Groups associated with mediatised conflicts, such as 'Afghans', 'Palestinians' or 'Iranians',<sup>1</sup> have been evaluated particularly negatively (Červenka, 2011), perhaps because of a perceived intergroup threat (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Contrarily, tourism seems to positively affect the perceptions of other Muslim-majority national groups, due to either tourists' experiences or marketing a destination as attractive and safe. The Czech Statistical Office (2023) identifies Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia as frequent destinations for Czech travellers, with 245,000 people (2.3% of the population) travelling to Egypt in 2017. One survey found significantly warmer attitudes towards 'Turks' and especially 'Egyptians' than towards 'Arabs', 'Syrians' or 'Chechens' (STEM, 2016). These differences suggest that the superordinate category 'Muslim' cognitively invokes its own stereotypes, which differ from those of distinct subgroups.

The representation of 'Muslims' in Czech public discourse over the last two decades has been overwhelmingly negative. Even before 2015, news coverage of this group mostly focused on foreign policy and conflicts, emphasising pathologies such as terrorism or fundamentalism (Burešová & Sedláková, 2016; Vesecký, 2006) and perceived otherness (Křížková, 2006). During the 2000s, much of the Czech mainstream intellectual debate on Islam revolved around whether 'Muslims' should be feared. As in other European countries, the European 'refugee crisis' contributed to securitising Islam in Czechia through journalism (Tkaczyk, 2017) and most political parties' adherence to anti-Muslim/anti-refugee discourse (Zahradník & Rosůlek, 2017). With a broad political consensus over the rejection of the EU's relocation and resettlement schemes for refugees, the Czech public debate paid unprecedented attention to Muslim migration, lasting well into 2019 (Prokop, 2019, pp. 107–108). Meanwhile, blatantly Islamophobic expressions were promoted by high-profile popular culture figures, intellectuals, activists, journalists and high-ranking state officials (see annual European Islamophobia Reports by country at <https://islamophobiareport.com>).

Moving beyond the information provided by survey labels, in this study, I relied on semi-structured interviews with citizens to better understand the dominant shared patterns of cognition of 'Muslims' in the country and the positive effects of intergroup contact on these mental representations. In this paper, after outlining my theoretical framework and methodology, I address in two separate sections the questions of who 'Muslims' are generally perceived to be in the Czech context and what positive effects intergroup contact with Muslims has on social cognitions of 'Muslims' among non-Muslim Czechs.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Bosniaks' might be an exception, as they are perceived as ethnoculturally proximate, although I could not find supporting survey data.

## **Measuring Attitudes towards 'Muslims'**

The contemporary concept of 'Islamophobia' is used to describe a multidimensional reality, with different disciplines and strands of scholarship favouring their own suitable conceptualisations. Definitions informed by social psychology have often located Islamophobia at the intra-psychological level, thus treating the phenomenon as a set of attitudes, beliefs and/or prejudices (Bleich, 2011; Ernst & Bornstein, 2012). Cross-national public opinion surveys have also generated data on attitudes towards 'Muslims' used to perform comparative analyses of anti-Muslim attitudes (e.g. Doebler, 2014; Marfouk, 2019) or to place Islamophobia in the contexts of different countries. Public opinion surveys on 'Muslims' can feed into narratives that guide policies, research agendas or citizens' social conformity biases. However, survey methodologies and many of their interpretations tend to neglect a validity issue – namely, that for survey respondents, 'Muslims' is a contingent category of practice rather than of analysis.

When using social categories, Brubaker (2002) draws a distinction between categories of analysis (i.e. as used by researchers to refer to a relatively bounded substantial social group) and categories of practice (i.e. as contingently employed in the vernacular to cognitively invoke a group). This epistemological distinction carries three important implications for public opinion research. First, in everyday thought and talk about a large social group like Muslims, research participants process information based on their situated mental representations associated with the category 'Muslims' rather than on an unmediated evaluation of an entitative Muslim group (see Lippmann, 1996). Second, the situation and context influence the extension of hypothetical cases of 'Muslims' included in the category. When a cross-national survey asks, 'How would you feel about having a Muslim as a neighbour?', respondents from diverse contexts need to process matters such as traits (e.g. ethnicity or class), social processes involved in this person becoming their neighbour (e.g. claiming asylum or a long-time citizen of their district moving house) or potential impacts of this arrival on their community. A Jewish settler in the West Bank, a resident of a multi-ethnic district in Marseille and an ethnic Czech living in an ethnically homogenous region may interpret this survey question very differently and hold distinct beliefs about that hypothetical 'Muslim' neighbour. The third implication is that categories foreground one of the actors' possible social identities. Despite the growing identification of and by Muslim immigrants to Europe as 'Muslims' since the 1980s (Bobako, 2015), when offering respondents the category 'Muslim', researchers make their perceptions of Muslimness the most salient differentiating trait (see Brubaker, 2013). Even infusing the 'Muslim' essence into an adjective (e.g. 'Muslim person', as in some translations in Kantar, 2019 -see factsheets by national language in European Union, 2019-) rather than a noun may alter survey results (Graf et al., 2013). For the Czech public, Muslimness is a highly loaded trait. An analysis of open questions from a 2014 Czech survey about the basic characteristics of 'Muslims' and 'Islam' found that 'Muslims were perceived as foreign, violent, in the role of terrifying

“Orientals”, religiously inclined, oppressing women, visually different, fundamentalists, irrational, oppressive and suspicious’ (Topinka, 2016, p. 239).

Given the growing consensus about the study of European Islamophobia as a form of racism (All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, 2018; Elahi & Khan, 2017), studies of public opinion should consider the varying racialisation dynamics of ‘Muslims’ across contexts. Superficial markers of the religion (e.g. Islamic names or dress) contribute to the contemporary European racialisation of ‘Muslims’ as an ethno-religious group (Meer & Modood, 2019). For many Europeans, ‘Islam’ is perceived not only as a religion but as separate from ideas of ‘Europe’. At the same time, most European Muslims are ascribed to ethnicised groups, which can become proxies for ‘Muslims’ in discrete contexts through historical patterns of residence (e.g. Maghrebis in France or South Asians in Britain) or dominant stereotypes (e.g. ‘Muslims’ as Arabs). Across countries, the perceived attributes of these ethnicised groups may be attached to shared mental representations of ‘Muslims’.

### Social Cognition and Intergroup Contact

Our minds subsume information about social categories, such as ‘Muslims’, under schemata of mental representations which most social psychologists conceptualise as stereotypes – namely, the collection of ‘knowledge, beliefs, and expectations we hold about human groups’ (Sherman et al., 2013, p. 549). The content of stereotypes guides our affective evaluations (i.e. emotional prejudices) of hypothetical or perceived actual group members (Cuddy et al., 2007), *inter alia*, by conditioning our intergroup threat perceptions (Riek et al., 2006). Superordinate categories, such as ‘Muslims’, can cognitively nest subgroups (Richards & Hewstone, 2001) or be combined with other typically overarching categories (e.g. gender or age). For instance, C. Brown et al. (2017) showed that US schoolchildren have already been socialised into holding stereotypes of ‘Arab Muslim men’ as angry and un-American and of ‘Arab Muslim women’ as oppressed. Though largely socially learned and motivated, stereotypes are also informed by intergroup contact experiences. However, when face-to-face encounters are scarce, the media’s influence on stereotype formation becomes greater (Fujioka, 1999; Ramasubramanian, 2013).

Decades-long research on the contact hypothesis has revealed that intergroup contact contributes to reducing prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew et al., 2011), even when contacts are imagined (Turner et al., 2007) or read/heard about (Zhou et al., 2019).<sup>2</sup> Contact is generally more likely to reduce prejudice towards

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<sup>2</sup> However, negative or stressful contacts with previously stigmatised groups, which are statistically rarer, can reinforce prejudice even more effectively (Graf & Paolini, 2016; Pettigrew et al., 2011, p. 277).

*an entire outgroup* when the contact person is perceived as a typical representative of that group and their group membership is salient (R. Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Prejudice reduction resulting from contact is mediated by many affective and cognitive processes (Boin et al., 2021) – notably, by reductions in both the anxiety experienced in intergroup interactions and the perceived intergroup threat (Aberson, 2019; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Importantly, contact produces stronger effects on the affective than on the cognitive dimension of prejudice (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Put differently, contact can alter our emotions about an out-group without necessarily affecting the underlying stereotypes.

Stereotype change can also result from contact, albeit less frequently. Stereotypes are more likely to change when the contact person is perceived as a typical group member who exhibits a stereotype-disconfirming behaviour (Wolsko et al., 2003). According to a hierarchical model of stereotype representation, contacts can be cognitively registered into subtypes or subgroups under a superordinate stereotype (Maurer et al., 1996; Richards & Hewstone, 2001). Subtyping occurs when disconfirming members are clustered together into a subtype, which is not easily associated with the superordinate category – that is, they become exceptions to the rule. Contrarily, subgroups aggregate a diversity of confirming and disconfirming members who share certain attributes and, to a larger extent, are seen as representative of the superordinate category (Hinzman & Maddox, 2017). While subtyping is believed to hinder stereotype change, subgroups are believed to modify the superordinate stereotype by heightening the perceived variability within it (Richards & Hewstone, 2001).

Situational factors also influence which type of stereotype respondents retrieve. Depending on their degree of familiarity with an out-group, their search for precision or the cognitive demands of the situation, they are more likely to retrieve stereotypical prototypes (i.e. an averaged abstraction of the out-group) or exemplars (i.e. memories of separate instances of out-group members) when processing social categories (Fiske & Taylor, 2021, pp. 120–130).

## **Data and Methodology**

As part of a larger project, in July–August 2020 and September–October 2021, I conducted semi-structured interviews with non-Muslim Czech citizens ( $n = 23$ ; indicated by ‘n’) and, regardless of citizenship or ethnicity, Muslims living in Czechia ( $n = 8$ ; indicated by ‘M’) to understand the nature, history and causes of anti-Muslim attitudes in the country. The participants were invited to comment on their perceptions of other Czechs’ attitudes and behaviours, express their own positions and recall personal experiences. Despite the exploratory character of this research, scripted and improvised questions were informed by theories and concepts from social psychology and Islamophobia studies, as well as extensive knowledge of the literature on Islamophobia in Czechia. The interviews lasted

45–75 minutes, and most were conducted face to face, with six being conducted via videoconference. Czech was the language used in all but five interviews, in which English was preferred. The conversations were recorded, transcribed and pseudonymised. Most participants were referred to me through my networks, with individual contacts never referring me to more than two participants per cohort. Three Muslim participants responded to invitations posted on Facebook.

A sample design identified five cohorts of non-Muslim participants based on criteria aimed at obtaining a diversity of views (see Table 1 for details). Three cohorts corresponded to cities that varied in size, presence of Muslim immigrants and vote share in the 2017 legislative election for parties whose support correlated with anti-Muslim prejudice (see MEDIAN 2018). These cities were Prague and Ostrava, as well as a small town in Moravia. Two other cohorts were expected to exhibit different effects of contact with Muslims, with participants recruited from the small spa city of Teplice (with a relatively high Muslim presence and tourism from Arab countries) and among non-Muslim Czechs who had travelled to Egypt since 2015 (which added a small Moravian city to this cohort). Four to five participants from each cohort were interviewed, ensuring minimal socio-demographic variation (e.g. in age and employment status). Consequently, there was an overall balance between male ( $n = 11$ ) and female ( $n = 12$ ) participants and between those with ( $n = 11$ ) and without ( $n = 12$ ) a university degree. Except for a Slovak-born participant who had mostly lived in Czechia, the rest could reasonably be ascribed to Czech, Moravian or (Czech-)Silesian ethnicity. Elected officials, journalists and academics were excluded.

**Table 1. Interviews' sample design**

• Areas with <i>different political behaviour</i> :
o Large industrial city with higher anti-Muslim vote rates (Ostrava)*
o Small town with average voting behaviour (Small Moravian Town)*
o Large multicultural city with lower anti-Muslim vote rates (Prague)*
• Non-Muslim Czechs who are likely to have had (different types and levels of) <i>contact with Muslims</i> :
o Spa town with a high presence of Arab tourist and Muslim, mostly Arab, residents (Teplice)*
o Czechs who have been on holiday in Egypt since 2015 <sup>a</sup>
• <i>Muslims</i> who have been living in Czechia since before 2015 <sup>a</sup>

Notes: \*In each city, sampling followed quotas to ensure a balanced mix by gender, age group (18–25; 26–35; 36–49; 50–69) and education (non-/university studies). At least one interviewee in each city was either retired, unemployed or working part-time. <sup>a</sup>Due to the unknown demographic profile of these two cohorts, quotas were not followed. Nevertheless, I tried to control as much as possible for variation.

For Muslim interviewees, self-identification as Muslim sufficed. Besides one participant who had moved to Czechia in 2016, the rest had been living there since before 2015. The limitations of my sampling methods and patterns of residence meant that Muslim participants from Prague (five out of eight) were predominant. Given the frequently greater salience of Muslimness among women, female participants ( $n = 5$ ) deliberately outnumbered men ( $n = 3$ ). Above-average academic attainment among Muslims in Czechia and/or sampling biases resulted in all Muslim participants holding or pursuing a university degree. Two Muslim participants shared attributable Czech ethnicity, whereas the rest had migrated to Czechia, mostly as adults, from different Arab-speaking countries, Turkey or Russia. A pseudonymised list of all participants is provided in Annex 1.

The transcripts were analysed in NVivo 2020 following a constructionist thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017). Themes are understood here as recurrent 'patterns of meaning' that are 'important in relation to the particular topic and research question being explored' (V. Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). After a first reading, I generated 19 non-exclusive codes mapping theoretically relevant areas (e.g. 'intergroup contact experiences' and 'representations of Czechia') and applied them to the corpus. I broke down some of these codes into subcodes (e.g. 'intergroup contact': in Egypt, Teplice, etc.). I then organised the information within each (sub)code along themes (e.g. 'Muslims can be better than us' and 'receiving attention from male Egyptians'). In the analysis, I often interlinked themes and introduced theoretical concepts. This article is based on a relevant selection from the overall analysis.

### **How 'Muslims' Are Perceived in the Czech Context**

In practice, the context restricts how 'Muslims' are thought and talked about. The participants interpreted my broad questions (e.g. "What do you think Czech society thinks of Muslims nowadays?") through perceived conversation-relevant events, frames or actors as largely shaped by recent public discourse dynamics. As I discuss elsewhere (Gómez del Tronco, in press), the participants regularly returned to the European 'refugee crisis', Western European Muslims' alleged problems of integration, jihadism and Muslims' intolerance and eagerness to 'force' (*tlačit, nutit*) their norms on others. Issues of inequality for women appeared most often among female, particularly older, non-Muslim participants. These topical restrictions influenced the stereotypical traits and Muslim subgroups that were cognitively invoked when processing situated information on 'Muslims'.

Most participants believed that, when thinking about 'Muslims', most Czechs were likely to imagine 'terrorists', 'extremists', 'Arabs' or some type of migrant. Despite the former attribution, non-Muslim participants rarely stated that fear of terrorism was among the main drivers of others' or their own preju-

dice, whereas Muslim participants often mentioned its salience. By 2020–2021, the threat of jihadist terrorism possibly resulting from Muslim immigration (re-currently featuring in 2015–2017 public discourse) may have lost relevance or may have been considered too uncivil for self-presentation or the presentation of other Czechs. According to Adéla (34/n), when Czechs talk about ‘Muslims’, 90% of the time, they mean ‘refugees’, or, as Radek (31/n) contended, ‘They speak about Muslims heading to Europe because Muslims who stay in the Middle East don’t really bother them.’ As a result of public debate on migration policy, non-Muslim participants often conflated the highly politicised categories ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ with ‘Muslim’. Despite their complex overlaps, when speaking of ‘migrants’ or ‘refugees’, the participants often emphasised issues of socio-economic integration (e.g. employability or antisocial behaviour) or resource competition (e.g. social benefits or jobs) over the cultural clashes most closely associated with ‘Muslims’.

Perceptions of Arabness and Middle Easternness frequently informed participants’ and, reportedly, other Czechs’ racialised stereotypes of ‘Muslims’.<sup>3</sup> In spontaneous associations with the word ‘Muslim(s)’, non-Muslim participants often included stereotypical images of the region (e.g. turbans and desert) or, when mentioning famous people, those were almost exclusively Arab men (e.g. Yasser Arafat and Saddam Hussein). Some acknowledged imagining ‘a person who is at home on the Arab Peninsula’ (Bernard, 32/n) or ‘a group that rather comes from the Middle East’ (Šimon, 32/n). The labels ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ were often used interchangeably by non-Muslim participants and, reportedly, other Czechs: ‘I myself mix up “Muslims” and “Arabs”, and many people do the same; for them, they are really synonymous, even when they aren’t’ (Věra, 25/n). This participant from Prague shared a detailed attribution:

I believe that Czechs make a terrible mishmash. For them, [‘Muslim’] is a mixture of an image of a sly Arab merchant who goes back to those Jewish and anti-Semitic stereotypes of the cunning guy [vyčuránek] who cheats and haggles with you. The Arab in this image is civilised yet rather sleazy. Then, this [image] is merged with that of the Islamic State – simply, the barbarians. On top of that, there’s the addition of sub-Saharan Africa – also barbarians. That’s all mixed up in a strange way. We have no idea that Indian Muslims exist. We don’t even know that Indonesian Muslims exist; therefore, we’re not interested in them at all. (Adam, 44/n)

Representations often excluded ‘Muslims’ from a perceived ‘European’ Whiteness. Several participants relationally racialised ‘Czechs’ (in the vernacular, predominantly an ethnic category) and ‘Europeans’ as White, with occasional explicit exclusions of Czech Roma and Southern Europeans from that Whiteness. In contrast to racialisation patterns in many Western European contexts, the per-

<sup>3</sup> For the role of religion on racialisation, see Gómez del Tronco (in press).

ceived non-Whiteness of 'Muslims' and 'Arabs' was sometimes (albeit inconsistently) demarcated as Blackness.<sup>4</sup> For example, participants from Teplice reported ethnic Czechs' use of the term 'Black' [černý] to refer to local Arabs and Roma or hypothetical Muslim refugees. Klára (52/n) worried about the presence of 'plenty of those Blacks [spousta těch černých]' in Nordic countries. Besides applying to abstract stereotypes (e.g. perceiving 'Muslim' migration to Europe as a threat to 'White people's culture/race' or imagining 'Muslims' living among 'White people' in Western Europe), non-Whiteness could be attributed to actual Arabs. Reflecting on decades of living in Czechia, the Arab participant Zain (55/M) reported that Czechs regarded him as Black and that 'whoever isn't blonde, whoever isn't Czech is Black; some would even call you [Me: Spaniard] Black'. Likewise, some non-Muslim participants reported standing out as 'Whites' when visiting Arab countries: 'Egyptians are insistent, particularly men towards women, mostly to Whites [běloškám]' (Adéla, 34/n).

Except for the interviews in Teplice, conversations with non-Muslim participants more often concerned Muslims residing or migrating from abroad than Czech Muslim communities. Most talk about Muslim-majority countries concerned either positive accounts of countries to which participants had travelled (e.g. Egypt and Tunisia), negative aspects from mediated places of conflict (e.g. Syria and Iraq) or human rights violations (e.g. Saudi Arabia). Western Europe occupied a special place in the mental geography that informed most participants' talk. Many non-Muslim, particularly older, participants raised concerns about alleged conflicts with Muslims in this region, while Muslim participants most often spoke of 'cosmopolitan' Western cities or about how Germans had grown accustomed to living together with fellow citizens of Turkish descent. Some non-Muslim participants conjured Western segregated ghettos or 'no-go zones', socio-economic alienation, aggressive demands to recognise Muslims' rights, religious-based violence or deviancy (e.g. riots and lootings). These scenarios reportedly drove many Czechs' concerns:

Since there aren't any Muslims in Czechia, it isn't a totally topical issue. It's more about the question of immigration more generally – about whether Muslims would come and [the motto] 'look at what happens in the West!' I think that's relevant because I feel that, in the West, they can't cope with the situation. They told us that there aren't any no-go zones there, but now they start being almost everywhere: in Sweden, France, Belgium... (Kamil, 39/n)

Versions of this Western 'Muslim' troublemaker remain salient in many Czechs' social cognitions of 'Muslims', regularly as a forewarning against future im-

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<sup>4</sup> The Blackness of 'Arabs'/'Muslims' was denoted by the adjectival noun *černý* rather than the noun *černoch*. The participants' use of *černoch* resembled dominant Anglo-American uses of 'Black', with contemporary Czech dictionaries often associating the term with 'African' descent.

migration. Notwithstanding, many participants attributed to most 'Muslims' a disinterest in relocating to Czechia and a preference for wealthier, 'Western' European countries, mostly Germany: 'We are the last country to which [Muslims] will go because. . . Why would they want to learn Czech?' (Hana, 24/n). Against this backdrop, Czechia was often referred to as a fragile place through intertwined perceptions of (cherished) safety, (incapacitating) smallness and (often frustrating) provincialism. A theme of 'Czechia' as calm and secure appeared frequently, particularly in the Moravian town and city:

I believe that Czechia is one of the safest countries in the world. There's no high criminality here, and there are few murders. I feel safe. I know I can go onto the streets and walk around the capital, and there's a 95% chance that nothing will happen to me. . . . Most [Czechs] are aware that Czechia is a safe country, while they're scared when they travel around Europe – to Paris, London, etc. (Stěpán, 20/n)

Relational perceptions of the national space are highly informative for analyses of national public opinion on 'Muslims', as evaluations are made in this context. This fragility of Czechia often magnifies the perceived burden or security threat posed by 'Muslims'. As Kamil (49/n) argued, 'If citizens want to have calm and security, and they consider that Muslims cause uneasiness in France, Germany or Britain... [policymakers] won't want them here'. Shared perceptions of a failed multiculturalist project in relatable (but wealthier) 'Western' Europe fuelled slippery slope arguments against increasing Czech Muslim communities' potential to cause harm:

I think there are far fewer Muslims here than in the West. Czech society is quite 'radical' and not as open, so I think that thanks to this, there's calm here. That's why more radical Muslims poke their little claws out: 'We want a little bit of this and that, and we want veiled faces' – even if it's against our constitution. They try to push their own issues conspicuously, sneakily. This contrasts with, for example, Germany or other Western countries, where they're more open to those questions, and Muslims there shout more about their rights. (Radek, 31/n)

Beyond the boundaries of 'Muslim' as a religious category, stereotypes shared by many Czechs contain, *inter alia*, perceived cultural, class, political and/or racial differences. Czech public opinion research on 'Muslims' should consider these contents as the basis and often hypothetical targets of such attitudes. Notwithstanding, no participant should be essentialised by the Islamophobic ideology informing some of their views. Individual accounts of 'Muslims' were complex, nuanced and often contradictory. Many had to think on the spot about issues which they had never considered. Nevertheless, the analysis revealed clear patterns of meaning among the participants and, reportedly, among other Czechs. The limited Muslim presence in Czechia presents Muslims with few opportunities for self-presentation or agenda setting. Czechs who are mostly

exposed to negative representations of this group, often perceived as a distant and even abstract entity, are more susceptible to holding dehumanising stereotypes. As I illustrate in the next section, contact with actual Muslims mostly contributed to giving a better press to those 'Muslims' inhabiting the minds of participants.

### **Mechanisms through Which Contact Leads to More Nuanced Representations**

Memories of contact with actual Muslims generally enriched non-Muslim participants' mental representations of 'Muslims' by generating subgroups and positive stereotypes, reducing perceived intergroup threat and anxiety and (re-)humanising them. The effects of contact were already evident in answers to one of my opening questions: 'Who comes to your mind when you hear the word "Muslim" or "Muslims"?' Participants who later reported personal contact with Muslims often mentioned their acquaintances, friends or loved ones as exemplars. In Teplice, some of the city's Muslim public figures were mentioned. In contrast, in answers to this question by non-Muslims, abstract representations of 'women in headscarves' constituted the most common theme. Experiences self-reportedly reinforcing negative stereotypes of all 'Muslims' were rarer and mostly marked by the superficiality of the contact (e.g. spotting a 'Muslim'-looking person in public space). However, a few older participants extracted negative generalisations from substantial contacts in which they situationally enjoyed higher status than their interlocutors (e.g. as officials of an institution or tourists in poorer countries). However, in isolation, power imbalances, superficiality and participants' age seemed poor predictors of negativity.

Frequently, contact allowed participants to incorporate new subgroups into the larger superordinate category 'Muslim'. Subgrouping was clearest among participants who had spent time in Muslim-majority settings, where 'Muslimness' was salient and diverse behaviours were observable. Even in Afghanistan, a conflict setting, Roman (39/n) and fellow soldiers received extensive training that reportedly allowed them to distinguish 'a Taliban – that is, a Muslim extremist – from a moderate Muslim'. Middle Easternness and stereotypically 'Muslim' religious observance seemed important attributes that favoured subgrouping over subtyping. In a few accounts, Muslims who had been seen enjoying alcohol, behaving as 'Europeans' or being promiscuous were not considered real 'Muslims'.

Subgrouping most often concerned Muslim-majority nationalities and ethnicities, as these constitute almost inescapable boundaries containing evident heterogeneity. For instance, Jozef (40/n), who had been stationed as a soldier in Kosovo and travelled extensively across Western Europe, generalised the sometimes conflicting forms of social organisation, religious observance or dispositions of 'Kosovars', 'Turks' and 'Moroccans'. In Teplice, where the labels 'Arabs' and 'Muslims' are often used interchangeably to refer to local Muslims and tourists, ethnicity could also play a role in subcategorisation:

I used to work in Šanov, the main area where Muslims stayed. I established great relationships with Syrians. The men were thoughtful of their wives – for example, by holding the door for them. However, I didn't like how those coming from the UAE behaved towards their wives, let alone their service – most of them had Filipino women working for them. Simply put, the Filipino woman was the 'white trash' of their society. [Emirati] had their whole visits funded by their prince. Although anyone could get along well with visitors coming here with their own funds, that scum [*spodina*] behaved terribly. At some point, it became horrible in the city. Even local Muslims who'd lived here for longer were strongly against this. They didn't like how those specific Muslim visitors made them look in the eyes of the rest. (Beáta, 34/n)

In this excerpt, the participant operated with three 'Muslim' subgroups ('local Muslims', 'Syrians' and 'Emirati male tourists') while embedding herself in several social identities (female, ethnic Czech and resident of Teplice). For Beáta (34/n), the contents of the stereotypes of these subgroups differed, and consequently, so did her evaluations of the subgroups in the context of their behaviours towards women and the city. The stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002) classifies stereotypes along the axes of perceived warmth (towards an in-group) and competence. Through this lens, thoughtful 'Syrians' and embarrassed 'local Muslims' shared a high-warmth/high-competence position, while the dehumanised 'Emirati' 'scum' belonged to the low-warmth/low-competence matrix quadrant. Contexts of high diversity, like multicultural Teplice, are particularly conducive to the subgrouping of individuals who, in context, are perceived as 'Muslim' but exhibit manifold behaviours.

Despite non-Muslim Czechs' few contact opportunities, some degree of interaction with three groups of Muslims living in Czechia appeared across cities. Mostly older female participants mentioned knowing a 'foreign Muslim man who married a Czech woman'. These participants often spoke of these men's difficulties (and prejudices faced) in adapting to life in Czechia and, especially, failed relationships, which were often blamed on husbands and reinforced widespread stereotypes of Muslim men as domineering. More positively, participants spoke of 'Muslim doctors at regional hospitals' and 'Muslims who work at kebab shops'. The evaluations of the latter were particularly positive, with a stereotype of moderate-to-high competence (i.e. business savvy) and warmth (i.e. friendly customer service). The salience of Middle Easternness in the kebab shop experience makes kebab sellers a potential 'Muslim' subgroup for many Czechs, with positive experiences reinforcing stereotypes of 'Muslims' as good traders:

Young Czechs have become really fond of Muslims who own kebab shops. We've become very fond of our local one. ... He offers refreshments that are attractive to young people. ... When I think of the sale of fast food, it happens in every corner of the country. They consider it their source of livelihood and try to be the favourite spots in their localities so that customers visit their places regularly. Muslims are excellent traders, sellers, businessmen and so on. They know how to sell their products and how to make money – how to connect with clients. (Stěpan, 20/n)

Generally, contacts with customer-/patient-facing Muslim workers were positively evaluated, partly because these interactions follow relatively clear social scripts, which helps reduce intergroup anxiety.

Contact also enabled positive stereotyping of Muslims in comparison with Czechs – notably as kinder, more generous and more tolerant. These stereotypes were often juxtaposed with perceptions of Czechs as provincial and prejudiced against Muslims. Bernard (32/n) contrasted his Muslim cousin's assertion that Muslims welcomed Christians to pray at mosques with his experience of a Christian funeral in Czechia at which some church attendees seemed offended by the presence of his Muslim cousins. Positive stereotyping seemed to be related to the phenomenon of deprovincialisation (Pettigrew, 2011), through which contact fostered not only tolerance of other cultures but also a reappraisal of participants' national culture. During Jozef's (40/n) trips across Europe, Muslims had frequently treated him kindly – for instance, by inviting him to family lunches. A Muslim man once disinterestedly helped him repair his car as a good deed during Ramadan, which he believed that 'nobody in Czechia would have ever done'. Jozef (40/n) essentialised Islam as inherently positive, claiming that 'under the right interpretation of the Koran, everyone should help each other, regardless of their faith'. Similarly, Ondřej (20/n) reflected on Czechs being unsettled by Arab tourists' foreign custom of picnicking in Teplice's public parks. He was convinced that the same number of Czechs drinking beer in those parks would have been far more disturbing. This non-Muslim participant praised a behaviour which she believed most Czechs could not match:

[In Oman,] there was a lady at the pharmacy's cash register. I needed eye drops because I'd suffered a reaction to the sun... and that lady offered me different types of eye drops. She explained them to me, and she was smiling, pleasant. She asked me where I was from, and she looked for the country on a map. In Czechia, a lady at a pharmacy would probably not speak to a Muslim lady like this. This lady pharmacist [in Oman] was veiled; she wore a burka. I wasn't veiled, but she spoke to me nicely. Now, turn it the other way and imagine that a Muslim lady comes to Czechia and has an aching eye. And the lady pharmacist in Ostrava tells her, for example... What does she tell her?! This is why I really appreciate that she talked to me in this way. It was very pleasant for me. She didn't make any distinction based on skin colour or faith. She simply treated me as a patient. (Milada, 43/n)

A common way of entering meaningful contacts was by travelling to Muslim-majority countries, where interactions were often reportedly positive and beyond the settings regularly discussed in public discourse. Most participants travelling to Muslim-majority countries had visited either a specific country repeatedly or more than one country. Local guides were regularly praised for explaining behaviours (e.g. regarding waste management) and exposing participants to new situations (e.g. as conversation interpreters).

For most of these participants, these trips significantly reduced perceived intergroup threat and anxiety and, consequently, prejudice. For example, instead of interreligious conflict or ‘no-go zones’, the three most common themes emerging from participants’ stays in Egypt were locals being very friendly, female participants attracting too much attention and, consistent with the commercial nature of the trip, feeling perceived as a source of profit. These trips contributed to dispelling participants’ own or acquaintances’ fears. Despite noting that she always stayed in resorts, Barbora (55/n) claimed that her travel experiences in Egypt and Tunisia had taught her that ‘it’s possible to live among them – that I have nothing to fear’. Another participant recalled his radical attitudinal shift:

I was also brainwashed by the media, and even I became afraid of [Muslims]. However I’d never been to Asia. I’d only seen Muslims on TV. Even my parents transmitted this fear to me because of how much they’d been brainwashed by the media. Thus, I feared Muslims even though I’d never seen one in my life. Then, we started going on holidays. My parents went to Egypt, and I joined them. We even went to Turkey after we went to the UAE with a friend. We were really excited about it. We never had any issues in any of those countries. On the contrary, we found smiling faces everywhere. The truth had been somewhere else. Those evil [Muslims] I was afraid of are a tiny minority. (Vitek, 31/n)

A second effect of these trips was the subgrouping of friendly ‘Muslim’ national groups (within which hostile ‘Muslims’ were also believed to exist). Notably, positive holiday experiences in Egypt fed into the content of stereotypes of ‘Egyptians’, as this Egyptian participant acknowledged:

One of the good things in Czechia is that most people I meet tell me, ‘Oh, we were in Egypt, in Hurghada, Marsa Alam...’ There was intense tourist activity between the countries ... so almost everybody knows Egypt and says, ‘Oh, Egypt’s nice, it’s cool’ and so on. ... [These travels had an impact on Czechs’ attitudes towards Muslims because] it wasn’t as scary there as they may have thought. If you’d told them, ‘Over there, there’s Sharia, and they cut hands off’ [they would have been scared]. But when they travelled to Egypt, they saw how people really live and came back thinking that Egyptians are nice people. Or they went to Tunisia and saw nothing of this sort. Being open to Muslim countries influenced Czechs’ attitudes. (Youssef, 47/M)

Particularly powerful were accounts of the (re-)humanising power of contact. Bruneau et al. (2018) found significantly higher levels of dehumanisation of ‘Muslims’ in Czechia than in other European countries (see also Prokop, 2019, p. 101). Muslim participants reported instances in which they felt they had been denied the attribution of human emotions (i.e. *infrahumanisation*; see Leyens et al., 2007) or traits (i.e. *dehumanisation*; see Haslam, 2006) by non-Muslim Czechs. They believed that contact was the antidote:

The more visible [actual Muslims] are, [the more they will be] seen as fellow human beings, with their good deeds and bad deeds, their contradictions as human beings, their ability to do good and bad. It's just another human being. Then, the Czech public will see them as just... 'yeah, they're just like us' – not necessarily that they're really great people and angels. They're not. Muslims are just part of humanity. They're not angels; they're human beings. They can make mistakes and commit crimes – like any other human being – and they can also be very good. (Maleek, 51/M)

Intergroup contact has proven effective in humanising out-groups by establishing common identities through reduced intergroup anxiety and increased empathy (Capozza et al., 2013). Zain (55/M) recalled an intercultural event in Teplice at which some non-Muslim attendees broke into tears after intergroup encounters. He explained to them that besides Muslims' private relationship with Islam, 'we have exactly the same problems and difficulties: our children are in school; we have sick mothers to care for... Our lives are exactly the same.' Likewise, having Muslim schoolmates reportedly allowed non-Muslims to better understand cultural differences and why some comments could be offensive and, generally, to humanise their classmates' social groups. Reflecting on the painful experience of facing a man in court who had sent her death threats online, this Muslim participant concluded:

In Czechia, Muslims are still so terribly anonymous that nobody feels sorrow about writing something mean about them. I saw this in that man in court. When I stood in front of him and told him what he had done to me and how I had been affected by his comments, he was shocked. Had I not told him in court, he would not have realised. Afterwards, he apologised to me several times. Czechs lack experiences with actual Muslims. If they didn't, whenever they imagined who stands under the label 'Muslim', they would think of a regular person who they encounter several times a week or month. (Yvona, 33/M)

## **Conclusions**

In recent years, surveys have measured highly negative attitudes towards 'Muslims' in Czechia, which have often been attributed to a lack of contact with actual Muslims and the effects of anti-Muslim public discourse. In this article, I have argued that survey respondents interpret the label 'Muslim' as a category of practice (see Brubaker, 2002). Thus, the basis and targets of self-reported attitudes are contingent stereotypes of 'Muslims' rather than actual Muslims. Stereotypes present unique specificities in each (sub)national context, so Dutch survey respondents might operate with qualitatively different stereotypes of 'Muslims' than Czech respondents (Dekker & van der Noll, 2012, p. 115; see M. Braun et al., 2013). To better comprehend widely shared social cognitions of 'Muslims' among Czechs and how intergroup contact affects them, I relied on a construc-

tionist thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with both Muslim and non-Muslim participants conducted in 2020–2021. To my knowledge, no other qualitative empirical analysis of Czech citizens' attitudes towards 'Muslims' has been published to date.

The results confirm some of the limitations of how the category 'Muslim' is processed in its everyday use. The highly mediated frames of immigrants/refugees coming into 'Europe', Islamism/jihadism and alleged issues of integration of Muslims in Western Europe largely condition social cognitions of 'Muslims' in the country. When discussing 'Muslims', most participants think of sociopolitically relevant Muslims abroad (potentially 'migrants' uninterested in settling in Czechia) rather than Czech Muslim communities. In this regard, perceptions of 'Muslims' causing trouble in Western Europe are of utmost salience and are often juxtaposed with images of 'Czechia' as fragile (small, safe and provincial), which magnify the perceived intergroup threat resulting from immigration. Furthermore, stereotypes of 'Muslims' are racialised through their perceived Arabness and Middle Easternness and their exclusion from the 'European' Whiteness in which 'Czechs' are often embedded. These restrictions probably appear among many Czech survey respondents when they cognitively process questions about 'Muslims'.

Against these constraints, in the second section of this article, I analysed the mechanisms through which intergroup contact experiences enrich social cognitions of 'Muslims' – namely, subgrouping, particularly effective in increasing perceived group variability; positive stereotyping of 'Muslims' in comparison with 'Czechs', which arguably results from deprovincialisation; reduced perceived intergroup threat and anxiety (e.g. when visiting Muslim-majority countries); and (re-)humanisation, particularly desirable for Muslim participants. Except for a few groups (e.g. kebab sellers and Arabs in Teplice), opportunities for stereotype-challenging face-to-face intergroup contact in Czechia are very rare (rendering vicarious contact more effective for interventions). Therefore, stays in Muslim-majority settings, such as Egypt, where 'Muslimness' is salient – as are stereotype-disconfirming behaviours – offer opportunities to challenge stereotypes and prejudice. However, the extent to which these enriched stereotypes influence the processing of 'Muslims' in surveys remains unclear, as questions are generally interpreted within a sociopolitical context.

These results invite researchers to reflect on how survey methodologies are designed and interpreted when analysing attitudes towards 'Muslims' across countries. Turning the focus from actual Muslims to stereotypes can contribute to identifying (and subsequently tackling) the contents of perceived Muslimness fostering prejudice, the subgroups promoting or challenging negative stereotypes of 'Muslims', the ethnicised traits that are most salient when processing the category or, relevant to the Czech context, respondents' distinct beliefs about Muslims living in their countries. Survey methodologies can advance our understanding of anti-Muslim prejudice in Czechia – for example, by reducing the

gap between researchers' and respondents' interpretations of the category 'Muslim' through definitions, vignettes or cognitive interviewing methods, such as probing (Behr et al., 2020), or by measuring the affective social distance to Muslim groups other than those negatively mediatised. Importantly, more qualitative studies on attitudes towards and stereotypes of 'Muslims' (vis-à-vis 'refugees' or 'migrants') should be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of a social issue that legitimises daily discrimination and violence against actual Muslims.

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## Annex 1. Participants' Basic Data

## List of participants – first part

Name	Age	Occupation	City	Gender	Muslim	Was in Egypt	University degree
Adam	44	Unemployed	Prague	M			Y
Adéla	34	Healthcare	Ostrava	F		Y	Y
Agáta	45	Trader	Somewhere in Egypt	F		Y	Y
Aneta	56	Entrepreneur	Teplice	F			Y
Barbora	55	Healthcare	Prague	F		Y	N
Beáta	34	Healthcare	Teplice	F			N
Bernard	32	Architect	Small Moravian town	M			Y
Františka	54	Unemployed (caregiver)	Prague	F			N
Hana	24	Student	Small Moravian town	F			N
Jozef	40	Entrepreneur	Ostrava	M			N
Kamil	49	Photographer	Small Moravian town	M			N
Klára	52	School teacher	Small Moravian town	F			Y
Lucie	68	Retired	Ostrava	F			Y
Maleek	51	Unemployed	Prague	M	Y	N/A	Y
Malika	32	Self-employed	Prague	F	Y	N/A	Y
Maryam	26	Student	Prague	F	Y	N/A	N
Milada	43	Entrepreneur	Ostrava	F			Y
Ondřej	20	Student	Teplice	M			N
Radek	31	Theatre	Ostrava	M			N
Robert	19	Student	Prague	M			N

**List of participants – second part**

Name	Age	Occupation	City	Gender	Muslim	Was in Egypt	University degree
Roman	39	Police officer	Small Moravian city	M		Y	N
Šimon	32	Unemployed	Prague	M			Y
Štěpán	20	Student	Small Moravian town	M			N
Tereza	35	Public sector	Brno	F	Y	N/A	Y
Věra	25	Market research	Teplice	F			Y
Vítek	31	School teacher	Small Moravian city	M		Y	Y
Youssef	47	IT	Village in Central Bohemia Region	M	Y	N/A	Y
Yvona	33	NGO	Prague	F	Y	N/A	Y
Zain	55	Healthcare	Teplice	M	Y	N/A	Y
Zehra	30	Administrative role	Prague	F	Y	N/A	Y
Žofie	48	Part-time caregiver	Prague	F			N