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Brexit's Illusion: Decoding Islamophobia and Othering in Turkey's EU Accession Discourse among British Turks

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Abstract: The warnings about Turkey's not-so-near accession to the EU are explored as a strategic tool in the Brexit campaign, linking concerns about sovereignty and immigration compounded with the anxieties surrounding Islam and the threat of terrorism. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Edward Said's Orientalism and the unique perspectives gathered from British Turks, this paper sheds light on their nuanced responses. It uncovers strategies of disbelief and denial in the face of the constructed narrative that portrayed Turkey as an undesirable 'Other' with its predominantly Muslim population. A closer analysis of some British Turks' narratives is premised not only on the sacralised defence of the principles of Turkish westernisation but also on the socio-political reputation of the Islamic Ottoman past as almighty. The article equally contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between British national identity and discourses surrounding immigration, sovereignty, and Islamophobia within the context of Brexit, as well as the principles by which the privileges of modern, secular Turkey, as well as the demise of the mighty Ottoman image, are maintained. In a paradoxical manner, the act of denial only serves to affirm the Brexit campaign's narrative depicting Turkey as an undesirable 'Other' with a predominantly Muslim demographic.

Keywords: Brexit; Islamophobia; Orientalism; British Turks; Othering

1. Introduction

Since the official conclusion of colonial rule, the departure of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) has arguably emerged as the most influential political event in shaping British narratives of both national and transnational identity (Koegler et al. 2020). This elusive event, which came to be known as The Brexit referendum (2016), capitalised on, *inter alia*, the perceived 'threat' posed by migration. It has given racism a free pass and public displays of xenophobia a broader acceptance from the parliamentary to the street level. It has bolstered populism, prejudice, and Islamophobia—yet instilled a sense of hope and renewal, not least among its apologists, lobbyists, and across sizeable sections of the British population (Koegler et al. 2020, p. 585). From post–9/11 through to post-Brexit, nationalism and racism come to be articulated hand in hand, and national belonging is racialised in the UK (Gilroy 2011; Saini et al. 2023). The past was represented through 'white, middle-class English/British' into which racialised others, i.e., "the rest", have been legitimated as 'strangers' in their own land. In other words, not only those who are first-generation immigrants but also those who have been naturalised and hold British citizenship have found themselves under the label of 'Other', an experience equally familiar to British Turks, descendants of immigrant Turks.

Turkey became a focal point in the immigration discourse due to UKIP—a populist Eurosceptic political party—that advocated for Britain's separation from the European Union through a contrarious advertisement video[1]. The video asserted that Turkey would join the EU by 2020, leading to the migration of 15 million people to EU nations, including the UK. The group of people used in the video was covertly associated and defined with the notion of terrorist and criminal organisations transiting from Turkey to Britain, inciting Islamophobic sentiments. Islamophobia has been a hot topic over the last 25 years, with growing convergence around the racialisation and homogenisation of Muslims and the negative representations and demonisation of Islam in Britain, requiring understanding Islamophobia in terms of the legacies of colonialism and institutional Islamophobia (Vakil and Sayyid 2023). In other words, exclusionary practices of Islamophobia at times move past the street level, working through to the conduct of conduct, enabling the problematisation of Muslims to achieve a massive shift in governmentality such as *the implementation of Brexit* (ibid., p. 48, emphasis mine). The statements in the UKIP's video, by and large, enabled the racialisation of Turkish people as 'Muslim' Other and garnered significant attention in the media, causing the immigration issue to be more closely linked to Turkey than to other EU countries like Poland or Romania. When probed further, the latter have been amongst the countries whose nationals have predominantly settled in the UK[2], thanks to the EU's free movement scheme (Türkmenoğlu 2022). In no sense can it be, therefore, comprehended that Turkey's position in discussions of its candidacy for the EU would have paved the way for the main leverage of the Brexit campaign. The persistent politics of race, racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia in today's UK not only framed Turkey as a perceived threat, echoing Orientalist views of the East as inherently dangerous to the West, but also resulted in British Turks' negotiation of their identities and Turkey's position around several axes such as Islam(ophobia), a secular Turkish image, a strong Ottoman Empire, and so forth. This, for some British Turks, translated into questioning their sense of belonging in the only country they have lived in, resulting in either scorning, denying or deflecting away Turkey's portrayal in the Brexit campaign as an unwanted Muslim 'Other'.

While the previous studies shed light on the impact of Brexit on the Turkey–EU relationship (Alpan 2019; Burak 2019; Ker-Lindsay 2018; Völkel 2019), the ways in which British Turks engaged with the Islamophobic and xenophobic dimensions of the Leave campaign are far lacking. The only exception to this is the PhD thesis of Babacan (2021), who addressed how some individuals reacted to the anti-Turkish rhetoric of the Vote Leave Campaign during Brexit by reinforcing their ethnic identity. He argued that this defensive response led some Turks in Britain to alter their political views, highlighting the complex relationship between perceived discrimination, ethnic identity, and political engagement (pp. 166–169). By way of the main argument of this paper, the perspectives of British Turks were not only shaped in the context and scope of British politics, where they live, but also by Turkey—from history and familial experiences and opinions passed through generations (Onay and Millington 2024). So the main objective of this article draws from two distinct perspectives: one from the likelihood of a sense of exclusion and unbelonging, stemming from anti-Muslim sentiments foregrounded by the Brexit campaign's use of Turkey, and the other from the longstanding, entrenched collective memories on Ottoman/Turkish Orientalism defining Turkish identity as different from a racialised and stigmatised 'Muslim' Other and as a product of the hegemonic westernisation project of the late Ottoman–early Kemalist[3] era. Examined in detail in the following sections, this work sheds light on the ways in which the Leave campaign's use of Turkey interrupted the sense of self of British Turks around various axes. This interruption is especially embodied in the form of disdain, denial, withdrawal, and deflecting away, which is too complex to be reducible to British politics per se. Accounts of British Turks necessitated rethinking the principles of Turkish secularism, progress, and Western modernism ingrained in the reflexive thinking of modern Turkish subjects in addition to the surge in Islamophobia in the current conjuncture UK.

2. Methodology

This study is an extension of my previous research built upon the nuanced experiences of racism and Islamophobia among British Turks, along with their perspectives on the concept of race, including whiteness. A discussion of the Brexit campaign was not included among the interview questions I had initially prepared. A few of my respondents, however, either demonstrated their stance against Brexit or recounted an instance in relation to Brexit in response to the interview questions listed below:

1. Have you ever felt that you have been treated unfairly in Britain?
2. To what extent has the perception of British people towards Turkish-origin people living in Britain changed since 9/11 or 7/7?
3. Have you ever withdrawn yourself from certain debates for fear of misinterpretation to avoid stigmatisation, Turkophobia, and Islamophobia? Can you give some examples? How did this make you feel?

The above-mentioned interview questions were intended to find answers to the following research questions:

What factors mediate the difference and belonging strategies of British Turks? And to what extent can these factors be associated with Islamophobia?

Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with British Turks living in England and Wales between 18 and 55 over twelve months. Eighteen women and twelve men were interviewed; only one respondent (out of choice) did not hold British citizenship. The snowballing sampling for this qualitative research was initially based on two criteria: self-identified 'Turks' whose parents originate from mainland Turkey and the residency period. The respondents of this research are all children of Turkish Muslim immigrants and have since retained Muslimness as their religious identity, independent of their levels of belief, sects, or practice of Islam. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted to dig deeper into the participants' responses, allowing for the exploration of nuanced perspectives and the contextualisation of their self-assessments of many positionalities they hold, such as British, Turkish, Muslim, and so forth. The term 'British Turks' in this research refers to those who identify themselves as both Turkish and British, regardless of which identity outweighs the other. The idea of Turkishness has no reference to a hegemonic racial group (descent), dominant ethnicity (Turks or Kurds from Turkey), or religion (Islam).

As minorities are hard-to-reach populations, I initially assumed that my position as a Turkish Alevi[4] scholar would help me reach the Alevi Turkish and Alevi Kurdish diaspora, only to be shunned by the Alevi community on the basis that I initially researched Islamophobia amongst Sunni Muslim Turks in the UK. As for the Kurdish community from Turkey, this group has been the hardest to access. I managed to access only a few of them and realised their reception and experiences of racism and Islamophobia and the way they understand the reception of Turkey in British Politics are utterly different from Mainland Turks, necessitating a comparative approach. Hence, to stay within the scope of the study, both Kurdish and Alevi Diaspora were not involved in the study as separate groups, except for a few of my participants who defined themselves as Turkish and Alevi, next to their Britishness. However, all participants defined Islam as a part of their identity. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and each interviewee was given a pseudonym. The transcripts of the interviews were then submitted to inductive thematic analysis, which, by its nature, does not require predefined codes and anticipations of answers from the respondents (Braun and Clarke 2013). As the research progressed, while Brexit was not a predefined topic in the interviews, participants naturally integrated discussions about their identities, including aspects related to ethnicity, nationality, and Brexit, during the conversations.

2.1. Sovereignty, Colonialism, Islamophobia, Orientalism, and Other Narratives Underlying Brexit

In the June 2016 referendum, the United Kingdom (UK) chose to exit the European Union (EU). The rise of Euroscepticism in the UK can be attributed to various factors, with the Brexit campaign being shaped by discussions revolving around the economy,

immigration, *racism*, and the concept of national sovereignty (Gasimzade 2018, emphasis mine). Several arguments are sounded in this paper to understand the main drivers of Brexit in relation to the data and narratives of British Turks. It is, however, against the backdrop of a rise in anti-immigration and Islamophobic[5] sentiments in the country that British Turks almost experienced utter dismay and consternation at the negative portrayal of Turkey and its Muslim population as a viral threat. While the anti-Turkey campaigns in the Brexit process have attracted significant academic interest over the years (Gasimzade 2018; Ker-Lindsay 2018; Türkmenoğlu 2022), how some Turks, who were born and bred in Britain, tended towards disregarding and totally denying such 'otherisation' of Turkey still requires further research to fully understand its implications.

This trend echoes historical instances such as Margaret Thatcher's utilisation of fear of being 'swamped' by immigrants from the new Commonwealth and Pakistan in the context of post-colonial conditions in 1978. Thatcher's rhetoric tapped into existing racial tensions in the UK, amplifying anxieties surrounding immigration. We can argue that drawing on colonial and racial orders still shapes the myriad ways Muslims in Britain view themselves as unbelonging, requiring a historical lens presenting Islam and Muslimness as a monolithic phenomenon. While much of the debate on racism in the 1980s focused on the relationship between nationhood and racism (Solomos and Back 1996), it can be argued that the Brexit referendum was contingent on the relationship between diluting national identity, immigration, and Islamophobia. *The use of Turkey in Brexit*, a majority Muslim country, is undoubtedly the exploitation of Islamophobia for political gain (Grossman et al. 2020, emphasis mine). In probing further into the platforms that contributed to the amplification of the Islamophobic discourse, negative sensationalised media combined with the increased political polarisation in the UK equally contributed to Islamophobic dynamics, including comments of then Prime Minister Boris Johnson in a newspaper article in 2018 when he was a foreign secretary. He compared Muslim women who wear *burqa* or *niqab* to bank robbers and letterboxes, and this has caused its own 'spike' with a 375 per cent increase in Islamophobic incidents in the week following the article's publication (Sealy and Modood 2020). Sure enough, repressed anxieties surrounding empire nostalgia (and the colonial past) (Gilroy 2011), anti-EU and anti-Muslim sentiments, and a loss of certainty as to who is British mapped onto the factors for leaving the EU. Brexit has indeed revived the remains of the long-gone empire's narcissistic nationalism that has militated against the very idea of Europe (Koegler et al. 2020). As for the claims that millions of Turkish citizens would try to enter the UK after Turkey's (not-so-near for the time being) accession, leaflets were handed out in schools (see Figure 1 below). This occurred during a time of rising Islamophobia in Britain, partially influenced by a series of high-profile terrorist attacks not only in London and Manchester but also in France and Belgium. Bordered by Syria and Iraq, hence the alleged risk of terrorism, the prospect of Turkish membership in the EU stood at the forefront of the Brexit campaign. This environment might have potentially underpinned the direct portrayal of Turkey, with its majority Muslim population, as a challenge to the country's social cohesion and national sense of identity (Ker-Lindsay 2018), which was recognised by few British Turks, but on other occasions, the majority of my participants either put the blame on Eastern European migrants to the UK or ignored the marginalisation of Turkey as another Muslim 'Other'. Here, we observe Britain's Orientalist and Islamophobic fantasies about the threat of Islamisation displayed in militancy and terrorism (Yegenoglu 2012) and the neurotic response where Turks, as the Muslim 'Other', are positioned as undesirable. The latter was evidenced by the ways some British Turks completely denied the use of Turkey as leverage for anti-Muslim and anti-immigration.

Figure 1. On 22 May, Vote Leave published a poster of an open door fashioned from a passport with footsteps walking through it and the tagline 'Turkey (Population Seventy-Six Million) is Joining the EU'—one that was also re-used on social media platforms right up until the day of the referendum (Bale 2022).

2.2. Turkey's near Battle for Westernisation

The search for continual definition, redefinition, and authenticity is not peculiar to Britain, and Islamophobia is not only externally directed at Turkish people but equally characterised by Orientalist bifurcations between modernity and Islam in their parental home (Onay and Millington 2024). Therefore, the broader argument of this paper is that although the far-right UKIP went so far as to associate the prospect of Turkey's membership to the EU with a surge of (*potentially* Muslim) immigrants into Europe, it may be seen that some British Turks denied the existing correlations between the Brexit campaign and Turkey's quest for EU membership (Ker-Lindsay 2018). Second, and it is here that Ottoman Orientalism and conceptualisation of Islamophobia as a globally articulated phenomenon still informs much of how some British Turks viewed Brexit and its repudiation of Turkey.

It was against a general backdrop of constructing a 'modern' identity veiling Islam in the public sphere that perhaps no country has tried to 'Westernise itself' as much as Turkey. Anyone with ties with Turkey takes a slice of its contrasts, and so did the British Turks. As Chomsky (2008b) beautifully put it, Turkey's geopolitical position as a bridge between the East and the West is only the beginning of the numerous disparities in modern Turkey (Chomsky 2008a, p. xi). To understand the disparities, crises, and contrasts embedded in the contemporary Turk's mindset, one must return to the nineteenth century's *Tanzimat* (the reorganisation) reforms (1839–76). Lewis (1961) argues that the Tanzimat reforms, including the development of a large central bureaucracy, are often regarded as leading to the development of Turkish nationalism, with the primary objective being to take hold of the Ottoman Empire's multi-ethnic enterprise. The international events[6] aggravated the national sentiments already prevailing amongst Ottoman Christian subjects who tried to break free from Ottoman rule with the support of European powers (Somay 2014, p. 207).

The loss of the territories of the Ottoman Empire inadvertently necessitated the development of Turkish nationalism in the early 20th century, drawing the boundaries of its own national identity in the face of disintegration. In a similar fashion, Ottoman progressive and reformist intellectuals or bureaucrats made it necessary to ensure that turning its back to old traditions and past, instigating Western-style training both in education and the army, was necessary for salvaging the governing of the empire. Although it extends beyond the focus of this paper, it is important to acknowledge the undeniable impact of Orientalist trends in 19th-century Ottoman Empire (Eldem 2015). Nevertheless, Ottoman Orientalism was limited by the cultural and political legacy of a multicultural, ethnically diverse, and religiously pluralistic empire, which included various 'Orients', such as Arab, Kurdish, and Islamic identities. Once the Turkish Republic was established by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk

(1923), there was no longer any harm in overtly pointing at the 'Orient' (Eldem 2015, p. 102). This historical context illuminates the mindset of some British Turks, shaping perceptions and responses to contemporary issues such as Brexit and narratives surrounding national and ethnic identity and Islamophobia.

Unlike Western Orientalism, which Edward Said explains as a Western style of dominating and having authority over the Orient (Said 1978, p. 3), Ottoman Orientalism, as understood by the early Republican elite, was not just a self-designation but also a means of asserting superiority over other nations and cultures considered less advanced. The embrace of self-righteous secularism during the reforms of the 1920s and 1930s further reinforced this perception. This mindset led to viewing elements traditionally associated with the 'Orient', such as Arabs, Kurds, and Islamic conservatives, as the primary factors responsible for the underdevelopment of the newly formed Republic of Turkey (Eldem 2015). The early Republican leaders, in their pursuit of a more Westernised and modernised Turkey, marginalised what they perceived as Islamic or religious influences, promoting instead an overarching Turkish identity aimed at achieving a "level of contemporary civilisation."[7]. In this context, the dominant form of Islamophobia as a conduct of conduct was predicated on Westernising modernisation and a globally racialised Western horizon in late Ottoman/early republican Turkey (Sayyid 1997; Vakil and Sayyid 2023).

It is apparent that in the Kemalist modernisation initiative, the terms modernisation and westernisation were largely interchangeable. Within this framework, cultivating strong ties with Europe naturally complemented the broader agenda of Westernisation. Indeed, these trends have become distinctly visible in the popular sentiments and attitudes towards Europe by the 21st century, especially in the nationwide discussion about Turkey's EU accession (Somay 2014). Unsurprisingly, Turkey was among the nations actively seeking participation in the formal European integration process, securing associate membership in 1963. The depth of this relationship, evolving from 1963 to 1999 until Turkey was officially acknowledged as a candidate for full membership, should not be underestimated. Significant trade and investment connections were established between Turkey and the EU Community, reaching a pinnacle with the endorsement of the Customs Union Agreement, which took effect at the close of 1995 (Öniş 2004). The question of whether Turkey belongs to Europe and European identity is still one of the persisting uncertainties and contrasts, and hence, Turkey's path to the EU is indeed a protracted journey. However, it is unsurprising that Kemalism's modernising ideology normalised the Turkish national identity with its practically built-in, innate quality of secular Europeanness[8]. While the focus of this paper does not explicitly address the tendency to prioritise secularism, it is pertinent to note its influence on Turkish political expressions, at least until the emergence of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002. The AKP's predominant Islamist discourse challenged the previously exclusionary nature of secularism. Despite Turkey's emphasis on secular modernisation, notably since the 1920s and 1930s, and its pursuit of liberal globalist policies, including alignment with the European Union (EU), as I will soon discuss, the country's path towards EU membership encountered significant scepticism due to its predominantly Muslim society. This tension underscores the complex interplay between secularism, Islamism, and Turkey's aspirations for European integration (Yegenoglu 2012). Whilst the EU elites have maintained an arm's-length relationship with Turkey for decades, putting its borders with other Muslim countries and its own 86 million subjects, Turkey's not-so-near accession to the EU was used as one of the most cited arguments of Brexit supporters, which was opposite to the Turkish experience, British Turks in particular, who have unambiguously adopted the West and Europe as their reference point. In other words, the constitution of European/Western/'Secular' identit(ies) ingrained in British Turks' collective memory resulted in dismay, denial, and complete disguise, as will be addressed in more detail below.

3. Analysis

Synthesis of Turkism, Islamism, and Modernism

Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924) was an Ottoman intellectual who hugely influenced Turkish nationalism, although he was of Kurdish origin. His sociocultural theory was influenced by Durkheimian sociology of the 19th century and, more often than not, by its central tenets of harmony and social order, which Gökalp recontextualised around a central problematic roughly from the mid-1910s, a period of transformation in Turkish society: constructing a viable synthesis of Turkism, Islamism, and modernism. Gökalp's Turkism was a tool to ease the transition from a multicultural empire to a nation-state. The Islamic ideal was less of a guide to action than an abstract sense of morality. The source of modernism, for Gökalp, had to be Western science and technology, keeping out Western individualism and liberalism (Ergin 2016, p. 83). Thus, Ziya Gökalp argued, 'the first rule of our social order should be this sentence: I am of the Turkish nation, of the Islamic umma, of Western civilisation' (Gökalp 1969, p. 64 cited in Ergin 2016, pp. 82–83). Drawn out of Gökalp's version of Turkishness, tainted by Turkish nationalism developed in the early 20th century, this section demonstrates multiple discourses illustrating how British Turks interpreted the UK's Brexit campaign.

Nazli's account expressed cynicism towards the Brexit narrative and accused the conservative party (also known as the Tories) of deliberately lighting on Turkey to pique fears about Islamism and mass migration:

> I always knew that the use of Turkey was a massive lie to get people to vote leave. Turkish people know Turkey doesn't have good enough standards to get into the EU. There were videos also at the time saying Turkish people wouldn't actually want to live in the cold and rainy UK (Laughing). Brexit is the biggest lie. Rather than the government blaming itself . . . [for its wrongdoings], it was easier to blame the EU and guess what? The migration is going up. I just find it all not logical with the Tories, and I find them racist. Remember Boris Johnson referring to Muslim women as letter boxes? That is my thoughts.
>
> (Nazli, 35 years old, Nutritionist, Leeds).

Nazli's quote reflects a critical perspective on the ways in which the Brexit campaign's exploitation of nationalist sentiments and scepticism against Muslim countries and Islam based on Turkey's application to the EU (even though it is readily apparent that Turkey is a long-term applicant and is unlikely ever to become a member) actually led more than half of those to vote to leave. Nazli assessed the possible implications of Brexit as a political strategy to cast a shadow over the rising discontent among British citizens (e.g., crumbling NHS) and the austerity politics of the conservative party. Towards the end of her quote, Nazli highlighted Boris Johnson's manifestly Islamophobic attitude towards Muslim women. This is cited to argue that the use of Turkish accession to the EU was merely a leverage tactic, playing into a broader narrative that emphasised concerns about British sovereignty—the notion of 'taking back control'—and purportedly neglected 'British Values' and 'British identity' (Wellings 2018). Nazli's poignant comments are crucial in unfolding the interplay of nationalist sentiments, political manipulation, and societal tensions that fuelled the Brexit campaign. Her quote shed light on how the exploitation of fears and prejudices, exemplified by the misleading portrayal of Turkey's EU accession, played a significant role in shaping public opinion and ultimately influencing the outcome of the referendum. As she aptly highlighted, the blame-shifting tactics employed by political figures such as Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage only serve to obfuscate deeper systemic issues, including xenophobia and Islamophobia, and perpetuate racial and religious divisions within society.

Moreover, the findings from IpsosMORI, as cited in Bale (2022), provide empirical evidence supporting Nazli's insightful analysis, highlighting the significant impact of misinformation and manipulation on voter perceptions and decisions during the Brexit campaign. IpsosMORI found that while '45 per cent of respondents rejected as false the suggestion that a vote to Remain would see Turkey fast-tracked into the EU and its

population of (then) 75 million people granted the right to free movement to the UK, another 45 per cent believed it was true. Many of them, we can safely assume, went on to join the 52 per cent of British voters who, on 23 June, voted to leave the European Union' (p. 493).

Aslı, one of my older respondents, preferred to stick with her Turkish ethnic identity as a reaction to the discourses of the Brexit campaign:

> For many years, they have been scared of Turkey. It goes back to the Ottoman times, especially the French. . . they have always been scared of Turkey. Obviously, a vast number of Turkish citizens would flee through here. That is what they were scared of, too... but then it does not make sense because they opened doors to Romania and Bulgaria; these are not up countries like Turkey. And also, because Turkey is known to be a Muslim country, they are afraid of that. Because there are no Muslims in the EU, so obviously, there is that too; that's why the UK was scared of Turkey, and that is one of the reasons they have come out of the EU. Turkey might go into the EU for immigration reasons. Basically, they are also scared of the fact that the whole world will be Muslim in the future; it is scary that it will come down to politics in the end. The world as a whole knows that Turkey would fight for their flag to death; it is a commitment, and they know this. As the whole world knows, Turkey is a very powerful country.

(Aslı, 55 years old, Working with Autistic Children, London)

Asli drew upon the institutional (or political) Islamophobia, rather than everyday Islamophobic incidents, to highlight unwanted 'Muslim' differences with its problematic characteristics that need to be removed and indicate the portrayal of Islam as a problem informing the roots of UK getting out of the EU (Khan 2023). She said little of the Brexit campaign's dominant discourses about the anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish programmes that were circulated to attract Leave voters. If anything, Aslı deflected attention by emphasising the taken-for-granted assumption of Turkish superiority embedded in the Ottoman Empire, economy, flag, and army. Aslı built her narrative of the hierarchy of Turkish–Islamic synthesis in a certain way to defy Brexit's use of Turkey and its Muslim population as a threat to British values and culture. She used the element of 'fear' as an antidote to cover up degrading perceptions of Turks/Muslims. Not only did she claim that it was the fear of 'invasion' of Britain by Turkish/Muslim immigrants that resulted in Britain's exit from the European Union, but through nationalist rhetoric and discourse, Aslı maintained the myth of Islamic and Ottoman threats to Christianity and Europe. Even though her perception of Brexit demonstrates misperceptions about Islam and Muslims as a threat to perceived British values, identity, and sovereignty, it also draws from the notions of Ottoman superiority and the intrinsic belief of Turkish identity as civilised and a part of Western civilisation rather than 'backward Muslims of the Orient'. The latter is a common trend amongst Turkish citizens. It is deeply rooted in Ottoman/early Turkish Orientalism, positing Ottoman Turkey and Islam as obstacles preventing Turkey from aligning with the West in its fullness (Çarmikli 2011, p. 8).

One might argue that the Brexit campaign weaponised Turkey's not-in-near-future accession to the EU to tie together the issue of immigration with the issue of sovereignty. Turkey was the perfect rhetorical weapon for encapsulating the narratives of the desire to leave the EU. The reason for this desire was twofold: first, 'a nostalgia for the imperial past, as the basis for calls to restore the nation's sovereignty and wrest back control of its borders'; and second was the annihilation of 'the spectre of a migration crisis tied with the looming threat of terrorism seen as indicative of Muslim presence' (Rhodes and Hall 2020, pp. 284–85). Perhaps, then, it was no surprise that Asli acknowledged the latter in accordance with what the media was telling the British community for the duration of the Brexit campaign, saying that a vast number of Turkish people would actually flee to the UK after its accession to the EU. This was, however, followed up by her hard-line stance insisting on the powerful and inviolable dominance of Turkey and its Ottoman past to

evade the associations of Turkey and Turkish people with negative immigrant stereotypes, correspondingly and implicitly including herself into the equation.

Ultimately, it is a fact that the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) actually released a broadcast warning voters about the possibility of Turkey (*population 86 million*[9], *predominantly Turkish Muslim)* being a member state by 2020 should they back Remain. We can rightfully claim that Turkey was cited considerably more than any other country in articles about immigration during the ten weeks of the referendum campaign and that 'the most negative depictions of non-UK nationals were of Turks and Albanians' (Ker-Lindsay 2018)[10]. Ironically, the overtly xenophobic portrayal of Turkey and its citizens at a time of rising anti-Muslim sentiment in Britain was downplayed by some of my respondents. Whilst commenting on Brexit, some at times defied the Leave campaign's propaganda that singled out the accession of Turkey to the EU as a primary factor in securing Brexit:

> It is so complicated, my opinion is if Turkey joins Europe, we enter the EU, and it has no bearing on the UK. It is not the UK's responsibility; I think we should join the EU; you know, all British people want to go to Turkey every summer they go to Turkey, so why would they incite a negative opinion? So, I do not think British people happened to create a hostile environment on purpose, not really. I also did not feel like I was unwelcomed during the Brexit campaign.

(Erdal, 21 years old, Studying Pharmacy, Norwich/London)

Turkey's position as 'likely to be a member of EU' being effortlessly carved out in the Turkish mindset is based on historically nourished discourses around Turkish identity, Turkish Islamophobia, and the sense of it being culturally superior to other Muslim nations (Ergin 2016, p. 3). Above, a person with Turkish heritage, who was present in this particular setting where xenophobic and Islamophobic views were overtly repeated for ten weeks of the Brexit campaign, denied the perception that Turkey is cast as a straightforward representative of 'vilified undesirables' (Joseph 2020, p. 59). Against this Orientalist position, perhaps unsurprisingly, Erdal dehistoricised the populist Brexit narratives embodied in Turkey's negative portrayal and, if anything, reconstructed the image of Turkey as an appealing holiday hotspot for British people. Others simply implied instances of disbelief at the magnitude of concerns against a backdrop of Turkey's candidacy for EU membership. Azra, for instance, suggested that the primary focus of the Leave campaign was the understanding that 'we can do better by ourselves' rather than xenophobic views:

> I personally wanted to stay in the EU; I did not like to think about it like, 'Oh, Turkey is joining the EU; we should leave' I don't really understand any of them. I did not understand the rationale behind it, I understand why they have used it, but I have never thought about that whilst, you know, voting stay or leave. I did not think about that while doing that; I rather thought, 'Oh, it is just more beneficial to stay in the EU' [maintaining] white British. I mean, I don't think so; I don't think they have voted because of Turkey, thought 'Oh, these countries are joining the EU, so we should leave' I don't think that was their thought process; I think they just thought the EU as a whole which was not doing great at the moment, we can do better by ourselves kind of mentality.'

(Azra, 17 years old, Studying Law and Business, London)

Azra's perspective emphasised that Brexit's underlying motivation was to safeguard "white Britishness" and resist diversity and immigration. This viewpoint aligns with the notion of maintaining a specific cultural and racial identity, which was a significant concern for many proponents of Brexit. In light of Gilroy's concepts, the idea of "white Britishness" can be examined through the lens of melancholy within the identity of white Britain following the decline of the Empire. Gilroy (2011) suggests that this decline has evoked a sense of loss and melancholy among white Britons, who once benefited from the power dynamics of imperial dominance. This melancholy arises from a shifting power dynamic, where the assured prosperity derived from exploiting other nations is now perceived to be under threat due to immigration and diversity within the UK. Azra henceforth rejected the

discourse on the 'undesirability of Turkish immigrants' upon Turkey's joining the EU at face value. She evidently reiterated the argument of the Leave campaign, which is encapsulated in the context of the 'we can do better ourselves mentality'. Garner (2023) argue that dominant groups reproduce themselves through power relations, that is, relationally. The rhetoric of the Brexit campaign was partly grounded (Bhambra 2017) in the legacies of the Empire and the myth of White British exceptionalism[11], promoting heights of *self-assured* and naturalised cultural superiority of white native Britishness (or Englishness) (Gilroy 2011; Garner 2012 emphasis mine). In other words, the colonial past based on English superiority and imperial melancholia has functioned as the basis for political claims in the present. This extract suggests that preceding discourses on sovereignty and autonomy were so ubiquitous and commonplace during the Brexit campaign that it was even established in the minds of immigrants and children of immigrants in Britain.

This tendency to think of Brexit seems to have resulted in a complete denial and disguise that helped the Turkish context to be masqueraded as irrelevant by British Turks. It ought to be noted that this understanding is the product of a historical process negotiated by British Turks in a double context: from within their country of family origin (Turkey) and from within their current country of residence (Britain) (Onay and Millington 2024). We should not forget that all my respondents were either born in or immigrated to Britain at an early age and raised by parents who emigrated from Turkey in the early 1970s and 1980s. And their parental home was firmly and concretely shaped through instruments of Orientalism, secularism, whiteness, and Westernisation (Bozdağlioğlu 2008; Cagaptay 2006; Göle 1997). Seen in this light, in Azra's mind, Turkish citizens' unwanted status based on race or modernity cannot necessarily underlay and underpin the motives behind Brexit. The formulation of a modernised Turkey, consolidated by the concept of 'whiteness' in the past two centuries, has transplanted Turkish people's perceptions to a large extent (Göle 1997). This might explain the difficulty in understanding why Turkey's EU membership was at the forefront of the Brexit campaign. This also unveils why the narratives of the respondents did not touch upon the fact that Turkey is the perfect instrument to mobilise Islamophobic sentiments for voting intentions. Developed around this blind spot, the next respondent showed vehement disbelief in the feasibility of putting Turkey on a poster with an image of a UK passport declaring that Turkey (population 76 m) is joining the EU (Figure 2):
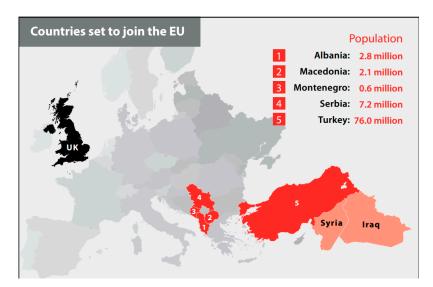

Figure 2. EU referendum: The Brexit campaign was accused of 'fanning flames of division' with a controversial map (Cowburn 2016).

I have a memory, basically, it was in secondary school, during Brexit times, and what happened was people who promoted Brexit came to my school and handed

out those leaflets, and I remember taking a look at the back of the leaflet; it was saying 'can you imagine Turkey joining the EU?' I was like, wow, because when I think about it, okay, I understand their viewpoint, what they might think. After all, obviously, Turkey has a large population and then a lot of problems there happening politically, and in other ways, so I can imagine so many people migrating to the UK. So, I still did not like the way they used Turkey, though. Can you imagine Turkey is joining, like aliens are coming... they did not have to print that way; it was on the leaflet... it is like, why did they feel the need to put that on... My Turkish friends and I talked about it later. Did they really do that?

(Irem, 21 years old, Studying Medicine, Bridlington)

Here, rhetorical questions are asked to make a point rather than to get an answer. Irem uttered, 'Why did they feel the need to put that on... [...] did they really do that?' to emphasise the 'irrational' character of the Brexit discourse created around Turkey. Irem acknowledged the attitudes around immigration and Brexit based on the fact that Turkey abounded with the potential of new 'Muslim' immigrants to the UK. The way Irem addressed the impact of sensationalised portrayals of Turkey in the context of Brexit discussions echoes the historical background outlined in the previous sections, where the Ottoman Empire's multicultural legacy, its peculiar form of Orientalism followed by muscular Kemalist reforms, shaped perceptions of Turkey and its relationship with the West. The quote reflects on the discomfort felt upon encountering a leaflet insinuating Turkey's potential EU membership as a threat, akin to the arrival of aliens. This discomfort resonates with the historical shift discussed, where Ottoman Orientalism gave way to a more overt pointing at the 'Orient', the inferiority underpinning the unwanted status of 'Islam', in the era beginning from the Tanzimat reforms and stretching into the Turkish Republic era. Similar to other respondents, Irem could not fully juxtapose the concerns stemming from Islamophobia with Turkey and its candidacy to the EU. Irem's view was captured as a way of turning a blind eye to the fact that Turkey was not deemed to fit into the prospects of Western civilisation by Britain and, if anything, was merely placed alongside unwanted, inferiorised Muslim countries. In this mindset, Turkish people are viewed with suspicion, and Turkey is relegated to the position of an undesirable and unwanted Muslim country, which resulted in my respondents' disbelief and denial. After all, this feeling has long been absent from the Turkish mindset.

4. Conclusions

This article has shed light on the intricate interplay between the Brexit campaign and issues of sovereignty, immigration, and Islamophobia, particularly focusing on the discourse surrounding Turkey's not-so-near accession to the EU as a Muslim-majority country. Employing Edward Said's Orientalism as a theoretical framework, the study explored in depth the construction of an 'irrational' narrative about Turkey and its Muslim population within the Leave campaign's arguments that Turkish membership was a real prospect (Ker-Lindsay 2018). The analysis revealed the strategic use of populist narratives rooted in nostalgia for a perceived imperial past and the exploitation of fears related to the risk of terrorism in a *borderless* EU and being in the same union with Turkey and anxieties surrounding migration (Gasimzade 2018). The warnings about Turkey's EU membership were identified as a tactical tool in the Brexit campaign, intertwining concerns about sovereignty and immigration with anxieties about Islam. Through the accounts of British Turks, the research unveiled nuanced responses marked by dismay, disbelief, and denial in the face of the constructed narrative that portrayed Turkey as an undesirable 'Other' with its predominantly Muslim population. Therefore, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between identity, politics, and discourses surrounding immigration, sovereignty, and Islamophobia against the background of Brexit's Leave campaign, which was shaped not only by British politics but also illuminated Ottoman Orientalism and the collective consciousness of Turkishness.

This article delineates two ongoing and unfinished nostalgic narratives converging on the Brexit discourse. In broad, stylised comparisons between Turkey and Britain, whilst the former has been intending to achieve full membership in the EU for decades, the latter voted to leave the EU in 2016, allowing one to put the whole issue of leaving and entering into the prospect of a future that is imaginary. I argued that in both Turkish and British mindsets, the European Union has been registered as a fantasy that informs the hegemonic national imaginary. On the Turkish front, accession to the EU is a natural counterpart of the broader project of westernisation, shaped in the Kemalist modernisation project initiated by Ottoman elites (Öniş 2004, p. 8) and consolidated by the customary obsession with the last remaining scraps of pride in the Ottoman Empire all at the same time. As far as Britain is concerned, the arguments are tied to the obsessive repetition of key themes, such as the loss of the former British Empire and the additional loss of certainty about the limits of national and racial identity that results from it (Gilroy 2004, p. 116); hence the 'independence' side appeals to the patriotic heart. The thinking of the Leave campaign is magical; it plucks a dimly remembered but glorified past (*that was as never as nostalgia makes it*) (Koegler et al. 2020, emphasis in original). Social unrest brought up with the expression 'Turkey (population 76 million) is joining EU' on the poster indicated that "if Turkey enters the EU, millions of Muslim 'Others' will be on our doorstep; hence, our welfare is under threat" (Türkmenoğlu 2022). In the realisation of hegemonic Orientalist construction positioning Turkey, Turks, and Islam as the 'Other' against 'us', the West, the Leave campaign's use of Turkey as leverage to gain votes shattered British Turks' sense of belonging, on occasion leading them to question their place in the UK, albeit in disguise, and the image of the modern, secular, Westernised Turkey, while at least for some, the latter was romanticised with the once potent position of the Ottoman Empire.

Notes

[1] UKIP's controversial Turkey video

[2] In 2021, there were approximately 4 million EU-born residents in the UK, making up 6% of the population and 37% of all those born abroad. The top countries of origin for EU-born residents are Poland (21%), Romania (14%), the Republic of Ireland (10%), Germany (7%), and Italy (7%). M. V. Cuibus (2023, November 20). EU migration to and from the UK. Migration Observatory.

[3] Kemalism is the founding myth of the Turkish Republic, and secularism is an integral part of it. Kemalism inferiorised religion in terms of modernity and progress: in these terms, religion is "reaction", irtica, and conservative/backward. Being modem is being secular. Modernism and secularism are associated with Western models, extending to the minutiae of everyday life, such as dress, family relations, and personal comportment. Zubaida (1996).

[4] Alevism is a mystical belief that is rooted in Islam and Sufism with some traditions of Christianity and Shamanism. That being said, some segments of the Alevi community argue that features of their belief and culture do not follow Islamic or other religious codes strictly. For simplicity's sake, I do not delve into further detail about atheist Alevis and Alevis who oppose Islamic religiosity but adhere to Turkish nationalism. A. Dudek (2017). Religious diversity and the Alevi struggle for equality in Turkey. Retrieved from., A. Akdemir (2016). Alevis in Britain: emerging identities in a transnational social space.

[5] Islamophobia is a pervasive kind of racism. Its effect ranges from everyday slow-burning microaggressions to eruptions of violence and murder; its scope extends from classrooms and workplaces to neighbourhoods and state frontiers, from print and social media to the public square. Muslims find themselves framed by Islamophobia in the form of questions about national security, social cohesion, freedom of speech, gender inequality, and cultural belonging. Bhatti (2021).

[6] The Ottoman Empire was the only Muslim great power. It was also the only Muslim state to rule over a vast Christian population, a great number of which resided in Rumelia. Throughout the nineteenth century the Great Powers—Austria-Hungary, Great

Britain, France, Russia, and the latecomers, Germany and Italy—engaged in a full-fledged struggle to win the hearts and minds of the Balkan Christians and thus draw them into their own sphere of influence. The Bulgarian revolt became an important step in a chain of events that would eventually result in the creation of a new state, Bulgaria. It could be argued that the April uprising in 1876 led directly to the outbreak of the Russo–Ottoman War of 1877–78, which would change the map of Europe and create a new balance of power in which Germany would play a leading role. A. Kilic (2014). The International Repercussions Of The 1876 April Uprising Within The Ottoman Empire. *Uluslararasi Suçlar Ve Tarih* (15).

[7] For a discussion of Turkish Orientalism from the 1920s to the present, see (Eldem 2015, pp. 226–69)

[8] The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) entered Turkey's political scene in 2002, established by Recep Tayyip Erdogan. With the increasing power and authoritarianism of religious government in Turkey since 2002, the concept of secular, also known as white Turk, has been denigrated by the current head of state, Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself, on the grounds that white Turkishness has always been the marker of the secular and Kemalist segment of Turks. Tayyip Erdogan, therefore, called himself a black Turk in 2003 in a report published by The New York Times. He said: 'In this country, there is a segregation of Black Turks and White Turks... Your brother Tayyip belongs to the Black Turks' (Brennan and Herzog 2014, p. xvi).

[9] This number does not indicate a definite or approximate number since Turkey is currently undergoing a demographic transition; it hosts 4 million refugees, and 3.6 million are Syrians. E. C. Auditors (2018).

[10] Moore and Ramsay (2017). UK media coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum campaign. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/cmcp/uk-media-coverage-of-the-2016-eu-referendum-campaign.pdf> (accessed on 22 May 2022).

[11] Gilroy contends that the collapse of the Empire has left a lingering sense of melancholy within the identity of white Britain. This melancholy stems from the shift in power dynamics, where the dominance once exerted over various races and nations is now directed towards the marginalisation of those who have sought refuge in the UK, referred to as the 'escaped' subjects (Gilroy 2004, p. 120). The British populace was assured prosperity through the British Empire and the exploitation of the Majority World, a trajectory that cemented an unchallenged belief in British racial superiority/exceptionalism (Anne Turner 2022).

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