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Do Muslim Citizens Welcome Fundamentalist Muslim Immigrants? Evidence from a Conjoint Experiment in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

How do Muslim citizens respond to immigrants who hold fundamentalist interpretations of Islam? Although the social science literature has examined public perceptions of Muslim fundamentalists, it has primarily focused on Western liberal democracies. Consequently, we know relatively little about how Muslim citizens in Muslim-majority societies evaluate immigrants with extreme religious beliefs. To address this gap, this paper provides empirical evidence on how Muslim nationals assess immigrants based on variations in religion and religious intensity. We conducted a conjoint experiment in Kazakhstan, a secular state with a Muslim-majority population, in which respondents evaluated profiles of hypothetical immigrants with randomly assigned characteristics. The results show that Muslim citizens express unfavorable attitudes toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. Moreover, more religious respondents are even more likely to disapprove of such immigrants. These findings suggest that Muslim citizens do not simply draw social boundaries based on shared religious affiliation. Rather, they distinguish between in-group and out-group members according to competing interpretations of what constitutes "Islam." Higher levels of religiosity therefore do not necessarily translate into greater support for fundamentalist beliefs.

Keywords Conjoint analysis · Kazakhstan · Religion and religiosity · Muslim immigrants · Muslim majority societies · Survey experiment

Introduction

Is Islamic fundamentalism perceived as inherently threatening? Islamic fundamentalism—commonly understood as a rigid and doctrinal interpretation of Islam that seeks to (re)establish religion as the foundation of political order—has received significant

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scholarly attention, particularly in the wake of terrorist attacks in Europe and North America. This heightened perception of threat has spurred extensive research on how non-Muslim natives in Western societies view Muslim immigrants, often perceiving Islam as a foreign attribute introduced by immigrants into the host society (e.g., Di Stasio et al. 2021; Savelkoul et al. 2011; Schlueter et al. 2020; Strabac et al. 2014; Velasco González et al. 2008).

While this body of work has substantially advanced our understanding of public attitudes toward Muslim immigration in Western contexts, an important gap remains. We know relatively little about *how Muslim citizens themselves respond to Muslim immigrants in non-Western settings.* This omission is particularly striking given that most Muslim migrants settle outside the West: only about 36 percent choose Western countries as their destination (Pew Research Center 2012). This pattern may partly reflect migrants' preferences for culturally proximate destinations (Böhmelt and Bove 2020). Despite a growing literature on migration attitudes in non-Western or non-democratic settings (e.g., Omelicheva 2010; Yitmen and Verkuyten 2018; York 2022), few studies empirically examine how citizens in Muslim-majority societies perceive immigrants who espouse fundamentalist interpretations of Islam.

While sharing the broader aim of exploring the dynamics of migration acceptance in non-Western contexts, this paper focuses specifically on the impact of religious fundamentalism in secular, Muslim-majority states where religion is separated from the politics and the country maintains neutrality toward all religions. In fact, many Muslim states maintain secular social structures and political institutions that reject Islamism. However, due to globalization and expanding transnational networks, these societies remain susceptible to religious extremist movements originating from outside actors (e.g., fundamentalist Muslim immigrants). For example, Rink and Sharma (2018) find that contact with migrants from Somalia, who are considered to have a high risk of radicalization, increases radicalization among Kenyan Muslim citizens. Since fundamentalist beliefs can be transmitted by immigrants who hold them, understanding how citizens in receiving countries respond to such immigrants is essential for assessing the potential spread of fundamentalist ideologies.

We examine how Muslim citizens in Kazakhstan, a secular Muslim-majority country, respond to Muslim immigrants with fundamentalist beliefs. In studying the relationship between native sentiment toward immigrants and immigrants' religion, the social science literature has traditionally emphasized religious affiliation as a key factor in drawing group boundaries and identifying in-group versus out-group members (Deaux et al. 1995; Ysseldyk et al. 2010). Religious affiliation is typically treated as a dichotomous concept—distinguishing individuals based on adherence to one religion versus another (Leszczensky and Pink 2017; Verkuyten 2007)—which may lead to the expectation that even non-fundamentalist Muslim residents might be inclined to welcome fundamentalist Muslim migrants.

While we agree that religious affiliation serves as a salient boundary marker, we argue that individuals' self-understanding of their own religion and their attitudes toward others go beyond such simplistic categorizations. To clarify this point, we draw on group threat theory and consider the religiosity of both natives and immigrants. In short, *Muslim citizens may perceive fundamentalist Muslim immigrants as fundamentally different religious out-group members and view them as a serious*

threat. We further theorize how Muslim citizens' religiosity might moderate their attitudes toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants, shaping whether they are more or less likely to accept them. We expect that variation in Muslim citizens' religiosity will influence the degree to which they tolerate these immigrants.

To test our theoretical expectations, we conducted a conjoint (choice) experiment in which respondents were presented with two hypothetical profiles of incoming immigrants. Following prior studies (e.g., Helbling and Traunmüller 2020), we varied immigrants' religious denomination (i.e., no religion, Muslim, and Christian) as well as their level of religiosity (i.e., fundamentalist, practicing, and non-practicing). By randomly assigning these attributes in a survey experiment, we examine how citizens respond to fundamentalist Muslim immigrants compared to other types of immigrants.

This experiment was conducted in Kazakhstan, which has received the largest volume of immigrants in Central Asia since gaining independence in 1991. The country is also a secular Muslim-majority society where the government allows for religious pluralism but strictly prohibits religious extremist ideologies and movements. While 72% of Kazakhstan's population identifies as Muslim and 23% as Christian, citizens vary widely in their levels of religious attachment and priorities. Given its status as a secular country with meaningful variation within Islam (Collins 2023), Kazakhstan provides an appropriate case for testing our hypotheses on how Muslim citizens' religious affiliation and religiosity shape their tolerance toward Islam and fundamentalism. At the same time, Kazakhstan holds distinctive beliefs and practices of Islam, and thus we cannot directly compare the case with other Muslim countries or Western countries. Still, it provides valuable insights into whether existing findings based on Western contexts are applicable elsewhere.

The results of our conjoint experiment are twofold. First, Muslim respondents expressed the most negative attitudes toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants—even more so than toward immigrants with different religious affiliations, such as practicing Christian immigrants. Second, compared to secular respondents, more religiously pious individuals were more likely to hold negative views toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. Although pious respondents also showed greater negativity toward both practicing and non-practicing Christian immigrants, their disapproval was significantly stronger toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. These findings suggest that, much like in Western societies, Muslim citizens do not welcome fundamentalist Muslim immigrants, particularly in a secular country whose leaders stigmatize the latter group. Instead, Muslim citizens' negative attitudes toward fundamentalists are amplified—not diminished—by their religiosity. Our results strongly indicate that citizens in secular, Muslim-majority societies may exhibit similar mechanisms of attitude formation as those observed in the West, and that higher levels of religiosity therefore do not necessarily translate into support for fundamentalism.

Theoretical Perspective: Religious Fundamentalism and Group Threat Theory

Religious Fundamentalism and Islam

Scholars have long examined the impact of religion, as it is widely believed to constitute one of the core elements shaping individuals' identities (Seul 1999). Traditionally, the social sciences have conceptualized religion as an overarching system that guides people's ideas and practices—beliefs and rituals—through a shared sense of solidarity and belonging to the sacred (Durkheim 1995). Although fundamentalism is difficult to define due to its diverse manifestations across historical periods, countries, and religions, many scholars characterize it as a committed and dogmatic adherence to the sacred texts of a particular religious tradition (Juergensmeyer 2004; Liht et al. 2011; Williamson and Ahmad 2007). For example, Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992) define fundamentalism as "the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity that must be followed, unchangeable and opposed by forces of evil" (118).

Although the term *religious fundamentalism* originated in the conservative Christian movement in the United States in the 1920s, it has more frequently been used to refer to Islamic fundamentalism since the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967 and the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. Because religious fundamentalists tend to adhere rigidly to what they regard as pure teachings and often express intolerance toward alternative beliefs and practices, they are frequently perceived as radical or extreme (Juergensmeyer 2011; Rausch 2015). However, fundamentalism does not necessarily lead to extremism. For instance, Islamic fundamentalist groups such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) advocate the establishment of an Islamic state and the implementation of Islamic law while rejecting the use of violence (Mohamed Osman 2010; Putra and Sukabdi 2014; Ward 2009). Nevertheless, Islamic fundamentalism—or even Islam more broadly—is often stigmatized through its association with violence and terrorism (e.g., Helbling and Traunmüller 2020).

Earlier studies have frequently emphasized religious affiliation when examining international conflict, particularly in discussions of Islamic fundamentalism. For example, following the September 11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, theories emphasizing global civilizational conflict gained prominence in U.S. policy discourse and in the field of international relations (Urban 2003). Drawing on arguments advanced by Fukuyama (1992) and Huntington (1997), these perspectives conceptualized Islam as a potential source of threat to the contemporary democratic world. Another example is social identity theory. In studies examining the relationship between natives' attitudes toward immigrants and immigrants' religion, scholars have applied this framework to argue that religious affiliation serves as a key marker for drawing group boundaries and distinguishing in-group from out-group members (Deaux et al. 1995; Ysseldyk et al. 2010). In this line of research, Islam is often portrayed as a source of threat brought by immigrants into non-Muslim societies (e.g., Velasco González et al. 2008).

While these studies have provided valuable theoretical and empirical frameworks for understanding the role of Islam in contemporary politics, it is difficult to overlook

that many of these perspectives originate from Western political and social contexts, which are typically democratic and Christian-majority societies. If these theories were applied mechanically to Muslim-majority settings, one might expect immigrants with a Muslim religious affiliation to be readily welcomed in Muslim-majority countries, regardless of differences among Islamic subgroups (just as immigrants with Christian backgrounds might face fewer barriers in Christian-majority societies). However, like other religious traditions, the Islamic world is far from homogeneous (El-Menouar 2014; Pew Research Center 2012). Different Muslim-majority countries—and different groups within them—may hold diverse norms and standards regarding in-group identity, group identification, and attitudes toward out-groups (e.g., Martinovic and Verkuyten 2016).

Heterogeneity in Muslim Immigrants' Religiosity

In understanding public perception of immigrants, scholars have long investigated in identifying the circumstances in which natives view immigrants as *threats*. The group threat theory posits that in-group members perceive out-group members as significant threats to valuable resources, leading to the development of negative attitudes toward them (Blumer 1958). The theory identifies four distinct sources of threat: the labor market, welfare, culture, and security (e.g., Sniderman et al. 2004). While economic threats—such as labor market competition and fiscal pressure—are typically considered the primary drivers of group threat (e.g., Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010), security threats become especially salient when the focus is on fundamentalist religious groups (e.g., Hellwig and Sinno 2017; McDaniel et al. 2011).[1]

From a security threat perspective, in-group members' perceptions of danger may intensify when they believe that out-group members pose a risk to their safety. In response to such perceived security threats, in-group members often develop more negative attitudes toward the out-group as a whole. In Western societies, several studies have shown that security threats are among the strongest predictors of anti-immigrant sentiment, as physical safety is one of the most fundamental human needs (Canetti-Nisim et al. 2008; Fitzgerald et al. 2012). However, little is known about the extent to which this logic applies in countries where the majority of the population is Muslim. One of the few but important studies found that following terrorist attacks, Lebanese attitudes toward Syrian refugees became more negative (Braithwaite et al. 2019). Similarly, survey experiments conducted in Turkey and Morocco have shown that negative attitudes toward immigrants intensify when immigrants are associated with cues of insecurity (Buehler et al. 2020; Getmansky et al. 2018). In this light, even though fundamentalist Muslim immigrants share a religious affiliation with the host population, they may still be perceived as a serious threat to national safety and social cohesion.

[1] Economic threat arguments posit that perceptions of threat arise from material economic conditions, such as fears of labor market competition (e.g., Mayda 2006; Scheve and Slaughter 2001) or fiscal pressure on public services and the welfare state (e.g., Facchini and Mayda 2009). Because Muslim immigrants may occupy diverse economic positions, we emphasize alternative dimensions of threat perception.

By applying group threat theory and the security threat thesis, we can better understand how Muslim citizens in secular Muslim countries form attitudes toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. It is important to note that fundamentalism and violence are distinct phenomena—one does not necessarily lead to the other (Verkuyten 2018). However, multiple studies have shown that fundamentalist beliefs are positively associated with support for radicalization and hostility against out-groups (e.g., Koopmans 2015; Yustisia et al. 2020). Muslim citizens may then perceive fundamentalist Muslim immigrants as highly threatening and consequently evaluate them more negatively (Hypothesis 1).

H1: Muslim citizens are more likely to negatively evaluate fundamentalist Muslim immigrants.

Heterogeneity in Muslim Nationals' Religiosity

While we have thus far considered variation in religiosity among immigrants, it is also reasonable to assume that Muslim nationals' perceptions may depend on their own level of religiosity. While religion serves as a nominal identifier used to categorize different religious groups, religiosity reflects the degree of religious commitment and values held by individuals within the same religion.

Based on the security threat framework, we expect that pious Muslim citizens will be more reluctant to accept fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. Consistent with this expectation, prior studies have found that higher levels of religiosity are associated with heightened sensitivity to insecurity and mortality (e.g., Vail et al. 2010). Highly religious individuals tend to place greater emphasis on values such as conformity and security (Saroglou et al. 2004), likely because their religious practices keep them persistently aware of mortality. These heightened priorities make them less tolerant of unpredictable or drastic change and more inclined to seek a stable social order grounded in safety and security. In other words, individuals with high religiosity are more sensitive to perceived threats to their secure way of life. Empirical evidence supports this view. Stevens and Vaughan-Williams (2016) show that religiosity amplifies perceptions of security threats relevant to both individuals and their communities, while Adamczyk and LaFree (2015) find that pious Americans are more likely to perceive religious terrorism as a threat. Following this logic, we expect that pious Muslim citizens will be particularly sensitive to the security threats posed by fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. This leads to the following expectation (Hypothesis 2).

H2: Citizens with higher levels of Muslim religiosity are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants.

The Case of Kazakhstan as a Secular Muslim State

To empirically assess our hypotheses, we conducted a survey experiment in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is a Muslim-majority country in the post-Soviet region: approximately 72% of the population identifies as Muslim, while 23% identifies as Christian (mainly Russian Orthodox), including ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Despite this religious composition, the country can be considered a secular Muslim-

majority society due to its institutional commitment to religious pluralism. While the government recognizes Islam as the dominant religion, it also plays a central role in regulating and restricting religious activities in order to maintain religious harmony within a secular state framework.

During the period of political liberalization following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kazakh government relaxed previously strict regulations on religious practices as part of its effort to reverse Russification and revive Kazakh national identity. For example, in the early years of his presidency, Nursultan Nazarbayev adopted an overtly pro-Islamic stance (Akiner 2003). However, with the adoption of the second constitution in August 1995, Kazakhstan officially declared itself a secular state and banned the formation of public associations aimed at inciting religious enmity, as well as political parties based on religion. Malik (2019) describes this arrangement as a "duality," in which the state simultaneously encourages the growth of Islamic religiosity while also restricting it.

Country-level secularization does not necessarily imply that citizens are uniformly less religious; rather, religiosity varies substantially across individuals. For example, only 10 percent of Muslim citizens support the implementation of sharia law (Islamic law), and about half of Kazakhs believe that different religions can lead to heaven and that individuals can be moral without believing in God (Khaidar 2018). At the same time, several surveys indicate that Kazakh citizens have become more religious in recent years (e.g., Junisbai et al. 2018). Comparing the World Values Survey waves of 2011 and 2018 shows that the share of respondents identifying as Muslim increased by 17.3%. The Central Asia Barometer (2017) similarly reports that 61.53% of respondents agreed with the statement that people in Kazakhstan have become more religious in their practices and beliefs. Sharipova's survey (2019) further sheds light on religious practices, documenting a growing proportion—particularly among young, Kazakh-speaking Muslims—who report praying five times a day.

Driven largely by rapid economic growth, Kazakhstan has transitioned since the mid-2000s from a country of emigration to a destination for immigrants (Zhumashbekova et al. 2024). By 2015, immigrants made up 20.1% of the population—significantly higher than in other former Soviet states (e.g., 10.8% in Ukraine and 3.9% in Uzbekistan) and even in some Western European countries (e.g., 14.9% in Germany, 13.2% in the UK, and 12.1% in France; United Nations Population Division 2015). In light of Russia's economic downturn, Kazakhstan has become a major destination for migrants from other Central Asian states. Many choose Kazakhstan over Russia due to cultural and linguistic similarities, as well as relatively more liberal public attitudes toward immigrants. In addition to promoting the return of ethnic Kazakhs, the government has also introduced administrative reforms aimed at better accommodating labor migrants.

The growing trend of immigration, combined with the country's secular institutional setting, has gradually given rise to more restrictive religious policies. The 1992 law regulating religion, *On Religious Freedom and Religious Associations*, originally included many liberal provisions but was later amended to incorporate increasingly restrictive measures. These amendments included the introduction of "qualification examinations" and mandatory registration requirements for religious associations and missionaries (Podoprigora 2020). Following the terrorist attack in Aktobe in May

2011, the government established the Agency on Religious Affairs, which facilitated the passage of a new law prohibiting foreigners from registering religious organizations and banning religious congregations in private homes. The law also introduced minimum membership requirements for registering religious organizations (Khaidar 2018). In addition, the government has implemented the *Law on Countering Extremism* alongside extremism- and terrorism-related provisions in the Penal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan. These regulations adopt a broad definition of "extremism," which is not limited to violent acts and often frames Islam as a potential threat to the country, even though most Muslim citizens are moderate and apolitical (e.g., Omelicheva 2011). This tightening of religious regulation has also been influenced by developments in neighboring Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan, where political opposition increasingly aligned with militant Islam to challenge authoritarian rule (Collins 2023; McGlinchey 2005). In sum, the Kazakh government's strong opposition to religious practices that fall outside its conception of "national Islam" may shape how citizens draw boundaries between "us" and "them."

Despite the secular environment and tightening state regulation of religion, citizens remain vulnerable to radicalization. Strict state control under authoritarian rule is often cited as a factor that can contribute to radicalization. Fundamentalism frequently emerges as a reaction against state intervention and national policies perceived as incompatible with Islamic norms and values (Almond et al. 2003; Moaddel and Karabenick 2013; Smith 1998). Although the Kazakh government officially denies the existence of homegrown terrorists and religious extremists, there has been a noticeable increase in Islamic radicalization, particularly in the southern regions of the country (Olcott 2016). Public opinion data suggest that citizens are aware of the possibility that religious extremism may spread domestically. The Central Asia Barometer (2019) reports that 74.87% of respondents expressed concern that some Kazakhs returning from Iraq and Syria might bring extremist views and beliefs. At the same time, citizens appear to distance themselves from Muslim fundamentalism, viewing fundamentalists as out-group members while recognizing the potential growth of extremism. According to the Central Asia Barometer (2017), 86.67% of Kazakh respondents reported trusting their government's decisions in combating terrorism, and 67.27% considered Islamic extremism to be a growing problem in their country. In 2021 (Central Asia Barometer Wave 10), 74.00% expressed unfavorable views toward the Taliban in Afghanistan, while 66.60% opposed accepting refugees from Afghanistan, with the most common reason being concern that "some may be terrorists." Taken together, Kazakhstan's growing immigrant population, secular institutional framework, and public concern about potential fundamentalist radicalization make it a compelling case for testing our theoretical expectations.

Sample and Methods

Fieldwork and Sampling Method

With the context of Kazakhstan in mind, we conducted fieldwork to collect survey data in the country from January 21 to April 1, 2021. The survey was implemented

using Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI), with enumerators conducting face-to-face interviews while displaying the questionnaire on tablets. The Business Information, Sociological and Marketing Research Center (BISAM) Central Asia, one of Kazakhstan's leading polling firms, managed the fieldwork. Interviews were conducted in either Kazakh or Russian, depending on respondents' language preferences after they agreed to participate. The survey targeted Kazakh citizens aged 18 to 75. To obtain a nationally representative sample, we employed a multi-stage cluster sampling design stratified by place of residence and household. We assessed the representativeness of the sample using demographic benchmarks from the 2009 census and other existing surveys, ensuring that the distributions of ethnic groups, religious affiliation, age, and gender closely aligned with national patterns. The final dataset includes responses from 2,097 individuals.

Conjoint Experiment

We conducted a conjoint experiment to test the above-mentioned theoretical expectations. Conjoint analysis is a particularly valuable experimental framework for this research for two main reasons. First, it allows us to rigorously identify the causal effects of immigrants' religion and religiosity on public perceptions by randomly assigning these characteristics to hypothetical immigrant profiles, while simultaneously accounting for the influence of other attributes (Hainmueller et al. 2014). Indeed, conjoint experiments have become increasingly popular in immigration research (e.g., Alrababa'h et al. 2021; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Sobolewska et al. 2017; Reeskens and van der Meer 2019).

Second, by presenting multiple attributes of hypothetical immigrants—without requiring respondents to directly express opinions on controversial or sensitive topics—conjoint experiments help mitigate social desirability bias (Horiuchi et al. 2022). As noted in our review of religious regulation in Kazakhstan, the country is governed by an authoritarian regime that has increasingly imposed strict controls on religious activities. As a result, citizens may be hesitant to express their true preferences regarding sensitive characteristics such as religion, religiosity, or ethnicity when asked directly. For example, given state policies promoting religious harmony while suppressing Muslim fundamentalism, respondents may feel compelled to evaluate Christians positively and fundamentalist Muslims negatively, regardless of their actual views. By randomly assigning combinations of attributes to immigrant profiles—and making it unclear which specific traits drive respondents' choices—conjoint experiments allow researchers to elicit more truthful responses, particularly in authoritarian contexts.

In the conjoint experiment, respondents were first shown two profiles of hypothetical immigrants who were described as already residing in Kazakhstan.[2] They were then asked: "If you had to choose between the two, which person would you prefer to have as your neighbor?"—a binary choice. This question was designed to capture not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) attitudes, in which individuals may support immigration in principle but oppose having immigrants live in close proximity (Dear 1992; Ferwerda et al. 2017). We believe this question effectively measures attitudes toward a scenario that is directly relevant to respondents' everyday lives. As an alternative measure, we also asked respondents to rate their willingness to accept each immigrant on a seven-point scale. The results remain consistent when this scale is used as the outcome variable (see Appendix C).

We requested respondents to repeat this experiment three times, in other words, evaluating three different sets of immigrant pairs.[3] The required number of task repetitions depends on the number of respondents and profiles included in the design (e.g., Johnson and Orme 2003; Orme 2010). Statistical simulations suggest that sufficient validity can be achieved when 1,000 respondents evaluate two profiles across three repeated tasks (Song and Zenkyo 2016). As our survey includes 2,097 respondents, our experimental design satisfies this condition.

Table 1 presents the attributes and levels used in our conjoint analysis. Following Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015), we included nine immigrant attributes tailored to the Kazakh context based on previous surveys conducted in the country (e.g., Junisbai et al. 2018; Sharipova 2019): gender, education, ethnicity, religion, occupation, work experience, language, visa status, intention to stay, and reason for immigration. The levels of religiosity include non-practicing Muslim, practicing Muslim, fundamentalist Muslim, non-practicing Christian, practicing Christian, and atheist. We did not include "fundamentalist Christian" because Muslim fundamentalism is widely perceived as the primary religious threat in the country, and it would be highly unrealistic to assume that fundamentalist Christians immigrate to Kazakhstan. These attribute levels were randomly assigned to respondents, with restrictions applied to

[2] "Notably, in real-world settings individuals rarely choose neighbors from a set of two options. At first glance, a paired-profile conjoint design may therefore appear less realistic than a single-profile design. However, beyond the fact that paired designs are widely used in migration-related conjoint studies, we adopt this approach for two reasons. First, coefficients derived from paired-profile designs tend to approximate real-world behavior more closely than those from single-profile designs (Hainmueller et al. 2015). Second, single-profile conjoint designs with a limited number of tasks exhibit lower consistency relative to benchmark experiments, whereas paired-profile designs do not (Cassel et al. 2022).

[3] There may be concerns about carryover effects, whereby respondents become fatigued from answering the same question multiple times and begin to satisfice by providing less thoughtful responses. To assess whether our results are robust to such potential biases, we conducted several data checks and additional analyses (Appendix D). First, we examined whether respondents were more likely to choose hypothetical immigrants displayed on either the left or right side of the conjoint table. As shown in Appendix D-1, immigrants displayed on the left were slightly more likely to be selected, although the overall results remained consistent with our hypotheses across both positions. To address this imbalance, we included a control variable indicating whether the immigrant appeared on the left or right panel, which confirms the robustness of our findings (Appendix D-2). Second, we conducted a jackknife analysis by sequentially removing each round of the conjoint experiment, one at a time, and found that the results remained stable (Appendix D-3).

Table 1 Attributes of the conjoint analysis on hypothetical immigrants

Attributes	Levels
Gender	Female; Male
Education	No formal education; Primary; Secondary; Specialized; Incomplete university; University; Postgraduate
Ethnicity	Kazakh; Kyrgyz; Uzbek; Tatar; Uighur; Chinese; Turkish; Russian; Ukrainian
Religion	Non-practicing Muslim; Practicing Muslim; Fundamentalist Muslim; Non-practicing Christian; Practicing Christian; No religion
Occupations	Bazaar trader; Waiter; Business entrepreneur; Nurse; Teacher; Childcare provider; Janitor; Construction worker; Financial analyst; Research scientist; Doctor; Computer programmer
Language	Kazakh and Russian; Kazakh and broken Russian; Kazakh and no Russian; Russian and broken Kazakh; Kazakh; Russian and no Kazakh; Both broken; Broken Kazakh and no Russian; Broken Russia and no Kazakh; Neither
Visa	Illegal entry; Without residence and work permit; Residence but without work permit; Both residence and work permit
Intentions to stay	Less than one year; One to three years; Three to five years; More than five years
Reasons to migrate	Reunite family; Better job; Better business; Refugee
Work experience	No job training or prior experience; One to two years; Three to five years; More than five years

prevent certain unrealistic combinations.[4] Our balance test suggests that all the feature variables of this conjoint experiment were well balanced, indicating that randomization went successful in this face-to-face survey.[5]

In fact, there is no clear standard way to empirically measure religiosity. Nevertheless, common practice has been to disaggregate religiosity into three to five dimensions, such as external practices (e.g., attending religious ceremonies), internal practices (e.g., praying), and belief (or importance or salience; e.g., Glock 1962; Lenski 1961; Levin et al. 1995; Wach 1944). Similarly, some scholars conceptualize religiosity in terms of behavior, belief, and belonging—an approach often referred to as the "3B's" framework (Smidt et al. 2009; Wald and Smidt 1993; Wald and Wilcox

[4] The frequencies of each attribute and level are reported in Appendix F. We excluded combinations in which the ethnicity was Russian but the language attribute indicated no Russian proficiency. By contrast, we did not restrict combinations in which ethnic Kazakhs spoke only Russian, as many ethnic Kazakhs residing in urban areas do not speak Kazakh and instead primarily use Russian. In addition, following previous studies, we imposed restrictions such that highly skilled occupations—doctor, financial analyst, research scientist, and programmer—were presented only with university or postgraduate education levels. Although it is not impossible for individuals in these occupations to lack college degrees, such combinations are highly unlikely in practice. These unrealistic combinations (22 out of 23,224,320 possible profiles in total) were therefore excluded and not presented to respondents.

[5] Appendix E summarizes results on the balance tests for the entire sample and subgroups with different religiosity levels.

2006).[6] These studies point out the significance of various religious practices such as church attendance (e.g., Putnam 2000; Strømsnes 2008) and private prayer (e.g., Hoffman 2020; Loveland et al. 2005; McCullough and Willoughby 2009) as well as divergent or interactive effects among the components of religiosity (e.g., Bloom et al. 2015; Spierings 2014; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Meanwhile, some other studies compile these dimensions into a single scale to gauge the aggregate impact of religiosity (e.g., Clayton 1971; Voas 2009).

Although we acknowledge the multidimensionality and complexity of religiosity (e.g., Esposito 2002; Froese 2008; Roth and Kroll 2007), processes of modernization and urbanization have increasingly individualized and privatized religious practices (Campbell and Tsuria 2021; Hervieu-Léger 2000; Luckmann 1967). In other words, people's religious practices and preferences no longer necessarily align with each other. Davie (2013), for example, describes Christians in Western Europe as "believing without belonging." In addition to Kazakh Muslims' relatively secular orientation and the corresponding low levels of religious practice in everyday life, we also considered the timing of our survey. The survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted fieldwork studies worldwide (Amano et al. 2023). Kazakhstan experienced states of emergency at the time of the survey, suggesting that observable religious behaviors such as church attendance or participation in religious services had become even less reliable proxies for religiosity. Because these external practices may also bias measures of personal religious practices (e.g., praying or reading religious texts), we decided not to adopt these dimensions. Previous studies indicate that internal religious belief constitutes the central dimension of religiosity and is highly correlated with most other dimensions (Pearce et al. 2017). Assuming that personal religious salience reflects religious commitment (Roof and Perkins 1975; Hoge and De Zulueta 1985; Reed 1991), we therefore use the concept of the "importance of religion" as our measure of religiosity.

Statistical Results

Overall Association

Figure 1 summarizes our main results. In the Figure, we report choice-level comparisons using the "projoint" estimator, following the framework proposed by Clayton et al. (2025). Rather than estimating marginal means for each attribute level independently,[7] the choice-level approach evaluates the probability that a profile with

[6] Of course, there are many other approaches in unraveling religiosity. For instance, Rose (2002) pays more attention to orthodox versus modernist Muslims in understanding religious commitment and their attitudes toward democracy. Taking relational social position of groups importantly, Ciftci, Wuthrich, and Shamaileh (2022) disaggregate religiosity based on two dimensions (preferences toward public versus private and plurality versus conformity), and identify Muslims into four groups: social communitarian, religious communitarian, religious individualist, and post-Islamist.

[7] The total results including all the attributes by using the conventional, profile-level comparisons with marginal means (Leeper et al. 2020) and Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs, Hainmueller et al. 2014) are presented in Figures B-1 and B-2 in Appendix B, respectively.

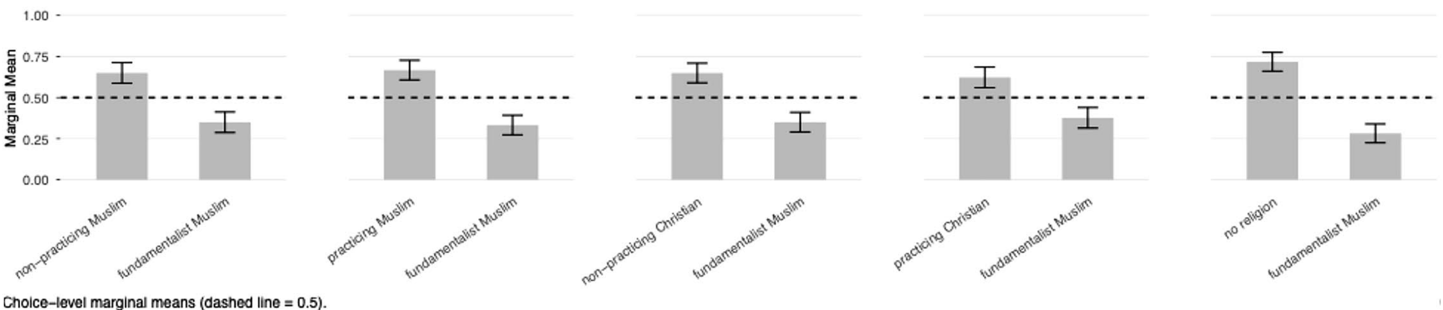


Fig. 1 Results of Choice-Level Comparisons: Public Preferences toward Immigrants' Religion in Kazakhstan. *Note*: The whole results using profile-level comparisons are shown in Appendix B. The number of respondents is 2,097. As each respondent was asked to iterate trials of the experiment three times with two hypothetical immigrants, the number of total observations is 12,582. All the respondents were Muslim. The point estimate represents marginal means here as the bars are the 95% confidence intervals

a given attribute level is chosen over another profile with an alternative level of the same attribute, while holding all other attributes constant through randomization. In other words, we directly compare pairs of immigrant profiles that differ only on a specific attribute level and compute the probability that respondents prefer one over the other. This approach provides a more interpretable and substantively meaningful assessment of how immigrants' religious characteristics shape respondents' choices in pairwise comparisons.

The results display two main findings. First, according to the overall results presented in Figure B-1 in the Appendix, the results are mostly consistent with previous studies conducted in the context of Western societies; citizens prefer those immigrants with high educational achievement, the same/similar ethnic background, and linguistic proficiency (of the languages spoken in the destination country) while disliking refugees and illegal immigrants. These results indicate that, regardless of religious, national, or regional contexts, people in general tend to develop their attitudes toward immigrants in a highly similar fashion.[8]

Second, and more importantly, we examine our main hypotheses on how Muslim citizens react to fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. Figure 1 presents our main choice-level comparison results. Each comparison contrasts the probability that respondents choose an immigrant profile with fundamentalist Muslim religiosity over an alternative profile with another religious background, holding all other attributes constant. A dashed vertical line at 0.5 represents the point of indifference: values above 0.5 indicate that the fundamentalist Muslim profile is more likely to be selected, whereas values below 0.5 indicate they are less likely to be selected.

Across all five pairwise comparisons shown in Fig. 1, respondents consistently and strongly reject fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. Substantively, the estimated choice probabilities for fundamentalist Muslim immigrants fall well below 0.5—typically around 0.30–0.35—indicating that respondents are 15–20 percentage points less likely to choose a fundamentalist Muslim immigrant over any alternative religious type. This provides clear evidence of pronounced aversion to immigrants perceived as holding fundamentalist beliefs.

In sum, the Muslim respondents do not discriminate among secular, non-practicing Muslim, practicing Muslim, and non-practicing Christian immigrants. In other words, they do not necessarily form more welcoming attitudes toward Muslim immigrants in an unconditional manner, and they are rather neutral in evaluating immigrants' religion. Only when immigrants' religiosity is perceived as incompatible to their value of religion (i.e., fundamentalist Muslim immigrants), Muslim citizens harbor antagonistic attitudes toward them. Our finding challenges the popular notion that people draw group boundaries based on religious denominations. Instead, at least in the context of Kazakhstan where religion is strictly regulated by the government and religious fundamentalism is stigmatized, Muslim citizens pay more attention to

[8] Some attribute features exhibit intriguing patterns perhaps specific to the context of Kazakhstan. For example, Chinese ethnicity is the strongest predictor that drives respondents to dislike incoming immigrants whereas Kazakh ethnicity has the most favorable effect on immigrant acceptance. Similarly, respondents in Kazakhstan are less likely to accept refugees whereas the results from conjoint experiments in Western countries suggest immigration for escaping persecution tends to be welcomed by citizens (Hainmueller et al. 2014).

the radical religiosity of their co-religious immigrants and its consequence to their societies.

Heterogeneous Effects of Respondents' Religiosity

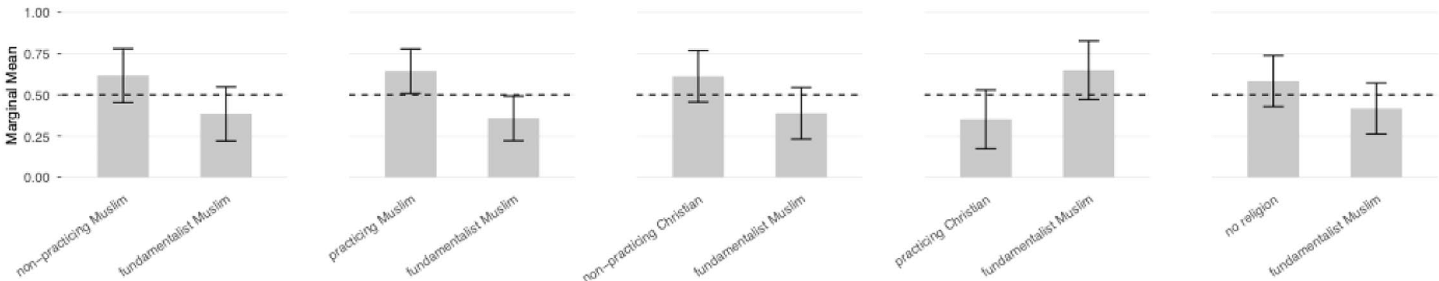
Next, we take the heterogeneous effects of citizens' religiosity into account (H2). We continue to rely on the experimental treatments of hypothetical immigrants' religion, but here we interact this variable with respondents' religiosity (i.e., importance of religion). In doing so, we considered the possibility that respondents' religiosity may not be orthogonal to other covariates that influence the strength of religious identities. If this is the case, the subgroup analysis may confound other features of respondents and thus just be the reflections of those attributes. To mitigate the possible threat of such spurious correlations, we followed Clayton et al. (2021) and regressed respondents' religiosity on important covariates that are likely to determine their religiosity such as gender, education, income, occupation, ethnicity, religion, and residential location to calculate residuals (Appendix I). The calculated residuals were then used as an alternative unexplained variation in religiosity for the subgroup analysis (Appendix H). The results still remained robust.

Figure 2 reports the choice-level marginal means of each immigrant religious profile for respondents with weak religiosity (Fig. 2a) and strong religiosity (Fig. 2b). These results reveal clear heterogeneity in how Muslim citizens evaluate immigrants depending on their own religious commitment.

First, respondents with weak religiosity (Fig. 2a) exhibit a relatively mild pattern of religious discrimination. While they do not strongly differentiate among most immigrant religious groups, they show a modest aversion toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants, whose marginal mean falls slightly below the 0.5 indifference threshold (though mostly without statistical significance). Moreover, weakly religious respondents are not systematically hostile toward practicing Christian immigrants; the marginal means for practicing Christians remain close to 0.5 and are statistically indistinguishable from neutrality.[9]

Second, among respondents with strong religiosity (Fig. 2b), the structure of preferences becomes more differentiated and aligned with our theoretical expectations. Strongly religious Muslims more clearly favor practicing Muslim immigrants, whose choice-level marginal mean is substantially above 0.5. At the same time, they display sharply negative preferences toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants, whose marginal mean drops well below 0.5—more so than among secular respondents. This pattern is consistent with the expectation that highly religious Muslims distance themselves from fundamentalist co-religionists. Moreover, strongly religious Mus-

[9] Despite the fact that marginal means for practicing-Christian immigrants overlap 0.5, the coefficients are negative and substantial. This effect could be because respondents perceive those immigrants to be assimilated to Russian speaking population. To test this possibility, we test (1) whether the effects of immigrants' religion are moderated by their Russian language fluency in the sample of low-religiosity respondents, and (2) whether the effects of immigrants' religiosity are moderated by Russian shares of low-religiosity respondents' residential locations (the results are presented in the Appendix L). The results did not find meaningful impacts of these moderators.



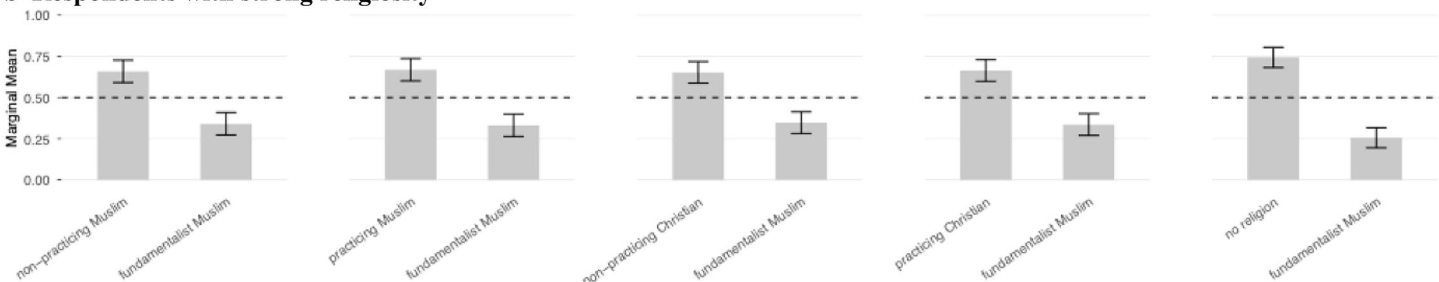


Fig. 2 Choice-level Marginal Effects of the Interaction between Immigrants' Religion (Treatment) and Respondents' Religiosity. *Note*: Figures are classified based on respondents' religiosity. The weak religiosity sample includes 2,004 data points while the strong religiosity sample includes 10,488 data points. Figure 2a shows the choice-level marginal means of immigrants' religion and religiosity for respondents with weak religiosity, whereas Fig. 2b presents choice-level marginal means of immigrants' religion and religiosity for respondents with strong religiosity. The whole results are shown in Appendix B-2

lims do not penalize practicing Christian immigrants: the marginal means for practicing Christians hover around 0.5 and do not indicate significant rejection.

Taken together, these choice-level findings show that Muslim citizens do not simply apply a binary in-group/out-group logic based on religious category alone. Instead, they make fine-grained distinctions based on religiosity: rewarding moderate or practicing co-religionists, tolerating non-Christian immigrants, and consistently rejecting fundamentalist Muslims. Strong religiosity among Muslim respondents amplifies this differentiation—intensifying the rejection of fundamentalist Muslims while neutralizing negative reactions toward practicing Christians.

This intriguing yet intuitive result may indicate that individuals who are devoted to a particular religion can also be respectful toward others who are committed to their own religions despite holding different beliefs. The finding highlights the multidimensional and complex nature of religion, which cannot easily be captured by simple theoretical expectations. In light of the longstanding debate on religious tolerance toward religious others—most notably the paradox that pious individuals, who are doctrinally expected to be tolerant, often display hostility toward out-groups—our results offer an alternative perspective on this discussion (e.g., Allport 1950, 1954; Steinmann and Pickel 2025). Further discussion and interpretation of these findings are presented in the next section.

Underpinning the Role of Security Concerns

Finally, in order to test whether respondents' security concerns drive the main results, we examined heterogeneous treatment effects conditional on respondents' security priorities.[10] Specifically, we constructed a binary indicator based on whether respondents agreed that the government should prioritize security and counterterrorism over democracy and human rights.

Figure (a) in Appendix J (overall respondents) shows that security-oriented respondents disproportionately penalize fundamentalist Muslim immigrants, particularly when comparing them with practicing Christians or non-religious immigrants. In contrast, respondents with lower levels of security concern express substantially weaker—or null—negative reactions.

Figure (b) in Appendix J (strong religiosity respondents) reveals an even clearer pattern. Among highly religious Muslims, those who prioritize security exhibit consistently strong aversion toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants across all comparison groups. When their level of security concern is low, however, the magnitude of this aversion becomes substantially attenuated, and several comparisons lose statistical significance. These results provide consistent support for our theoretical claim

[10] Notably, an alternative explanation is also possible—namely, cultural threat—whereby fundamentalist Islamic beliefs may be perceived as challenging the religious values and norms of Muslim citizens. Our heterogeneity tests on security concerns do not directly rule out this alternative explanation; rather, they are intended to provide supporting evidence for the security concern mechanism.

that security perceptions constitute a key mechanism underlying the observed hostility toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants.[11]

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we examined Muslim citizens' attitudes toward fundamentalist Muslims by comparing them with immigrants holding other religious attributes. Given the prevailing concern that fundamentalist Muslim immigrants may spread radical doctrines to Muslim-majority countries through migration, understanding whether Muslim citizens accept such immigrants is crucial to assessing the potential diffusion of Muslim fundamentalism. While most existing research has focused on public perceptions of fundamentalist Muslim immigrants and religious out-groups in Western contexts, studies on Muslim societies remain limited. As one of the first efforts in this area, we focused on Kazakhstan to explore how Muslim citizens in secular states form attitudes toward immigrants, using a conjoint analysis approach.

Our study produced two main findings. First, Muslim citizens tend to evaluate fundamentalist Muslim immigrants negatively. This finding aligns with group threat theory, which posits that perceived security threats lead to unfavorable attitudes toward specific immigrant groups. This seems to be particularly plausible under the context where the host government strictly regulates religious fundamentalism. The stigmatization of religious fundamentalism is embedded into social norms. It also resonates with previous studies conducted in Western societies—for example, Helbling and Meierrieks (2022) found that British citizens expressed negative sentiments toward fundamentalist, but not secular, Muslim immigrants. Our study extends these findings to the context of a secular Muslim society: in Kazakhstan, Muslim citizens similarly exhibit a preference against fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. In other words, even when Muslim citizens share a common religious background with fundamentalist immigrants, they share fundamentally different worldviews within Islam, becoming reluctant to accept the latter into the country.

Second, higher levels of Islamic religiosity among citizens tend to reduce support for fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. This finding aligns with previous studies on Muslim attitudes toward terrorist activities, which show that pious Muslim citizens are less likely to support terrorism (Egger and Magni-Berton 2021; Zhirkov et al. 2014). While a common stereotype in the Western world suggests that high levels of Islamic religiosity foster terrorist activity (e.g., Choi et al. 2023), our research challenges this view. It demonstrates that Islamic religiosity does not necessarily lead to support for radical religious doctrines; rather, it can contribute to the rejection of extremist religious groups.

[11] We also conducted additional analyses of heterogeneous treatment effects using demographic variables such as age, education level, rural/urban residence, state employment, and PSU-level ethnic diversity (Appendix K). Age and rural–urban residence reveal some heterogeneous effects. Similarly, respondents living in more ethnically diverse communities appear to be slightly more generous toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants, although the effects are weak. Overall, these moderators do not substantially influence respondents' willingness to accept migrants as their neighbors.

Additionally, religiosity influences public attitudes toward Christian immigrants. If individuals drew boundaries strictly based on religious affiliation, we would expect pious Muslim respondents to exhibit negative attitudes toward practicing Christian immigrants. However, our findings suggest that these respondents are more positive—or at least less negative—toward Christian immigrants. This is noteworthy, as strong religiosity is often assumed to foster out-group discrimination and aversion. Yet, earlier research has found that individuals with an intrinsic religious orientation tend to demonstrate greater intergroup tolerance (Allport 1950, 1954; Lenski 1961). Empirical studies (e.g., Batson 1982; Hoffmann et al. 2020) also show a negative correlation between high intrinsic religiosity and prejudice. It is therefore plausible that highly religious Muslim respondents, guided by principles of universal compassion embedded in their faith, are more sympathetic toward others who are also committed to religious practice, regardless of specific affiliation. This finding carries important policy implications for the West, where political rhetoric often frames Muslim citizens as threats to the liberal international order and global security. Such portrayals frequently overlook the nuanced ways in which religiosity shapes attitudes toward immigrants. In this respect, the validity of these generalized statements warrants re-examination.

It is important to emphasize that our experiment was conducted in Kazakhstan, a secular, Muslim-majority country that has undergone a distinctive nation-building process in which the state plays a strong role in regulating religious activities and organizations. The primary aim of this study is to assess whether findings from Western contexts regarding Muslim fundamentalism and public attitudes also apply to similarly secular yet Muslim-majority societies. Many Muslim-majority countries—such as those in South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa—actively promote religious activities, and even other secular Muslim-majority states differ substantially in their economic, historical, and political contexts. As a result, different theoretical expectations and mechanisms may shape public attitudes toward immigrants outside the Central Asian context.

Despite such potential heterogeneity, the security-threat thesis suggests that negative attitudes toward fundamentalist Muslim immigrants may emerge because these attitudes are rooted in concerns about human security. From this perspective, citizens may be more likely to view fundamentalist Muslim immigrants with suspicion rather than welcome them. At the same time, the broader religious context of a country—whether secular or religious—may either attenuate or amplify the stigmatization of fundamentalist Muslims. Moreover, if individual-level religiosity heightens security concerns and increases social distance from fundamentalist immigrants, as our findings suggest, higher levels of religiosity at the societal level may further reinforce perceptions that such immigrants pose security threats. Because these interpretations extend beyond the direct scope of our empirical analysis, future research should explicitly test these possibilities.

Importantly, Muslim population size and religiosity do not always correlate. For example, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, like Kazakhstan, have Muslim populations comprising approximately 70 percent of their citizenry but show significantly stronger public expressions of Islamic belief (Pew Research Center 2013). Conversely, in several sub-Saharan African countries where Muslims are not the majority,

Muslim citizens still exhibit relatively high levels of religiosity. Taking this variation into account, future research could examine whether security threats are constant driving forces leading to threat perceptions against fundamentalist Muslim immigrants. It could also extend these findings to a broader range of religious, political, and socioeconomic contexts to better understand how—and under what conditions—Muslim faith influences attitudes toward Muslim immigrants in Muslim societies.

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Data Availability Replication materials and datasets are openly available in the Political Behavior Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GJFYGX.

Declarations

Conflict of Interests The authors declare none.

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