



# The Portuguese Muslim community: integration and its role against radicalization

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## Abstract

Portugal has never reported any case of violent radicalization from Islamist-inspired terrorism. To analyze some of the reasons why, this article sets two goals: understand the integration factors of the Muslim community and identify strategies to prevent radicalization implemented by its members. An exploratory qualitative study was conducted with interviews with 11 Muslim leaders. The results describe the characteristics of integration of the Muslim community and the strategies implemented by them to prevent radicalization. The results are important to inform policy and practice related to immigrants' integration, and to understand how community resilience can be built to prevent radicalization.

**Keywords** Muslim community · Prevention · Radicalization · Terrorism · Community resilience

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## Introduction

An unprecedented massive flow of around 40,000 foreign fighters across different nations became radicalized and left their lives and families behind to join the Islamic State (IS) during the Syrian Civil War (United Nations 2017). Some of them returned home and perpetrated terrorist attacks, such as the Brussels attacks (France 24 2021). Nevertheless, while this phenomenon has been widely present in Western European countries, Portugal has been spared from it. Indeed, until this study, Portugal has never reported a case of violent radicalization from Islamist-inspired movements in Portuguese territory. Instead, the Portuguese foreign fighters who joined IS became radicalized in countries like the United Kingdom, France, Luxembourg, or the Netherlands while they were living there (Franco and Moleiro 2015; Arena 2018). Those who radicalized in Luxembourg, France and the Netherlands were born in these countries, but have Portuguese nationality due to their parents (Franco and Moleiro 2015; Pinto 2015). The foreign fighters who became radicalized and converted to Islam in the United Kingdom were either born in Portugal or moved there at a young age. This group of six men originates from families with roots in Portugal's former colonies (de Carvalho 2022; Arena 2018). A recent study demonstrates that some of the reasons behind the radicalization of this group are risk factors such as lack of social inclusion in the United Kingdom, discrimination, close contact with extremist individuals and use of extremist propaganda (de Carvalho 2022).

To understand the factors contributing to the significant influx of foreign fighters, academic literature highlights that the majority of these individuals are either Muslims or Muslim converts. They became radicalized as a result of a combination of risk factors, including discrimination, lack of integration, limited life prospects, exposure to extremist propaganda, and a perceived obligation to defend the Muslim community (Vergani et al. 2018; Wolfowicz et al. 2020). In fact, the interest in studying Muslims and their relation to terrorism and radicalization started in the aftermath of 9/11, since terrorist attacks came to be widely viewed as perpetrated mainly by Muslim men (Lynch 2013). Nevertheless, an extensive review of the literature revealed that the connection between the Muslim community and terrorism in Portugal has not been explored thoroughly in prior research. To address this gap, this paper unveils the findings of an exploratory study with two objectives: firstly, to understand the integration process of the Muslim community in Portugal, and secondly, to investigate whether community members actively employ strategies to counteract risk factors associated with radicalization. Subsequent introductory sections will furnish a thorough insight into the Muslim community in Portugal and analyze some of the risk factors contributing to engagement in violent radicalization.

## The characteristics of the Muslim community in Portugal

The Iberian Peninsula has been home for Muslims over centuries, but Portugal, after the post-colonization period, which started in 1975, experienced a new wave of



Muslim people coming to the country, bringing in the new Islamic presence (Tiesler 2005). After the implementation of democracy in Portugal and the subsequent decolonization of Mozambique, the Indian territories and Guinea Bissau—many Portuguese families left these countries behind to move to Portugal. Among these people were Muslim families, some with Portuguese nationality, who wanted to start their new life in the mainland.

In the 1990s, immigrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and then Morocco and Algeria, immigrated to Portugal, but on a smaller scale, to try to find better economic opportunities (Tiesler 2010). Adding to these numbers are the refugees that Portugal received after the refugee crisis escalated in 2015. Many of these people came from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, which are mainly Muslim countries. Following the European Agenda for Migration and the commitments with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Portugal hosted almost 2000 people seeking asylum (Friaças 2019). More recently, after the fall of Kabul in August 2021, Portugal has welcomed nearly 500 Afghan refugees (Lusa 2021). Nowadays, the Muslim community has grown. According to the last Census, there are 36,480 Muslims living in Portugal (corresponds to 0.415% of the general population) (INE 2021). However, this number is probably much higher, because the question about religion in the Census is optional, and there is some concern that immigrants, including some who may be undocumented, might have hesitated to officially declare their religious affiliation (Pinto et al. 2023).

Despite being small in size, the Muslim community in Portugal is considered by some a case study because of its interesting characteristics (Nielsen 1992; Tiesler 2005; Henriques 2015). It is composed of mainly by Sunni people, then Shia people (mainly Ismailli and a limited number of Ahmadiyya individuals). A common feature is that almost all members of the Muslim community have a Portuguese-language background, which facilitated their integration, and hold medium to high education, making the process of labor integration smoother (Tiesler 2005; Henriques 2015). Additionally, a crucial aspect is that the Muslim community residing in Portugal often openly expresses feeling welcomed and well-integrated into the society (Henriques 2015). According to Berry's acculturation theory, integration involves adopting acculturation strategies wherein individuals adapt to and build social connections with the host community while preserving their cultural roots (Berry 1997). This definition tends to predict the non-existence of discriminatory behavior.

Recently, the President of the Islamic Community of Lisbon (CIL)—the main Muslim organization in Portugal—gave an interview to a famous Portuguese newspaper, claiming that there is not Islamophobia or other type of discrimination towards Muslims in the country. Indeed, some literature has pointed out that Portugal has an open and tolerant attitude towards immigrants and different cultures. But, on the other hand, it is also necessary to understand the integration factors from the side of the Muslim community, which, in combination, might provide some clues to understand the process of achieving a multicultural and secure society.



## The Muslim community and the risk factors of radicalization

According to Dawson, the majority of Western foreign fighters in the Syrian Civil War come from Muslim immigrant background (Dawson 2021). This disproportionate number of Muslim people adhering to extremist ideologies is the starting point of this study, which aims to understand the characteristics of the Portuguese Muslim community in relation to integration and prevention of radicalization. One of the reasons that Benmelech and Klor (2018) found in their study to explain the departure of people to Syria and Iraq is that larger Muslim communities in highly ethnically homogeneous countries produce more foreign fighters. These authors argue that difficulties in integration and even cultural assimilation are two of the factors that help to explain this flow of foreign fighters.

In the last decades, several terrorist attacks perpetrated by Islamist extremists, who allegedly justify violence in the name of Islam, have caused negative perceptions against Muslim communities in Western countries. These events have been exploited by, for example, far-right leaders, who include in their narrative an amalgamation of Islam, Muslim people and Muslim immigration to Western countries and depict this as one of the biggest threats to Western culture (Oztig 2023). This type of discourse and the fear they produce might cause negative stereotypes and negative attitudes against Muslim people, such as discrimination and social exclusion. Moreover, these attacks have led many people questioning whether efforts to promote integration of Muslim communities have been implemented to prevent feelings of social exclusion and discrimination.

In fact, the literature on risk factors of radicalization indicates that discrimination, social exclusion, low integration, and relative deprivation are some of the potential social-based risks of radicalization and support for violent extremism (Ellis et al. 2021; Wolfowicz et al. 2021; Vergani et al. 2018). These factors put people at a greater risk of radicalizing into terrorism, because these are vulnerabilities that extremist groups usually exploit through their ideology and propaganda (Bindner 2018). This fact seems to suggest that the promotion of integration, as well as the implementation of measures to counter social exclusion, discrimination and relative deprivation is essential to protect against violent radicalization. However, not all academic literature aligns with the idea, that integration is essential to prevent radicalization and support to violent extremism. For example, a study attempted to understand the connection between acculturation strategies<sup>1</sup> and perception of threat in Norway and in the United Kingdom (Tahir et al. 2019). Surprisingly, the authors of this study concluded that “assimilated and, to some extent, integrated Muslims in both countries tended to show the highest violent behavioral intentions” (Tahir et al. 2019). One of the explanations might be the fact that, in some cases, high levels of

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<sup>1</sup> John Berry defined the acculturation model which premises four different strategies: integration, which occurs when individuals maintain their original culture and adopt the host community’s culture; assimilation, when individuals abandon their cultural background in order to adopt the new culture of the host society; separation, which occurs when individuals reject the host culture and maintain their original culture; and marginalization, which happens when individuals abandon their original culture and do not adopt the host’s culture (Berry 1997).



integration may lead to more awareness of the social clues, which signal discriminatory behavior and language from the host society members (Awad 2010). In accordance with this, Lajevardi and colleagues found that “integrated Muslims are consistently more likely than their counterparts to report individual- and group-level societal and political discrimination” (Lajevardi et al. 2019). These results indicate that successful integration must be a two-way process: on one hand Muslims, in this case, must be willing to integrate, but host societies should embrace the minority group as well. As these studies demonstrate, discrimination against Muslims, even if they feel themselves integrated in the society, may hinder community cohesion and lead to greater support or engagement in violent extremism. Furthermore, it should be taken in consideration that discrimination is not the only reason to support or commit extremist violence. In order to understand the process of integration of the Muslim community and its connection with potential for radicalization, other risk factors need to be explored, such as relative deprivation. Relative deprivation can be defined as the perception of receiving less than individuals consider they deserve (Doosje et al. 2013). A systematic review on radicalization risk factors highlights that relative deprivation of a social group, encompassing elements such as injustice, stigmatization, social exclusion, and marginalization, is consistently identified as a prevalent risk factor in the literature (Vergani et al. 2018). Additionally, a recent study demonstrates that group-based relative deprivation is associated with extremism among certain Muslims born in Western countries (Obaidi et al. 2019).

## Present study

Perceived discrimination and social exclusion within the host society, coupled with feelings of relative deprivation, may help elucidate the radicalization and support for violent extremism within the Muslim community in Western countries. Given that Portugal has not witnessed any instances of violent radicalization thus far, an exploratory qualitative study was undertaken, involving interviews with Muslim leaders in Portugal. As lack of integration has been indicated as one risk factor of radicalization, the primary objectives of this study are twofold: firstly, to comprehend the integration process of this community in Portugal, and secondly to ascertain if any actively implemented strategies by community members exist to mitigate risk factors leading to radicalization. The findings regarding these objectives may provide insights into why Portugal has not experienced violent radicalization stemming from Islamist terrorism.

## Method

In order to address the two research questions of this study, we decided to develop an exploratory study, following the inductive research method, and to conduct in-depth interviews. This way, initial contacts were made with the Mosque in Porto. After this first contact, an active member of the Muslim community from Porto agreed to become a participant in the study, and recommended, through snowball sampling,



more participants who fit the eligible criteria for this study. Thus, we interviewed 10 more people, in a total of 11 interviews, developed in Porto and Lisbon. Snow-ball sampling is a common method used in qualitative research. In this method, researchers start the process with initial contacts, who are then requested to suggest and refer additional contacts to participate in the study (Parker et al. 2019). For this research, we decided to interview the religious leaders and prominent figures of the Muslim community in Portugal, who have been an active part of it by, for example, promoting integration efforts for newcomers. We did not plan for a final number of interviews to be conducted. Instead, we concluded our contacts upon reaching a saturation point, at which interviewees no longer provided recommendations for additional contacts. Each interview was conducted by the same researcher and started with a presentation of the study, the goal and the research questions. The researcher also provided information about informed consent, which participants had to sign upon agreement to participate in the study. None of the participants were previously known or familiar with the researchers. Considering the exploratory nature of this study, aimed at acquiring an in-depth understanding of the subject, the emphasis is not on the representativeness of results for the broader Muslim population in Portugal. Therefore, the findings are applicable to this specific sample, so caution is advised when attempting to generalize them. After the completion of this study, results were shared with participants, in case they wanted to make any changes to their statements. However, all of them were happy with the results.

## Participants

The interviews were conducted with Muslim religious leaders and active members of the Muslim community, who fit the criteria to respond to the two goals of this study. One initial contact, an active member of the Muslim community in Porto, after getting acquainted with our study and its objectives, recommended religious leaders of the Islamic Community of Lisbon, as well as active members in the community, who have been working for its benefit and for the integration of newcomers. Therefore, for this study, we interviewed five religious leaders and six active members of the Muslim community. The first interview was conducted in August 2019 and the last in December 2019.

## Interview script

For the conduction of the interviews, the researchers developed a broad script, with semi-structured and open questions to create moments of reflection and in-depth answers from participants. The main topics of the questions were reasons that explained the absence of violent radicalization in the Portuguese Muslim community; strategies implemented by the Muslim community to prevent radicalization; the process of integration, whether there are discrimination and social exclusion, and other topics such as socioeconomic situation. Besides the initial questions, interviewees were told that they could expand their answers to other topics, by providing



details that were not included in the script. The average length of the interviews was 52 min.

## Analysis

In order to analyze data collected in the interviews, we followed the process of content analysis, characterized as a research method aimed at generating an objective and systematic depiction of the manifested content (Berelson 1952; Bardin 1977). Through a scientific approach, this process converts “raw” data into meaningful data to respond to research questions (Prasad 2008). Hence, the process of implementing content analysis must start with a familiarization of the content and then follow four steps which must be undertaken: (1) selection of units of analysis, (2) development of codes, categories, and themes, (3) sampling appropriate content, and (4) checking intercoder reliability (Stempel 1989). The resulting coding scheme, with units, codes, categories, and themes, can be found in Table 1. In order to establish credibility, one researcher was responsible for analysis and coding, while others checked their validity and reliability (Elo et al. 2014). In the end, all researchers discussed the final coding scheme and any potential disagreement together.

## Results

The analysis of the interviews produced two major themes: Factors of Integration in Portugal and Reasons for the Absence of Violent Radicalization in Portugal. While the literature does acknowledge the role of the integration process in preventing radicalization, we chose to separate these two themes as they correspond to the distinct yet interconnected objectives of this study. As such, the first theme, Factors of Integration in Portugal, is divided into three categories: Familiarity with Portugal, Characteristics of Portugal, and Role of the Islamic Community of Lisbon. Thus, the first category, which is divided into two codes, aims to describe how Muslims feel towards Portugal, since the majority of participants said that they perceived themselves as Portuguese. The first code is Nationality. Many members of the Muslim community came from former Portuguese colonies, mainly from Mozambique and Guinea Bissau. When these countries acquired their independence from Portugal, many Muslim families decided to move to Portugal, as they were already Portuguese. Moreover, the second and third generations were born in Portugal, meaning that their primary identification is that of Portuguese Muslims rather than individuals who acquired their nationality later in life. The second code is Language. Given that many members of the Muslim community resided in Portugal’s former colonies, they were fluent in Portuguese. This linguistic familiarity was cited as facilitating a smoother integration process, as expressed by one participant who stated, “Language was the main factor that brought many of us here; it’s easier to integrate” (religious leader, 13 October 2019). For those arriving later from different countries without proficiency in Portuguese, participants highlighted that integration



**Table 1** Coding scheme with themes, categories, codes, and units

Themes	Categories	Codes	Meaning units
Factors of integration	Familiarity with Portugal	Nationality Language	Portuguese Natural integration for Portuguese speaking people Easy integration due to help given by Muslim community
	Characteristics of Portugal	Population Socioeconomic conditions	Unique case of integration in Europe Welcoming, non-discriminatory Financial stability Employment
	Role of the Islamic Community of Lisbon (CIL)	Active role Appeal	Foundation of CIL Integration of newcomers Help given to Muslim in Portugal For integration For respect for Portuguese law
Absence of violent radicalization	Continuous prevention	Prevention with children Prevention within the community	Schools Madradas Statements after attacks Dissemination of leaflets and lecturing Control of new mosques Control of the received funding Active collaboration with authorities
	Leadership of the Islamic Community of Lisbon	Appeal	For calm For primacy of the Portuguese law over religion For praying For caring for Portugal





became more manageable with the assistance provided by the established Muslim community.

The second category is Characteristics of Portugal, and it is divided into two codes. The first code is Population. Participants classified Portugal as an “unique case in Europe in promoting integration”, and as “heaven, (...) because we can express our confession without any type of problem, we are welcome, I mean, the community appreciates us” (religious leader, 14 October 2019). Regarding the Portuguese Population, they categorized as “welcoming, stable, pacific, non-xenophobic, supportive and [promoting] peaceful interaction” (member of the community, 15 December 2019). Participants further expressed a profound sense of integration within Portugal, not considering it a significant issue to them (“natural integration,” “not an issue for us”; religious leader, 22 September 2019). Illustratively, some participants noted that individuals within the Muslim community who wear Islamic attire do not perceive discrimination from non-Muslim Portuguese individuals. The second code is Socioeconomic Conditions and it is divided into two units. The first is Stability, wherein participants asserted the presence of stable economic conditions in Portugal, citing that a “considerable portion of us belong to the middle and middle-high class” (member of the community, 13 October 2019). The second is Employment. Participants contended that a significant majority is employed, and they enjoy professional stability, largely attributed to the aforementioned financial stability.

The third category is the Role of the Islamic Community of Lisbon, which is divided into two codes. The first is Active Role. Participants asserted that the founding of the Islamic Community of Lisbon in the 1960s played a pivotal role as an institution, serving as a foundation for the integration and assistance of other Muslims arriving in Portugal (“The Islamic Community was already established and had all the merit in welcoming and integrating other people, and that was very interesting!”, religious leader, 14 October 2019). Consequently, Portuguese Muslims actively engage in aiding and supporting one another in various facets of their lives in Portugal. Three participants underscored that they embody the principles passed down by their parents, who lived in former Portuguese colonies: “We have movements within the community where this was inculcated since we were children, and we visit sick people in hospitals, we go to the cemetery, we visit people regularly”; “I have that moral responsibility to help, responsibility that my parents taught me”; “When migrants arrived in Portugal, when I was younger, we used to go meet them and share contacts and help them” (member of the community, 15 December 2019). Consequently, they contribute to the support and assistance of the community in Portugal, akin to the practices their parents employed while residing in Mozambique or Guinea Bissau, thereby preserving elements of their original culture. Additionally, the Islamic Community of Lisbon assumes an active role in facilitating the integration of newcomers, particularly immigrants and refugees (“nowadays we focus more on refugees coming from Syria and Iraq”, 14 October 2019). The second code pertains to an Appeal made by the Islamic Community of Lisbon to its members, urging them to actively foster integration and prioritize adherence to Portuguese laws over religious jurisdiction (“So, if the Portuguese law does not allow, we, in the religion, won’t impose things against it to the community”, religious leader, 19



August 2019). In summary, this initial theme describes the factors that help elucidate the successful integration of the Muslim community in Portugal, as reported by the participants. Factors pertaining to Portugal, including identification with the country, language, population characteristics, and the role played by the Islamic Community of Lisbon, collectively contribute to fostering and facilitating the integration of Muslim individuals in Portugal.

The second theme is Absence of Violent Radicalization in Portugal and it is divided into two different categories. The first is Continuous Prevention made by the Muslim community. It is divided into two codes. The first pertains to Prevention through children, implemented in both schools and *madrasas*. This entails addressing the concept of extremism and imparting a moderate interpretation of religion. As emphasized by one participant, “We always strive for prevention, we have to explain our situation to children, what religion truly is. We must speak openly, not only to condemn but also to clarify the rationale behind our condemnation” (religious leader, 21 October 2019). The second code is Prevention in the Community, divided into five units. The first involves issuing official statements following terrorist attacks. This serves the purpose of disassociating themselves from the incidents and advocating for calm and tranquility within the community (“We have to make these statements, explain that attacks have nothing to do with religion, our faith, our spirituality, otherwise, they’ll get confused”; “With these statements we call for peace and calm”, religious leader, 21 October 2019). The second involves disseminating flyers and conducting lectures within the community to elucidate the distinctions between extremism and religion (“We disseminate to explain what religion is and the differences between religion and terrorism”; “We talk to people to let them know that religion is not that”, religious leader, 6 August 2019). Then, the Control of New Mosques, as well as Control of the Received Funding for New Mosques by the Muslim community is crucial to prevent funding that could amplify the dissemination of extremist ideology. Participants indicated that financial support for the construction of the central mosque in Lisbon, along with other mosques in various Portuguese cities, comes primarily from private Portuguese Muslim donors and local governmental entities, including Town Halls. Only a minor proportion of the funding originates from Arab countries, contributing to the completion of the central mosque (“In those situations there is no funding. We do not receive illicit funding, nor we give money when we don’t know how that money will be used”, member of the community, 25 October 2019). Finally, another significant measure aimed at advancing prevention is the Active Collaboration with Authorities by the Muslim community. This initiative was undertaken to foster trust, transparency, and mitigate any misperceptions that could associate them with extremism (“We are in contact with the Portuguese authorities and if something weird happens we communicate”, member of the community, 25 October 2019).

The second category is Leadership of the Islamic Community in Lisbon. The only code is Appeal. The community actively appeals the Muslim population to maintain calmness and engage in prayers as a preventive measure against any form of extremism (“In situations like these, we appeal to calm”; “We appeal to pray, so people can avoid falling into radicalization”, religious leader, 4 December 2019), and to acknowledge the supremacy of the Portuguese law over religious



considerations (“Religion will transmit confidence but will also respect the law of the country where people are”, religious leader, 4 December 2019). As one participant said, “we have our families here, we invest here, we don’t want anything bad to happen, we must care for Portugal’s wellbeing” (religious leader, 13 October 2019). Overall, this second theme addresses the study’s second objective and illustrates that the Muslim community appears to actively and intentionally implement measures to prevent radicalization and foster community resilience, through measures that act in different dimensions of the community.

## Discussion

This study has two main goals: firstly, to describe and understand the process of integration of the Muslim community in Portugal, and secondly, to examine the preventive measures identified by them to mitigate the risk factors associated with radicalization. In pursuit of these objectives, the study started by reviewing literature outlining the features of the Muslim community in Portugal, followed by an exploration of literature examining the (lack of) integration and its correlation with radicalization and the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Subsequently, the study delved into the perceived discrimination experienced by Muslim individuals from the host community in which they reside. A total of 11 interviews were conducted with Muslim religious leaders and active members of the Muslim community. The data collected was analyzed against a coding table, which resulted from the thorough analysis of the interviews and produced results to respond to the two goals of the study.

As indicated by the participants, the Muslim community perceives itself as thoroughly integrated into Portugal and believes that the country provides conducive conditions for smooth integration. According to participants, Portugal is generally regarded as a successful nation in fostering integration without discrimination. The reasons pointed out for the success of the integration of the Muslim community are threefold. The initial is linked to becoming familiar with Portugal. Muslims arriving from Portugal’s former colonies found it relatively straightforward to obtain Portuguese citizenship, and Portuguese was their mother tongue. According to participants, these two factors significantly facilitated their integration. As the literature demonstrates, cultural fluency is essential for understanding everyday social clues and popular references, which can facilitate integration in the new country (Lajevardi et al. 2019; Sue et al. 2007). Furthermore, literature also underscores that immigrants cannot fully engage in society and its economy unless they are proficient in the national language (García, 2017). Indeed, language emerges as a pivotal factor of successful integration, serving multifaceted roles in daily life. Its significance is particularly pronounced in education and the labor market, where proficiency in the national language plays a crucial role in mitigating discrimination and addressing social inequalities (Esser 2006). Having Portuguese as a first language explains a great deal of the smooth integration of most of the members of the Muslim community in Portugal. Moreover, it was reported by participants in this study that the majority of the Muslim community holds medium to high education levels. Education and proficiency in the national language mutually reinforce one another,



fostering integration in the labor market and facilitating access to well-remunerated positions and higher professional roles. This phenomenon is exemplified by the experience of the Muslim community that migrated to Portugal from the former Portuguese colonies.

The other two reasons are connected to the attributes of Portuguese society and the role played by the Islamic Community in Lisbon in fostering integration. Integration occurs when immigrants preserve their culture, values, and original identity while concurrently embracing the culture of the host society (Berry 1997). Thus, the process of integration is a two-way process of exchanges between host society and immigrant community (Berry 1997; Pedraza 2014). This implies that newcomers should display a readiness to integrate, and, reciprocally, the host community should extend a welcoming and embracing environment. According to the viewpoint of the participants in this study, the Portuguese population is perceived as accommodating, peaceful, and supportive toward newcomers. Furthermore, participants noted the absence of discrimination or xenophobia from non-Muslim Portuguese individuals, emphasizing the peaceful interaction between the two groups. This is in line with previous and more recent public declarations by Muslim leaders in Portugal, who stated “Here there is no Islamophobia. Portugal is like heaven, we should be proud” and “Portugal is a heaven for Muslims” (Petiz 2017; Jamal and Avillez 2024). Moreover, participants conveyed that their socioeconomic circumstances in Portugal, characterized by financial stability and employment (with a substantial portion of the Muslim community belonging to the middle and upper-middle class), significantly contribute to their integration. This aspect is not only crucial for their integration but also plays a key role in the prevention of violent radicalization. As stated before, relative deprivation refers to the gap that exists between expected and achieved accomplishments, and when there is the perception that one does not get what one is expecting, it can lead to feelings of injustice, victimization, and social grievances, which are risk factors of radicalization (Doosje et al. 2013). In this study, the risk factors of radicalization, such as discrimination from the host society, lack of integration, social exclusion, as well as perceived relative deprivation, were not reported by participants. In contrast, participants conveyed that not only do they perceive themselves as integrated into the Portuguese society, they have also achieved lucrative employment and a high social status. These favorable social conditions, recognized as protective factors, serve to counteract any potential susceptibility to radicalization and contribute to the sustenance of the integration process.

On the other hand, the Islamic Community of Lisbon has been playing a role which facilitates and promotes integration of their members. This is accomplished through the active engagement of certain members who assist and support their counterparts, thereby facilitating the integration of immigrant Muslims newly arriving in Portugal. As to participants, this collaborative dynamic is fostered by the establishment of the Islamic Community of Lisbon, an organization founded in the 1960s by Muslims and continuing its operations to this day. Another aspect is the appeal issued by the Islamic Community in Lisbon for Muslims to uphold the Portuguese legal system and integrate into the broader society. This encouragement and leadership model play a role in maintaining community cohesion while fostering an openness to multiculturalism.



As to participants, the practice of providing support and actively participating in community dynamics was acquired from their parents, who brought these traditions from their respective countries of origin. The establishment of the Islamic Community of Lisbon serves to reinforce and perpetuate these traditions in Portugal. This underscores the ability of the Muslim community to preserve its original customs, transmitting them to successive generations while concurrently embracing aspects of the host society's culture. Participants noted their involvement in local festivities and traditions, including Christmas. The appeal made by the Islamic Community of Lisbon to respect the Portuguese jurisdiction further advances these integration efforts by promoting adherence to the rules of the host society.

Concerning the study's second objective, participants provided insights into what they perceive as explanations for the absence of violent radicalization within the Muslim community in Portugal. Two primary responses emerged, with the first pertaining to ongoing preventive measures implemented with children, and the second involving preventive initiatives conducted within the Muslim community. Regarding the latter, two important topics were mentioned: an active collaboration with authorities, which started by their own initiative, in order to build trust, transparency and commitment to peace; and an oversight over the construction of new mosques, including the financial resources allocated for their funding. While this is not a prevalent concern in Portugal, the awareness and vigilance exercised by the Muslim community have mitigated the risk. The funding of mosques, Islamic schools, and charitable organizations, which has been a significant factor contributing to the spread of extremism in other countries, seems to have been effectively managed. For instance, Saudi Arabia finances the export of Wahhabism, a conservative branch of Islam which sometimes overlaps with jihadist narrative, to other Muslim majority countries and to Muslim communities in Europe (Akram et al. 2021). The funds are used to finance networks of Imams and mosques, which, in turn, spread extremist narratives in the countries where they are. As an example, in the United Kingdom, the finance of terrorism mainly from the Gulf countries, has been a serious issue, now recognized by the Government. These funds have supported the construction of mosques and Islamic schools, providing platforms for extremist preachers and the dissemination of extremist material (Wilson 2017). In this regard, it is not solely the Muslim community in Portugal that has shown concern regarding this matter. As mentioned by one participant, the institution he oversees, aimed at facilitating the integration of other Muslim immigrants, receives funding from the local Town Hall. This collaboration was established to maintain the organization's independence, transparency, and to circumvent reliance on foreign funding. Additionally, it ensures the teaching of a moderate perspective on Islam to children.

In regard to the preventive efforts against radicalization, the Islamic Community of Lisbon assumes a crucial leadership role, consistently appealing for calmness over frustration, prayer over radicalization, and emphasizing the importance of caring for Portugal and respecting the supremacy of Portuguese law over religious dictates. As outlined by participants, the presence of an active leadership within the Muslim community stands out as a key factor contributing to the success of a peaceful integration and the absence of violent radicalization.



The results of this study highlight the tight social control that the Muslim community in Portugal enforces to its members to conform to social norms, and therefore integrate in the wider society and avoid radicalization. The appeals that the Islamic Community of Lisbon makes to Muslims to integrate, to avoid radicalization, and to respect the primacy of the Portuguese jurisdiction over religion, as well as the lectures, the dissemination of flyers, and the prevention done in schools with children, are all prescriptive social norms, implemented actively and intentionally by the Muslim community to avoid any type of deviance from its members. In this case, these prescriptive social norms aim to conform Muslims to the expected behavior, by promoting integration, in order to avoid radicalization. These social norms are learned through socialization and social control within the community, via contacts with family, friends, and the leadership of the Muslim community.

Specifically, to avoid radicalization, the Muslim community implements a set of social control mechanisms to reinforce and maintain its members' social bonds to the community, but also to the wider society. The Social Control Theory shows that strong social bonds are essential to avoid deviance (Hirschi 1969). The mechanisms used to promote these social bonds, as seen in the participants' discourse, are highly valued and recognized within the community, demonstrating that Muslims adhere and conform to these social norms. Engaging in the community through employment, attending school, or pursuing a university degree are avenues through which the community fosters the establishment and sustenance of social bonds. Furthermore, fostering connections with family, friends, and the community at large, by dedicating time and effort, serves as another means by which the Muslim community reinforces social bonds within society and with others. The commitment of Muslims to society, through investment in socially approved activities and institutions, is also another mechanism of developing social bonds that the Muslim community implements to reinforce the linkage between its members and the society. In short, the Muslim community, actively and intentionally, enforces on its members a set of measures to strengthen their commitment to society, while avoiding radicalization.

In fact, as the Theory of Social Control suggests, commitment to society and to communities are essential for the prevention of violence, as strong links forged between its members and the community are fundamental to reduce the likelihood of individuals to commit violence (Hirschi 1969). In addition, strong social bonds within a community play a pivotal role in strengthening the community against various forms of violence (Ellis and Abdi, 2017). Derived from the results of this study, the Islamic Community of Lisbon has been able to develop and maintain strong social bonds between its members and the whole society, and, thus, to build community resilience to (violent) radicalization.

Benmelech and Klor (2018) concluded in their study that larger Muslim communities in highly ethnically homogeneous countries produce more foreign fighters. However, the Muslim community living in Portugal is rather small. Official and unofficial estimates suggest that the Muslim population in Portugal ranges from 36,480 to 100,000 individuals, constituting approximately 0.415% to 1% of the total Portuguese population. Additionally, Portugal is a highly homogeneous country, with approximately 1.040 million immigrants, according to the most recent data



from the Agency for the Integration of Migrants and Asylum, and is also one of the European Union member states with the lowest proportion of immigrants residing within its borders (Henriques 2024). The authors also indicate that risk factors, such as difficulties in integration, discrimination and social exclusion contribute to explain the phenomenon of radicalization of foreign fighters. The findings of this study suggest that these circumstances are not applicable to Portugal, which could be one of the reasons for the absence of violent radicalization. The vast majority of the Muslim community is Portuguese, either acquired their nationality after arriving from former colonies or are born in Portugal. Therefore, they identify as Portuguese and have a similar lifestyle as non-Muslim Portuguese citizens. And as shared by them in the interviews, they feel fully integrated in the Portuguese society and do not perceive discrimination from non-Muslims towards them. Consequently, as mentioned by participants, Muslims align themselves with Portuguese identity and lead a lifestyle akin to that of non-Muslim Portuguese citizens. As also reported by participants, there is a sense of complete integration into Portuguese society and no perceived discrimination from non-Muslims.

The study's findings provide insight into the nuanced features of the Portuguese context, particularly with respect to the integration of the Muslim community and the strategies they employ, that could serve as potential preventive factors against violent radicalization and the dissemination of violent ideologies in Portugal. While the findings may not be readily generalizing, they offer deep insights into crucial aspects of the integration of the Muslim community in Portugal and how some of its members actively prevent violent radicalization. In part, these strategies, coupled with the successful integration highlighted by participants, elucidate the absence of Islamist-inspired extremism in Portugal. This is in contrast to other nations that may lack similarly effective integration strategies and a resilient Muslim community, factors that seem to contribute to making Portugal a successful case thus far. Therefore, the results of this study offer valuable insights that can inform policies and practices related to the integration of immigrants and minorities. Furthermore, it contributes to a pertinent body of knowledge aimed at understanding the construction of community resilience to prevent radicalization. However, this study also presents limitations. The first limitation pertains to the exploratory nature of the study. While these studies are advantageous for identifying areas for future research and enhancing deeper comprehension of certain topics, they come with constraints. In this instance, the modest sample size hinders the precise interpretation and extrapolation of results to the broader Muslim population in Portugal. Thus, additional research is necessary to comprehend the factors influencing the integration of the Muslim community in Portugal and its correlation with the absence of violent radicalization. A second limitation is that this study was conducted in the second half of 2019. Since then, more Muslim refugees and immigrants have arrived in Portugal, increasing the number of Muslims and the challenges that come with migration and integration in a different country. Hence, further investigation is required to update this study and assess whether there have been any changes in the results. A third limitation pertains to the integration of the Muslim community in Portugal as viewed from the perspective of the host society. This study exclusively focused on the integration process from the standpoint of certain members of the Muslim community, thereby omitting the



perspective of the broader Portuguese society. Given that integration is inherently a two-way process (Berry 1997), it is essential to investigate how Portuguese society perceives Muslims and their integration. Future research should therefore prioritize examining acculturation attitudes in Portugal toward the Muslim community and their integration into the country.

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**Data availability** The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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