By gathering 39 local scholars, experts, and civil society activists specialized in racism and human rights, the fourth edition of the European Islamophobia Report addresses a still timely and politically important issue. All 34 country reports included in this book follow a unique structure that is convenient, first, for comparing country reports and, second, for selected readings on a particular topic such as politics, employment, or education with regards to Islamophobia across Europe.

The present report investigates in detail the underlying dynamics that directly or indirectly support the rise of anti-Muslim racism in Europe. This extends from Islamophobic statements spread in national media to laws and policies that restrain the fundamental rights of European Muslim citizens. As a result, the European Islamophobia Report 2018 discusses the impact of anti-Muslim discourse on human rights, multiculturalism, and the state of law in Europe.

This fourth edition of our report highlights how European societies are challenged by the rise of violent far-right groups that do not only preach hatred of Muslims but also participate in the organization of bloody terror attacks. The rise of far-right terrorist groups such as AFO (Action of Operational Forces) in France or the network Hannibal in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland confirms EUROPOL’s alarming surveys on the growing danger of right-wing terrorism.

This year, SETA worked in cooperation with the Leopold Weiss Institute, an Austrian NGO based in Vienna dedicated to the research of Muslims in Europe. In addition, the European Union has funded the European Islamophobia Report 2018 through the program “Civil Society Dialogue Between EU and Turkey (CSD-V)”.

About SETA
Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) is a non-profit research institute based in Turkey dedicated to innovative studies on national, regional and international issues. SETA is the leading think tank in Turkey and has offices in Ankara, Istanbul, Washington D.C. and Cairo. The objective of SETA is to produce up-to-date and accurate knowledge and analyses in the fields of politics, economy, and society, and inform policy makers and the public on changing political, economic, social, and cultural conditions. Through research reports, publications, brainstorming sessions, conferences and policy recommendations, SETA seeks to guide leaders in government, civil society, and business, and contributes to informed decision making mechanisms.
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ISLAMOPHOBIA IN
MOLDOVA
NATIONAL REPORT 2018

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Executive Summary

Most of the Muslims living in Moldova are immigrants mainly from Middle Eastern countries. Another important Muslim group in Moldova are the local converts who have converted within the past decade. While official statistics claim the number of Muslims in Moldova to be around 3,000, informal sources claim that there are over 16,000 adherents of Islam living in the country.

Over the years, several international institutions, such as the Pew Research Center, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Council on Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality (CPEDEE) conducted surveys regarding the situation of Muslims in the country, revealing that only 30% of the Moldovan citizens interviewed are open to having a Muslim neighbor, that the social acceptance towards Muslims is lower than the social acceptance of Jews - an alarming fact especially if understood in historical perspective - and that Muslims have emerged as they most discriminated religious minority in Moldova. Currently, the Muslim community is represented by the Islamic League, an organization which was granted official authorization in 2012, following a decade of unsuccessful attempts.

In the past few years, Muslims in Moldova, including women, men, and children, have been victims of several harassment incidents, such as physical and verbal abuses in the realm of education and the justice system.

In 2018, there were no major incidents of Islamophobia. Instead, the media and the electoral runoff for the position of mayor of Chisinau represented the main vehicles for Islamophobic remarks in Moldova.

The key highlights marking the existing Islamophobic attitudes in Moldova were a TV show, Vorbeste Moldova (Moldova Speaks), and several newspaper articles which falsely accused liberal politician Andrei Nastase of having a pro-Muslim agenda.

The TV show also sensationalized and orientalized the experiences of Muslim converts, setting the emphasis on the social stigma related to the conversion to Islam, and the articles threatened of the imminent danger of thousands of incoming Muslim refugees from Syria, as well as Arab individuals.
ISLAMOPHOBIA IN MOLDOVA

Sumar Executiv

Majoritatea Musulmanilor care locuiesc în Republica Moldova în momentul de față provin din Orientual Mijlociu și din Asia Centrală. Deși în minoritate, un alt grup important de aproximativ 3000-4000 personale este constituit de cetățenii moldoveni care s-au convertit la Islam în ultimul deceniu. De-a lungul anilor, mai multe instituții internaționale, precum Centrul de Cercetare Pew, Oficiul Înalțului Comisariat al Națiunilor Unite pentru Drepturile Omului și Consiliul pentru Prevenire și Eliminarea Discriminării și Asigurarea Egalității (CPEDEE), au efectuat sondaje privind situația musulmanilor în care arată că doar 30% dintre cetățenii moldoveni intervievați sunt pregătiți să aibă un vecin musulman, acceptarea socială față de musulmani este mai mică decât acceptarea socială a evreilor, un fapt alarmant, mai ales dacă este înțeles în perspectivă istorică, și că musulmanii reprezintă cea mai discriminată minoritate religioasă în Moldova. În prezent, comunitatea musulmană este reprezentată de Liga Islamică, o organizație care a primit autorizație oficială în 2012, după un deceniu de încercări nereușite. În ultimii ani, musulmanii moldoveni, inclusiv femei, bărbați și copii, au fost victime ale mai multor incidente de hărțuire, precum abuzuri fizice și verbale, în special în domeniul educației și al sistemului judiciar. În 2018, nu s-au înregistrat incidente majore de islamofobie. În schimb, atitudinii islamofobice au fost prezente în mass-media și în campania electorală pentru primarul municipiului Chișinău. În mod special, acestea au putut fi remarcate în emisiunea TV, Vorbește Moldova (Moldova Speaks) și câteva articole de ziar care l-au acuzat în mod fals politicianul liberal Andrei Năstase că are o agendă pro-musulmană. În emisiunea TV experiențele convertiților musulmanii au fost sensationalizate, accentul fiind pus pe stigmatizarea socială legată de convertirea la islam, și articolele amenințau despre pericolul iminent de intrare a mii de refugiați musulmani din Siria și a cetăț cetcolul iminent deă.
Country Profile

Country: Moldova
Type of Regime: Democratic Republic
Form of Government: Unitary Parliament Representative
Last Elections: 2016 Presidential Elections: incumbent Igor Dodon – Party of Socialists, 52.29% (the main conservative party in Moldova) and Maia Sandu – Action and Solidarity Party, 47.71% (often identified as a center-right, neoliberal party).
Total Population: 3.5 million (2015)
Major Languages: Romanian, Russian
Official Religion: Orthodox Christianity
Statistics on Islamophobia: No such statistics recorded; most Islamophobic incidents reported mainly by media outlets and NGOs are discursive events and verbal attacks.
Statistics on Racism and Discrimination: No data available.
Major Religions (% of Population): Orthodox Christianity (94%), Protestant Christianity (2%), No Religion (1%), Islam (2%), Judaism (0.8%).
Muslim Population (% of Population): 3,000 (1%) in 2014 (Moldovan government), 17,000 (5%) in 2018 (Muslim League official records)
Main Muslim Community Organizations: Liga Islamica (Muslim League)
Main NGOs Combating Islamophobia: N/A
Far Right Parties: N/A
Far Right Movements: Noua Dreapta
Far Right Terrorist Organizations: N/A
Limitations to Islamic practices
- Hijab Ban: No
- Halal Slaughter Ban: No
- Minaret Ban: No
- Circumcision Ban: No
- Burka Ban: No
- Prayer Ban: No
ISLAMOPHOBIA IN MOLDOVA

Introduction

In 2015, the Moldovan population has been estimated at 3.5 million. According to the most recent census on religious affiliation in Moldova, 94% of the population adheres to either the Russian Orthodox Church or the Basarabia Orthodox Church. The remaining 5% includes both atheists and members of religious minorities; the latter comprising Catholics, Protestants, Presbyterians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, Evangelicals, and Muslims.¹ The majority of Muslim individuals in Moldova have immigrated to the country from either the Middle East or Central Asia. The remaining 3,000-4,000 adherents to Islam have converted within the past decade.² In a study undertaken by the Pew Research Center from 2015 until 2017, only 30% of the Moldovan citizens interviewed are open to having a Muslim neighbor. In fact, the study highlights that the social acceptance towards Muslims is lower than the social acceptance of Jews, an alarming fact especially if understood in a historical perspective.³

In a 2016 study undertaken by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Council on Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality (CPEDEE), Muslims emerged as the most discriminated religious minority in Moldova.⁴ While a legal framework in charge of preventing discrimination of any type was implemented in 2012, cultural prejudices and xenophobia remain important aspects of Moldovan society. Importantly, the Moldovan Orthodox Church and the Moldovan Socialist Party are the key sociopolitical and religious actors informing a public perception often injurious to a harmonious coexistence of minorities in Moldova. Given the political situation in Moldova that is torn between Russia and the European Union, most illiberal activities are part of a larger political agenda of partisanship.

The media and the electoral runoff for the position of mayor of Chisinau represented the most aggressive vehicles for Islamophobic remarks in Moldova. Islamophobia is also institutionalized in surveillance mechanisms, and manifested in verbal and physical harassment.

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Discussion of Islamophobic Incidents and Discursive Events

Physical and Verbal Attacks

So far, the Muslim community in Moldova has yet to build a completed mosque. A key reason quoted on this matter is the fear of a potential backlash from the majority Orthodox Christian community. Instead, most of the prayers and gatherings take place in 3-4 makeshift public locations which belong to the Cultural Islamic Center. Indeed, sources from within the community note that this fear will remain the key issue which will prevent the community from having its own mosque in the future.5

Sergiu Sochirca, the president of the Islamic League, stated that the relationship between the Muslim community and state authorities has significantly improved since the official authorization of the Islamic League in 2012. Previously, Sochirca mentioned that all Friday prayers were attended by the police that would treat the community as a national danger and as a terrorist gathering. According to him, the authorities would photograph passports, keep records of each individual present at the prayer site, and arrest those without any form of identification.6 While such practices eventually diminished, Muslims continued to be harassed by law enforcement authorities. For example, the Islamic League reported discriminatory treatment of Muslims at entry and exit points of Moldova, including airports. League officials traveling to Saudi Arabia for the Umrah pilgrimage were subjected to additional processes of security checks, had their documents and religious literature photocopied, as well as their luggage hand-checked and their video equipment carefully scrutinized.7 Eduard Caraus, one of the co-founders of the Islamic League, recalled that even after the official registration of the league in 2012, he was stopped at an entry point from Ukraine into the Republic of Moldova and had to provide the customs officers with a handwritten declaration regarding his religious literature.8

NGOs have reported numerous incidents of Muslim women donning the headscarf in public places being verbally abused. In fact, several U.S. State Department reports highlight that Muslim women wearing the hijab in public places are particularly prone to harassment given the intersectionality between gender and religion, which has the potential to fuel greater feelings of isolation.9 One such example is

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5. Sprinceana, “Religie si libertate religioasa in Republica Moldova”.
6. Ibid.
Tatiana, a Muslim convert, who was confronted with repeated verbal and physical attacks in public places; one woman shouted at her in a supermarket for donning the veil, another poked her in a market for the same reason, while a group of young men threw walnut shells at her and her child on the street.\textsuperscript{10} Another such example is Natalia Marian, a woman fired from her job as a kindergarten teacher for donning the hijab, as parents complained to the school’s management.\textsuperscript{11} The situation, however, has significantly improved. As early as 2012, following the registration of the Islamic League, Moldovan officials agreed to allow Muslim women to wear the hijab in their ID photographs, as this right was previously denied.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Education}

Given the fact that Muslims in Moldova represent a small community, there is little information on acts of discrimination and no effort has been undertaken toward systematic data collection. In 2018, no such incidents have been reported. In a 2015 report released by the U.S. State Department, the Islamic League noted a decrease in Islamophobic incidents. The league noted that most anti-Muslim discrimination occurred in schools and other public institutions, manifesting in verbal abuse and harassment of Muslims by fellow students and in the professors’ reluctance to intervene in such cases.\textsuperscript{13} In November 2017, a Muslim student was publicly humiliated by a school teacher in Chisinau, as the latter shouted in front of the classroom “You are those who kill” and “Islam itself kills.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Politics}

Xenophobia and racism have been commonplace in political campaigns in Moldova. Muslims have been particularly discriminated against in the country. For example, in 2011, two villages in the country, namely Chetris and Hiliuti, located in the Falesti county, strictly forbade the practice of Islam.\textsuperscript{15} The most recent political incident of Islamophobia is the 2016 presidential campaign. The runoff between the conservative candidate Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu was peppered with xenophobic and
sexist remarks, wherein the former candidate, whose agenda aligned with the political agenda of the Orthodox Church, claimed the latter candidate would welcome thousands of Muslim refugees if elected. Such remarks referred to these individuals as ‘aggressive Muslims’ and flyers warned Moldovan Christians that they would spread all over the country to rape women and girls and to rob locals.16

This rhetoric was also used in 2018 during the mayoral elections in Chisinau against the pro-European candidate Andrei Nastase. In addition to such Islamophobic remarks, opposition candidate Ion Ceban accused Nastase of planning a 50-year lease of Chisinau to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) if proved victorious.17 In fact, a video allegedly from the Qatar-owned media outlet Al Jazeera covered the story of the UAE potentially leasing Chisinau for the purpose of modernizing the city. The supposed news report also mentioned that such plans would also benefit the UAE diaspora in Moldova, the majority of whom are studying at the Medical School, as well as the other residing Muslims in the country through the construction of numerous mosques.18 The video, which was widely circulated on social media platforms with 370,000 views on YouTube and 7,300 shares on Facebook, turned out to be a scam. In reality, the news report which featured on Al Jazeera covered the conflict between the UAE and Yemen, and had been edited and dubbed with the story of the elections.19 Similarly, another video shot in London and entitled ‘YES – We will do it!’ featured Muslims from the Middle East expressing their support for Andrei Nastase ahead of the 20 May, 2018 elections.20 In fact, a common theme during the election campaign was the accusations against Nastase of planning to accommodate around 30,000 Syrian refugees in Moldova, an allegation he himself often dismissed.21

Media
In 2018, most of the media reporting on issues related to Muslims evolved around the mayoral elections in Chisinau. In addition to the two videos reported in the previous section, many media outlets repeatedly reported negatively on Andrei Nas-

17. Dumitru Sliusarencu and Ion Foltea, The Rise of Illiberal Civil Society in Moldova.
ISLAMOPHOBIA IN MOLDOVA

tase in relation to Muslim matters. Another example is an article whose title read “He's Done It! Andrei Nastase Replaced the Cross in Stephen the Great with the Arab Crescent!” The article claimed that Nastase focused on securing the vote of the Arab community resident in Chisinau, which numbered 33,000 members. Such incidents are part of a trend identified by the Islamic League, which has repeatedly reported a negative portrayal of resident Muslims in the coverage of any news related to Islam. For example, the league noted that whenever reporting global news related to terrorist incidents, such as attacks or threats, the media organizations would cite the Islamic League as the only registered Muslim organization in the country, thus implicitly claiming its links to violence and danger.22

In May 2018, the TV show Moldova Speaks featured an episode on Muslim converts. From the very beginning, the reporting of conversions to Islam was peppered with orientalism and sensationalism, as the emphasis was set on revealing the mysterious nature of such conversions and the spectacular perseverance of converts in overcoming social hindrances and prejudices. For example, a couple confessed their families’ continued reluctance and objections to their decisions to convert, while another highlighted the lack of intolerance of the Moldovan society towards Islam. The show also featured instances of profound prejudices. The host highlighted that, following her conversion, a woman renounced her profession as a lawyer to be a housewife, a fact otherwise understood negatively in society, and centered the episode around the reasons why Muslim women don the veil; at many points, she compared the hijab with the headscarf worn by Christian women, openly criticizing the lack of emancipation of Muslim women. Also, the host asked their guests to spell out the meaning of ‘Allah Akbar,’ noting that the phrase is most often associated with terrorist incidents throughout the world.23

In July 2018, an article entitled “Muslim Invasion in Moldova through Sold Citizenship?” warned Moldovan citizens about the imminent danger posed by the incoming Muslim invasion from Arab countries. The article claimed that the majority of Muslims seeking to relocate to Moldova are neither refugees nor economic migrants, but owners of huge capital who could potentially control the political life in the country. Criticizing the executive decision of implementing a citizenship acquisition program through investment, the article bemoaned such a “diabolical decision” stating, “for one thing, the ruler Stefan the Great would have commanded their heads to be cut off, and Vlad the Impaler would have set them on fire in the Great National Assembly Square.”24 In addition to this, the article also expressed

concern about the fate of Moldovan society, warning that the incoming Muslims would “claim all kinds of rights, including religious ones” and demanding that people unite to “curb this evil.” The article added, “What could happen if the witnesses of this religion penetrate state institutions? Their aggressive behavior in the countries of Western Europe is evident.” The same media outlet, *Flux*, which was founded in Moldova in 1995 and has a monthly readership of 56,000, published a number of articles in 2018 warning about the threat of Muslims taking over Europe. Some of the headlines include “The Islamization of Europe Has Begun: A Church in Hamburg Has Been Transformed into a Mosque”,25 “The Muslim Assault: A Call for the Islamization of Austria and the Implementation of Shari’a”.26

**Justice System**

In 2018, there were no Islamophobic incidents reported in the context of the judiciary. In fact, Sergiu Sochirca has repeatedly expressed his content at the visibly improving legal situations of Muslims in Moldova. To this end, such improvements trace their origins in the official registration of the Islamic League in 2012 and the adoption of the anti-discriminatory law adopted in 2012. On 14 March, 2011, the Islamic League was officially registered by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), following a 10-year effort of the Muslim community.27 Prior to this, two other Muslim organizations attempted to register the community but were discouraged by repeated refusals from the Ministry of Justice to continue with the registration application process. One of these, the Spiritual Gathering of Muslims of Moldova, eventually registered as an NGO after unsuccessful attempts to register as a religious organization. The organization reported that the MOJ’s refusal was justified with the claim of incorrect documentation.28 Yet, the registration of the Islamic League sparked great backlash from the Moldovan Orthodox Church. Voicing concerns regarding the allegedly imminent threat posed by resident Muslims, the Moldovan Alliance of Orthodox Organizations organized a series of anti-Islamic protests on 18 May, 2011. Officials from the Islamic League noted that following the protests the general attitude towards Muslims in Moldova significantly deteriorated, wherein derogatory messages associated Muslims to pedophiles, homosexuals, and terrorists.29 A professor at the Orthodox Theological Academy of Chisinau, Peter Pruteanu, was a staunch critic of


29. Ibid.
the registration of the Muslim League, citing as a key concern the fact that an individual could only leave the Islamic faith through death; to this, he added that “the Arab states have a well-prepared agenda that is not secret or it is simply ignored by us because we are naïve. (…) Don’t think the sending of Muslim students to Moldova is accidental. It is easy to see that the first thing they do here is marry local Christian women, who are then forced to convert to Islam.”

The adoption of the anti-discrimination law (Law No. 121) was passed in the Parliament of Moldova on 25 May, 2012 and became effective on 1 January, 2013. The law put forward a comprehensive non-discriminatory framework with the intention of ensuring the equal rights of all individuals residing in Moldova, irrespective of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disabilities, etc. The adoption of the anti-discrimination law has been vehemently protested throughout the country. In April 2012, in the city of Balti, flyers were distributed which warned Moldovan Christians against the Muslim danger. The flyers made reference to the Ottoman occupation on Moldova in the 17th and 18th centuries, and warned against the Muslim refugees’ agenda of the widespread conversion to Islam or mass decapitation of Christians in Moldova. During the investigation, the local law enforcement authorities claimed that the Orthodox Church was behind the production and distribution of the flyers. While there was no evidence found to this end, the Bishop of Balti reaffirmed the content of such flyers.

Internet

In addition to the two videos detailed in the section on politics, the YouTube post of the TV show Moldova Speaks on the Moldovan Muslim converts received an overwhelming amount of negative attention. Most of the comments condemn the Moldovans who decided to convert to Islam and some of them also insult the women who converted following their marriage with a Muslim individual from the Middle East. Also, some of the comments denounced Islam itself, either labelling it as a heresy or as a quintessential religion of war: “Oamenii Razboiului” (The People of War); “Religia musulamana este criminal. Coranul spune sa-i prinda pe nonmusulmani si sa-i omoare” (The Islamic faith is a criminal creed. The Quran stipulates that non-Muslims should be captured and murdered).

Similar arguments were posted on the Internet as early as 2011. On 20 May, 2011, following the registration of the Islamic League, a blogpost featuring 12 videos by Professor Peter Pruteanu stated that Muslims in Moldova are deceiving, aiming to convince Christians that everything is fine, when, in fact, their religion is very dangerous, especially for the soul. He claimed that his blogpost was not intended to incite hatred or discrimination, but simply provide an objective perspective on Islam.34

Central Figures in the Islamophobia Network
While it is hard to speak of an Islamophobia network in Moldova, the central figures at the forefront of such campaigns usually are the Moldovan Orthodox Church, the Socialist Party of Moldova, as well as a number of media outlets, the most prominent of which is Flux. As mentioned above in the Politics, Media, and Internet sections, Islamophobic remarks are voiced either as integral parts of political campaigns or as Christian propaganda of the Moldovan Orthodox Church.

Observed Civil Society and Political Assessment and Initiatives
Given the small number of Muslims in Moldova, there are no civil society actors performing the role of watchdogs regarding discrimination against the Muslim community. Instead, important civil actors monitoring Islamophobic incidents or discursive events are the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights; the Council for Preventing and Eliminating Discrimination and Ensuring Equality, an independent NGO founded in 2013; and the Promo-LEX Association, an independent NGO aiming to promote the implementation of democracy in Moldova founded in 2002.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations
Given the small number of Muslims in Moldova, Islamophobia emerges mainly out of the Othering and sensationalism inherent in the reporting of Islam-related events. Whereas the Muslim diaspora is often projected as the threat of Islamization, justified in reference to some of the terrorist incidents throughout Europe, Moldovan converts to Islam are orientalized and projected as inherently mysterious. Either way, the political situation in Moldova, which is defined by a conflict between liberal pro-European and conservative pro-Russian actors, further contributes to the projection of Islam as the foreign Other by virtue of the Moldovan Orthodox Church’s conservative stance.

Based on the current situation of Muslims in Moldova, key policy recommendations include:

a. The systematic implementation of a data collection effort meant to closely monitor each Islamophobic incident and actor.

b. The encouragement of key governmental bodies and institutions, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture, to establish educational campaigns regarding the situation of Muslims worldwide on a regular basis. These would emphasize the diversity and the social reality of the Muslim community around the world, aiming to discredit incoherent projections of the religion.

Chronology

- **02.05.2018:** TV show Vorbeste Moldova (Moldova Speaks) features an episode on “Moldoveni convertiti la Islam” (Moldovan converts to Islam).
- **08.05.2018:** Video is posted on YouTube entitled “Pierdem Chisinaul?” (Are We Losing Chisinau?)
- **10.05.2018:** Article in Jurnalul MD by Lilia Zaharia, “STOP FALS: Reportajul Al Jazeera despre Andrei Nastase si arabi a fost trucat; in stirea originala nu se pomeneste de RM,” (STOP, FALS: The Al-Jazeera Coverage on Andrei Nastase and the Arabs Was Edited; In the Official Coverage Report There Is No Mention of RM.)
- **31.05.2018:** Article in Romanian editorial Adevarul by Sebastian Zachmann, “Alegeri pentru Chisinau. Andrei Nastase: Plahotniuc si Dodon au inventat ca am 11 case, ca voi aduce 30,000 de sirieni si ca voi concesiona Chisinaul arabilor,” (Elections for the Mayor of Chisinau: Plahotniuc and Dodon Make up a Story about My 11 Houses, Also Mentioning I Would Bring over 30,000 Syrians and That I Would Lease out Chisinau to Arabs).
• **31.10.2018**: Article in *Diez* by Liubomir Gutu, “Cat de mult moldovenii sunt toleranti? Care este rata de acceptare a persoanelor musulmane si de origine evreiasca in calitate de membru al familiei,” (How Tolerant Are the Moldovans? What Is the Acceptance Rate of Muslim and Jewish-Origin Individuals as Relatives?)