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Reimagining Ummah: The Role of Third-Generation Immigrant Women in the Transformation of Turkish Islam in Europe

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Abstract: For decades, the traditional precepts of “Turkish Islam” have defined the community structure for Turkish immigrants in The Netherlands. Today, spiritualism rather than Islamic morality is emerging as the more compelling religious practice among young people, especially among women who are looking to break out of their culturally enclosed communities. This study uses the terms “enclosure” and “opening up” as metaphors for immigrant participation in Dutch society and suggests that religious Muslim women immigrants are both the founders and dismantlers of the two metaphors. Through their own narratives, women are shown to challenge and resolve social compartmentalization, and the role of cultural transmission through “*Ummahtism*” (the global Islamic community) is detailed as it is reinterpreted in Europe by Dutch–Turkish women. The findings of this paper are based on field research conducted in The Netherlands between September 2020 and April 2022.

Keywords: Turkish Islamism; The Netherlands; women; integration policy; Ummah



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1. Introduction

This article argues that Turkish Islam in Europe, which was shaped through national ties, has begun to dissolve due to rising criticism among third-generation young women and that national ties were replaced by a new understanding of Ummah. In conducting this discussion, the role of Turkish Islam in the integration of Turks living in The Netherlands since the 1964 Turkey–Netherlands worker recruitment agreement is specifically addressed. Turks were among the earliest immigration groups to The Netherlands and remain the most prevalent, with a population of approximately 420,000 people¹. However, compared to other immigrant groups and as corroborated by Turkish immigrants themselves, Turks in The Netherlands have the lowest level of interaction with those outside their communities. The relatively large size of the population and the fact that most live with their families minimize the need for any outside contact, although such cultural isolation is reflected in problems with economic integration; for instance, the unemployment rate of Turkish immigrants is higher than the overall unemployment rate in The Netherlands (Tol and Akbaba 2016). Political integration is another area of concern, since cultural isolation may translate to a lack of participation in the political structure of the host nation. The *Denk Party*², founded by the Turks, is a clear indication that Turkish immigrants differed politically from the Dutch.

In The Netherlands, 85% of Turks are Sunnis and 15% are Alevis. Sunni Muslims are further divided into two subgroups, i.e., secular and religious Muslims (Yükleyen 2012, p. 12). It is important to note that those mosques that were established under the concepts of Sunni Islam, such as the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), the *Milli Görüş*, the *Süleymanlı*, and other Islamic groups, exhibit significant resistance to the integration of Turks in The Netherlands, both socially and politically. Since the intergenerational transmission of cultural identity through education programs in mosques is identified in this study as having political characteristics, the scope of this research is focused on

political rather than social reasons for the limited interaction of Turkish immigrants with other communities in the country.

Specifically, the study shows how the “enclosure” strategy of Turkish immigrants has its origins in the Turkish Islamist tradition and not only functions to preserve the culture but has been adopted to prevent their assimilation into the greater majority population. The relationship between the “enclosure” strategy, a policy aimed at preventing Turks from entering Europe, and Turkish Islam is analyzed, and the “opening up” strategy taking the place of the “enclosure” model is shown as a parallel process to the elimination of Turkish Islam from Europe, as evidenced by attitude changes across generations. The sustainability of this approach is criticized, and the study claims that the “enclosure” strategy is being replaced by a tendency towards “opening up”. Based on ethnological fieldwork, it is argued that the decline of Turkish Islamism in Europe is linked to generational changes in religious attitudes and evolving social ideals, especially among religious women.

Postulating that it was women who initiated this “opening up” process, the study shines a spotlight on third-generation Turkish women who have become alienated from the “homeland” and, by extension, from “their people”. To use the Islamic terminology, it is increasingly difficult for them to pursue the idea of the global “Islamic Ummah”, which in turn affects the sustainability of Turkish Islamism in Europe. It is maintained that women, as the bearers of Islam in the diaspora as well as in Turkey, are the main actors behind Ummah, since it is these women who are calling attention to the new crisis of Turkish Islamism by problematizing the dominant discourse of “tradition” in Turkish Islamism. One of the most important names mentioned in the article in the context of women and nationalism is Partha Chatterjee. The article analyzes how, in Chatterjee’s Third World nationalism, the roles of femininity, which have the task of protecting core values against Western tendencies, unexpectedly deconstruct the national bond in Turkish Islam in the diaspora.

2. Methodology

The analyses conducted for this study are based largely on ethnological field research conducted in The Netherlands between September 2020 and July 2021,³ while certain shortcomings of the study were addressed during two further 10-day visits in October 2021 and April 2022. An ethnological approach was preferred for the study rather than a top-down view of the subject, since ethnological research better illuminates the internal dynamics of societies without homogenization (Augé and Colley 2005; Monaghan and Just 2007). The article focuses on women who organized themselves through the mosque, and several Turkish mosques were visited across the country where the researcher participated in women’s meetings and religious festivals. The researcher also stayed in the home of one of the education supervisors in a Turkish mosque, conducting conversations with her and her female guests on different topics, all of whom were educators at Turkish mosques. Further information was gathered via various online chat groups. The experiences, observations, and information gained and collected through this fieldwork form the basis of the arguments in this article. As an additional source of data, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 people, most of whom were women, with a significant proportion of those identifying as Turkish Muslims. While some of the interviews were carried out face-to-face, others were conducted through various online platforms as an adaptation of field research methods to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic⁴. One-on-one interviews lasted an average of two hours, although some of the respondents were met a second time when more than two hours were needed to complete the interview. Training sessions offered by different Turkish Islamic groups were attended, as well as conversations organized by both these groups and the Directorate of Religious Affairs of the Turkish Republic (*Diyanet*).

In addition to interviews, the focus group discussions took place in mosques and were conducted in the form of face-to-face meetings or online as courses and seminars. In total, there were three focus group meetings in which 10 Turkish women participated. Each

focus group meeting lasted an average of 90 min, and none were recorded at the request of the participants. In addition, an online course on women and Islam was organized by an institute for religious education for Turkish Muslims in The Netherlands, in which civil law and women's rights were discussed with the participants. A total of nine students participated in the course, of which only one was male, and all were second-generation Turkish immigrants.

A significant proportion of these research meetings were conducted in the Dutch cities of Leiden, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam, while one was held in Tilburg and one in The Hague. Most of the group meetings that involved participatory observation were in Leiden. Since research was conducted in Leiden, the first women that researchers contacted were those who came to the Turkish mosques in Leiden. Through these relationships, the researcher reached the other interviewees in a snowballing contact process. Although Leiden is close to major cities such as The Hague and Amsterdam, it is a smaller center and hosts a smaller Turkish population. The Hague, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam are where most Dutch Turks live, and the Turkish community is therefore more well organized in those cities. It must be stated, however, that the respondents in Leiden were more open to criticizing the policies produced by the center due to their relative distance from the central organizations in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, and they were thus a key source of information in this study. The researcher's acquaintances from Turkey who worked with Islamic organizations in The Netherlands provided additional contacts for this study. After all interviews have been transcribed, the discourse analysis method was used for evaluation.

3. Historical Grounds of Turkish Islam

As both political and social touchstones, Turkish-Islamic traditions have an impact on the integration process of religious Sunni Turks in The Netherlands, and one must first look at the historical and intellectual foundations of Turkish Islam to understand the impact on immigrants. In Turkey's political tradition, nationalism, conservatism, and Islamism are interchangeable (Bora 1999, p. 8). There is a strong tendency towards continuity between Islamism and nationalism. For nationalists, "Turkishness" is defined not as a nationality based on language and assimilation but as a mixture of race and faith; in other words, if you are of Turkish descent and Muslim, you are Turkish (White 2014, p. 58). Although race has come to the fore in defining Turkey's national identity, Ziya Gökalp, an important academic on the topic of Turkish nationalism, sees it not as an Islamic belief system but as the core of Turkish cultural identity⁵. N. Shmunel Essenstadt also points out that the success of Turkish nationalism is largely based on the pre-existing, deeply rooted Islamic identity (Eisenstadt 2003, p. 446).

The close association between Islam and nationalism is longstanding and was evident as far back as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, the promises of restoring old powers and cultural significance, an ever-present feature of nationalism, have long been heard (Bora 1999, p. 24). One important Islamist thinker, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, made a connection between Islam and Turkishness, saying, "Turks began to think after they accepted Islam", and only after this acceptance "did they begin to weave bright protoplasms of civilization" (Akıncı and Şafak 2013, p. 262). He contends that Islam has deteriorated in Turkey since the Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, embraced the Arab world, but he claims that if Islam becomes powerful in Turkey, it will also become powerful in the Islamic world.

Having such prevalent nationalist discourse in Turkish Islamism has greatly hindered the development of an Ummah consciousness and understanding of the Ummah, which is one of the basic terms of Islamism. The perception of the Ummah by Turkish Islamists is not characterized by the assumption that Turks are simply part of the Islamic Ummah collective nation but instead forwards the assumption that Turks are the leaders of the Islamic Ummah. This perspective reconstructs the Ottoman Empire as a source of inspiration for the imaginary, unified Ummah. It is believed that by reviving the idea of Ottoman civilization, the missing aspects of Ummah will be fulfilled (Karakoç [1988] 2009, p. 4). İsmail Kara, a

prominent contemporary Islamist thinker, says that the “Ummahism” discourse, whose internationalist dimension has increased in Turkey with post-World War II Marxist socialist influence, has weakened concepts such as homeland, state, and land in favor of religion, and he criticizes such Ummah approaches. Kara laments that this aspect of Ummahism, which at first glance appears to be rallying and encompassing, is in fact weakening and detrimental to the group, and [that effect] is not emphasized enough (Kara 2005, p. 37). Although Turkish Islamism has seemed excited about certain developments in other parts of the Islamic world, such as the 1979 revolution in Iran or the strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood grassroots organization in its defiance against the state in Egypt,⁶ ultimately the discourse that has dominated Turkish Islamism is one that protects the state and secures its perpetuity, while claiming that Turks are the overall leaders of the Islamic community. Kara explains this quality of Turkish Islamism by drawing upon Rumi’s⁷ metaphor of a pair of compasses, which states that as long as one steady compass remains permanently fixed on the geography of Turkey, the other can move around and observe other Islamic geographies or sources other than Turkish Islamism (Kara 2020). However, it is of utmost importance that a steady compass remain permanently fixed on Turkey if any possible drifts in Turkish Islamism are to be prevented.

Kara’s claim is not unfounded. Islamists who consider the Ottoman Empire’s historical legacy to be a reference point believe that Turkey can become the political leader of the Islamic world and that shifting the compass either away from Turkey or away from the state bears significant risks for the course of Turkish Islamism. Given the new global contexts of Islamism, however, efforts to keep the compass fixed on Turkey have become untenable. Turkish Islamism found its way by merging with nationalism after World War I, when nationalist movements were on the rise in the Third World⁸, but globalization now eclipses the local/national,⁹ and Turkish Islamism is struggling to adjust. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904–1983), Nurettin Topçu (1909–1975), and Sezai Karakoç (1933–2021), the founders of Turkish identity in the early days of the Republic, present Turkish Islamism as a requirement of Turkishness within an interpretation that can be summarized as Islamism under the larger umbrella of nationalism. Kısakürek’s poem “The Great Eastern Anthem” (*Büyük Doğu Marşı*) begins with the line “The liberated People chosen by God” (*Allah’ın Seçtiği Kurtulmuş Millet*), illustrating the hyperbolic meaning he ascribes to the place of Turks within Islamism.¹⁰

Moreover, “anti-Westernism” and “anti-modernism”, or more moderately put, criticisms of the West that have arisen from a defensive stance, have been the centerpiece of Turkish Islamist ideology from its very beginnings. The Islamist attempt to come to terms with Western modernity and Turkish Westernization has long focused on a negative and negativistic discourse aimed at cleansing society of the “contaminating” effects of Westernization and questioning Western dominance in world politics (Çınar 2018, p. 182). Dealing with the question of modernization and Westernization has been one of the greatest challenges to non-Western nationalist movements (Bora 1999, p. 23). Topçu, Karakoç, and Kısakürek stand out in this regard as Turkish Islamists who advocated the empowerment of Islam to protect it from Western influence. They further championed the denial of Westernism based on Islamic morals and civilization. In this sense, Kısakürek’s “selective” thesis that encourages Turks to make use of “only the technological developments originating in the West, without surrendering the moral values of Islam”¹¹ is a central argument for Turkish Islam. Karakoç concurs with Kısakürek and supports the claims that the nation that can best lead the Islamic world by bringing it together under its aegis is Turkey (Karakoç [1988] 2009, p. 183). The Ottoman Empire is usually regarded as the “society of the Ummah” and is associated with the golden age of Islam, surpassed only by the time of the Prophet and his companions (Yıldız and Çıtak 2022, p. 10). Topçu goes on to define the relationship between Islam, Turkishness, and morality, claiming that the “religion of the people is one that has molded people’s morals, customs, and hearts and has become the direction and source of Turkish Islamic civilization, and that religion is Islam” (Topçu 1997).

In the process of Turkish modernization, it was necessary to adapt to European developments and to keep up with innovations to ensure the existence of the state. On the other hand, an important question was posed on how a nationalistic and religious society could preserve its values in the face of these changes. At this point, the status of women became a popular topic in discussions of Turkish modernization, and an archetypal model woman emerged, one who took advantage of the opportunities of modern life while preserving her national values. In fact, establishing and emphasizing a relationship between morality, family, and women proved to be useful in filling in the ideological gaps of Turkish Islam. Instead of criticizing or resisting the political and economic system of the West, the preservation of Turkish–Islamic culture, which is centered upon family and women, and resistance to Western ideologies then came to the fore.

Fatma Aliye, a Paris-educated writer who spoke fluent French and who sought to protect “national values”, is a key name among the Turkish Islamic ideologues who were vocal on women’s issues.¹² According to Aliye, Islam and Turkishness were intertwined, and like other Turkish Islamic thinkers, the protection of the state was her priority, although she also strived to inform Europe about the “correct” Islam (Kızıltan 1993, p. 66). Aliye attaches importance to women’s education mainly in support of their role in raising children and therefore in developing society (Aliye 2012, p. 79), which is typical of the nationalist understanding in which the ideal woman is an actor in broader social development through traditional work such as their child-rearing obligations (Kandiyoti 1996).

Fatma Aliye claims that Islam can respond to the demands of the modern world and challenge Muslims who find themselves exposed to Western “aggression” (Bahadır 2018, p. 88). She further suggests that religion should not be considered an obstacle to scientific progress or women’s rights, as it is enough to turn to Islamic sources to realize their importance (Aliye 2016). Fatma Aliye’s ideas can be considered a summary of the Turkish Islamic view of women, and her thoughts reflect those of Partha Chatterjee on Third World nationalism. Chatterjee, an anthropologist and leading academic in the subject of nationalism, explains the family–woman connection and culture in postcolonial nationalist ideology, and she contends the nationalist movement distinguishes between the material and spiritual spheres (Chatterjee 2002, p. 28). For Chatterjee, the “outside” world is represented by the material sphere of economics, state affairs, science, and technology; it is the sphere in which the West has proved its superiority and the East has submitted (Chatterjee 2002, p. 22). Accordingly, the superiority of the West in these fields should be recognized and even mimicked. However, instead of mimicking the West in its entirety, a national understanding means it is necessary to highlight cultural differences from the West to some extent. The place for accentuating these differences from the West in anti-colonial societies is the spiritual sphere (Chatterjee 2002, p. 22), wherein the family is seen as the standard bearer and locus of cultural differences. Chatterjee points out that gender relations is the pivotal axis along which the fear of modernity and the need to distance oneself from the colonial West are balanced. The discourse of nationalism defines social and moral principles for the positioning of women in the modern nation–state (Chatterjee 1989, p. 241), so the material sphere is labeled as the domain of men, while the spiritual sphere is conceptualized by women since their gender is responsible for the protection and representation of culture.

The idea of women as exponents of culture was adopted by thinkers looking to establish Turkish Islam’s relationship with the West as they steered the course of Turkish nationalism. Of course, Turkey was never a colonial state—a fact repeatedly emphasized by Turkish nationalists—but as a country in which late nationalism developed, the Turkish version had similar characteristics to Third World nationalism (Aktoprak 2016, p. 5). When Turkish Islam was reincarnated among the diaspora, an analogous nationalist project was implemented among the immigrants. Today, Muslim women living their lives in Western European countries have adopted the Turkish–Islamic mission of preserving their religious and national ties. As one of the respondents of the present study¹³ stated, Islamic morality

within the framework of “Turkish Islam” has served as a shield against Western cultures for immigrants who thought that they would one day return to Turkey.

4. Transnational Imaginations of Turkish Islam from Generation to Generation

Large communities of Muslims have emerged in Western Europe as a result of post-colonial emigration and labor migration after World War I (Yükleyen 2012, p. 37). During the two decades following the 1960s surge of foreign workers into The Netherlands, multicultural policies were put in place according to which ethnic groups were allowed to set up their own organizations. The intention was to ensure equal rights to migrants and to maintain recognition of their culture and identity (Carrera et al. 2017, p. 261). To this end, the government developed a consultative structure and empowered itself as a facilitator among different groups (Vasta 2007, p. 757). The implementation of this policy, which can be referred to as “multiculturalism” in the Dutch context, was left to the initiatives of the minority groups and their organizations within the limits of the general laws. Subsequently, a law was enacted allowing broadcasting in minority languages and the addition of subject courses on minority languages and religions to school programs, while also paving the way for the opening of Islamic schools and places of worship (Ersanilli and Koopmans 2009, p. 5). Today, Dutch multicultural policies recognize Muslims’ group identity, and their organizations have developed cooperative relations (Laurence and Vaisse 2006). A different approach was taken in the early 1990s, however, with the enactment of an integration policy that emphasized the socio-economic participation of immigrants as “allochthonous”¹⁴ people and other policies through which minorities were turned into citizens. According to De Koning (2020), Dutch policies shifted from multiculturalism to a new realism in the 1990s, especially after the events of 9/11 in the US and various bombings in Western Europe (De Koning 2020). Consequently, in The Netherlands, immigrants are now categorized on an individual basis rather than at a group level, and various policies have been revoked, including those permitting education in minority mother tongues in schools. Islamic communities and organizations responded in turn, offering social and religious services to meet the expectations of Muslims. They established mosques, educational institutions, foundations, associations, and media outlets.

Two dynamics are particularly decisive for immigrant Islamic life in The Netherlands. The first is the religious policy of the host country towards immigrants; the other is Turkey’s domestic policies towards that group. After the reunification of Turkish immigrant families in the 1970s,¹⁵ religious activities expanded as families worked together to build a community with its own social, religious, and economic infrastructure. It is clear that there is a linear relationship between Islamization and family reunification that included Turkish women’s and children’s arrival in Europe (Mazlum 2023, p. 157). In all meetings conducted with second-generation immigrants, both men and women repeatedly emphasized Turkish–Islamic culture and the importance of transmitting this culture to the third generation. Wendy Cadge and Elaine Howard Ecklund (Cadge and Ecklund 2007) claim that the ethnic and religious identities of immigrants tend to merge into a political identity, and this is certainly the case with Turkish immigrants.

Indeed, Turkish mosques in Europe have emerged as places for the transfer of this political identity to subsequent generations. Several Turkish Islamic organizations opened Islamic education courses in mosques in the Turkish language, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the language by successive generations. After deciding to raise their children in Europe in a Turkish–Islamist framework, the members of these organizations constructed new mosques and used them for intensive education for children aged 4–16. From this perspective, if ties with the old homeland of Turkey were to be severed, then the borders of the new homeland they were establishing in Europe would have to be redefined. In other words, the migrants’ evident needs can be summarized as building a religious and ethno-national identity, passing on their culture to the second and third generations, and improving their economic prospects (Yükleyen 2012, p. 48). Thijl Sunier defines this process as “the migrantization of Islamic organizations” (Sunier 1999).

Against this backdrop, the moralist discourse of the Turkish–Islamist tradition served as the main basis for religious education. In reaction to their cultural separation from the homeland, religious education was embraced by the third generation, which mitigated alienation from Turkey. Religious education continues to this day, and the main aim was and is to protect the “national” identity through the principle of Islamic morality. In Turkish Islam, the moral dimension is more than an ideological one but extends into the fuller cultural identity (Yıldız and Çıtak 2022, p. 26). For instance, interviewees made clear their intention “to raise young people who embrace their religion and who know the Turkish language, as well as Turkish customs and traditions”.¹⁶ Second-generation Turkish Muslim immigrants in Europe have maintained their ties with Turkey, tending to visit Turkey once a year, to buy property there despite having no intention of moving, and to send their religiously obligated alms to Turkey. But, for the second generation, these tangible ties to the homeland still do not mitigate a lingering sense of belonging, neither in Europe nor in Turkey. That gap is addressed in part with educational activities for young third-generation Turks that help the second generation cope with their feelings of disconnection, since mosques and their religious education programs provide an ongoing connection to Turkey. As noted by Mieke Maliepaard, Marcel Lubbers, and Merove Gijsberts, second-generation Turkish immigrants continue to attend mosques regularly, following in the footsteps of their parents, but generally receive a more formal Dutch-style education compared to the first generation (Maliepaard et al. 2010).

For first-generation immigrants, most of whom came to The Netherlands under the workers’ agreement signed with Turkey in 1964, the “homeland” is still Turkey, the place they were born. By the 2000s, first-generation migrants had started to reach their sixties and were voicing thoughts of being buried in Turkey when they die.¹⁷ Most of them were uneducated, came from rural areas in Turkey, had a low socio-economic status, spoke little or no Dutch, and very few had any form of cultural relationship with The Netherlands (Güveli and Platt 2011). These factors had a long-term impact on the social and religious demands of Muslims in Europe (Yükleyen 2012, p. 46). In some respects, the remnants of the 19th-century Dutch pillarization system¹⁸, which segregated religious populations in the political sphere, made it easy for Turkish immigrants to establish their own religious and cultural institutions. Nevertheless, while the second generation was more religious, it was also more integrated into Dutch society than the first generation (Fleischmann and Phaet 2012).

The second generation is composed mostly of immigrants who were either born in The Netherlands or who were born in Turkey and moved to The Netherlands at an early age. By the 2000s, this generation had reached their twenties or early thirties and had feelings of belonging neither to Turkey nor to The Netherlands. As a generation stuck between two worlds, they addressed their sense of homelessness by transmitting “spiritual” values based on the Turkish Islamic synthesis to the third generation, and any religious break between the first and second generations was thus prevented, along with any possible generational communication gap (Voas and Fleischmann 2012). For example, while the first generation suffered from having no mosques to attend, the second generation built many Turkish mosques and considered them their new homeland¹⁹. They both educated themselves in religion and saw the passing on of religious values to their children as an important intergenerational task. As mentioned, the education of this second generation in public schools strengthened their ties to the host country compared to the previous generation and led to permanent settlement (Yükleyen 2012, p. 47). Chereb contends that, compared to first-generation Turks who came to The Netherlands, the identity of the second generation is more hybrid and diverse, as it interacts with both Turkish and Dutch culture (Güner and Abbas 2024).

In this study, every interviewee from the second generation expressed a fear of being unable to protect their children from the supposed corrupt way of life in The Netherlands and/or spoke of the need to preserve their culture. What the Turks consider “assimilation” in Europe is the loss of the Turkish language and the traditions specific to “Turkish culture”,

which has blended with Sunni Islamic culture. Therefore, religious education as offered by the Turkish mosques was viewed as the only way to tackle this problem, and the instillation of religious beliefs in the younger generation is seen as part of a “cultural repertoire” (Tilly 2006) filled exclusively by Turkish Islam. At the same time, Turkish lessons continued to be taught in the mosques. Second-generation women who had themselves been trained in mosques delivered most of the mosque education, usually as volunteers either for no pay or for very little remuneration.

Women from the second generation in particular took the lead roles in immigrant Turkish Islamic movements. In their European communities, where the family had the duty of protecting the values of the homeland, it was women who stood out more than men as the transmitters of culture as a side effect of their maternal and familial responsibilities. The continued presence of children in religious education classes in the mosques was mostly considered to be the responsibility of women. Women were thus able to establish a relationship with the mosques through their children, leading to participation in further courses themselves. All of the interviewers in the present study confirmed that it was women rather than men who were mainly involved in the events organized by mosques. This was attributed by some of the respondents to the better functioning of the women’s subbranches of different organizations, while others claimed that it was because women were naturally more religious or that women simply had more free time on their hands than men. The responsibility for raising the next generation, however, was the main reason given for women becoming more involved with religious affairs.

Motherhood as an institution can be used to regulate and supervise first women and then the wider community (Öztan 2010, p. 115), and this strategy is observed within the Turkish community in The Netherlands. Saba Mahmood, who has written on the experiences of Egyptian religious women, claims that the behaviors of pious women are part of the “inhabited norms” they desire, which are based on patriarchic and religious culture, and that such activities actually structure the ‘interiority’ of their gendered subjectivity (Mahmood 2005). From the Mahmood’s perspective, it can be said that second-generation Turkish women immigrants in particular have internalized and taken on the task of passing on culture and religion to their children through the role of motherhood. Paradoxically, it would seem that Turkish women involved in cultural activities meant to strengthen traditional female roles have in some ways become empowered by Islamization. Unlike first- and second-generation women, third-generation women tend to experience both Islamization and the pressure of cultural surveillance more intensely than men. As the group tasked with transmitting the culture to the next generation, women tend to be more critical both of Islamization and cultural surveillance. Women have become the main agents in the processes of Islamization and religionization in Europe by taking on the task of transmitting the connection to the homeland to succeeding generations. In this process, they have started to question the “enclosure” form of integration. The tension engendered by the intergenerational change within the movement, made visible particularly by women, in addition to the criticisms expressed by third-generation women about Turkish Islamism and the traditional structure it produces, have compelled the Turkish community in Europe to open up. In summary, the institutionalization of religion among Turkish immigrants made it more difficult for Turks to integrate into their society by making them introverted. However, the fact that institutionalization was being eroded by discussions about the new Ummah, especially by women, was a driving force for Turks to open up to the greater society around them.

5. The Closing in/Opening up Dilemma of the Turkish Community: What Comes First—The Ummah or National Belonging?

Since their migration to The Netherlands, Turkish immigrants have maintained their presence by means of “enclosure”, that is, by remaining within a closed community in their country of settlement. The first-generation migrants had little choice in this regard, as neither The Netherlands nor Turkey had a program in place to prepare Turkish workers

for what was to come. In this period, especially for the more devout in the community, Turkish Islamism offered a framework by which the Turkish workers could gather in isolated communities and lead a life without needing to integrate into Dutch society. In this context, the terms “opening up” and “integration” are used in parallel. Integration here is understood as a person feeling that he/she belongs to the society in which he/she lives, and an integrated person both makes and demands regarding the future of the society and has the opportunity to express such demands. Fieldwork for this study revealed that Turkish Islamism served as a refuge for first-generation immigrants against issues that were outside their control and that they consciously resist integration still today. In this sense, they see themselves as different than Muslim Moroccans (Cadge and Ecklun 2007). According to one second-generation respondent:

“The Moroccans seem to be more integrated into The Netherlands than Turkish immigrants. Why? Because they don’t care about protecting their culture. We are not like the Moroccans. We always protect the Turkish Islamic culture; we will never give up on it.”²⁰

This sentiment was just one example of how the potential “loss of culture” was considered unacceptable and met with abhorrence by the Turks. During fieldwork interviews, it was common among second-generation Turks to use a hierarchical language in which they positioned themselves at the apex, above Muslim immigrants from other regions. In their view, the connection between Turkishness and Islam is an essentialized relationship, and it is what lies behind this attitude. They further differentiated themselves from other Muslim immigrants through references to their Ottoman past and repetitions of the widespread discourse that the Turks were never colonized (Bora 1999, pp. 16–17).

“What can I learn from a Syrian in the name of Islam? I know Islam better than a Syrian because Islam came to Arab society, while the Turks chose Islam and ruled the Muslim Arabs for centuries.”²¹

Meanwhile, the different ethnic and cultural identities of the immigrants, as well as their religion, made assimilation difficult in the eyes of the host society. Frank Van Tubergen, in his study of Moroccan and Turkish immigrants in The Netherlands, identified a negative relationship between religiosity and such aspects of everyday life as the level of social connectedness with the local Dutch people, inter-ethnic marriages, education, employment, and mastering the Dutch language (van Tubergen 2007, p. 759). Confirming Tubergen’s argument, all of the immigrant Turks interviewed in this study spoke about protecting their children from the hegemonic culture in The Netherlands, or, in their words, from “culturelessness/degeneration” (*yozlaşma*). Respondents were terrified of the possibility of their children being exposed to the host culture and “losing” them as a result. The discourse of fear and othering was further reinforced when behavior patterns essentialized as Western, such as the freedom to engage in sexual intercourse outside marriage, legalized drugs, and same-sex marriage, were added to the mix. Respondents constantly described The Netherlands as an unsafe place for their children and themselves, and they felt responsible for providing their children with a safe habitat. This discourse continuously indicated a preference for a communal enclosure in which emphasis was placed on the family within the orbit of Turkish Islamic culture. In particular, the second-generation respondents were of the opinion that “in order not to dissolve as a minority community, you must protect and isolate yourself”²². For this group, continued cultural isolation was an immutable reality. In a Durkheimian sense, religion functioned as an instrument of social control over the younger generation, and especially women (Carol et al. 2019). Interviews further showed that women of the second generation took on the task of preserving and transmitting Turkish-Islamic culture. However, there are some objections among young women of the third generation who were expected to take on this role.

According to third-generation respondents, their relationships with both other Muslim immigrants and the Dutch were considerably different from those of the previous generations. Here, third-generation Turkish immigrants had more in common with the young

Muslims of other ethnicities than with second-generation Turkish Muslims. Born and educated in The Netherlands, they are fluent in Dutch, and their communications with the ethnic Dutch lack the tension felt by those of the second generation²³. Furthermore, Turkish Islam and the Turkish political arena hold less importance for those of the third generation.

Throughout the study, the estrangement of the third generation from the politics and religion of Turkey was a source of concern for the previous generations. During interviews with second-generation respondents, one interviewee stated that “some young people have abandoned their religion altogether, while others have become too religious”.²⁴ Statistically, studies report a slight general tendency towards secularization across generations among Muslims in Western Europe, as Muslim children on average appear less religious than their parents (Diehl and Schnell 2006; Kasselstrand and Mahmoudi 2020).

It is noteworthy that the abandonment of religion by young people was equally distressing as the emerging new religiosity. Although educated by the second generation, the third generation appears to have a significantly different interpretation of religiosity. In fact, during the fieldwork, it took longer to contact those of the younger third generation than those of the second generation. One reason for this was that the second-generation respondents were unenthusiastic about connecting such a researcher with young community members. It is possible that the second generation considered the building, protection, and dissemination of European Turkish Islam to be their responsibility and thus sought to limit the third generation from interacting with the world outside their community. While this was not carried out overtly, their discomfort with unsupervised communication with young people was apparent. A second reason for the reluctance to allow contact with the third generation was the tendency of youth to talk openly about themselves to outsiders, as their novel ideas were not recognized by the older community members. While the younger members of the third generation were critical of the wider Turkish community, they were still part of it, and like the older generations, they were careful not to reveal any existing tensions to outsiders.

Although all respondents maintained a level of secrecy and caution, in the interviews it was apparent that the enclosure strategy of the second generation aimed at “protecting their culture”, which was based on the principle of “nation first, homeland first”, was being replaced by a new discourse of “protecting Islam” and “Ummah first”. For example, when I asked one third-generation female respondent what culture meant to her, she replied:

“To me, culture means tradition. They [*culture and tradition*] are things that have been taught to us as part of Islam until today, but they have nothing to do with Islam. Islam should be purified from culture. Islam is Islam. It cannot be claimed by a particular culture.”²⁵

This criticism, which found widespread support among third-generation respondents, clearly expresses an objection to the Turkish-Islamic interpretation. As Güner and Abbas mention in their article, the new generation’s tendency to distinguish between the patriarchal, “cultural” practices of the Turkish community and the “real” Islam that values women’s rights can be seen as a practice of talking back (Güner and Abbas 2024, p. 9). Beyond that, it can also be said that this statement reveals that the third generation considered it necessary to become independent of the Turkish community in Europe and to open up to the Ummah with an individual understanding of religion. As one third-generation interviewee stated:

“My mother wants me to attend the mosque regularly, but I cannot be of service to the mosque all the time. Being a Muslim does not just mean serving Turks, as we also have obligations to the Ummah. . . In essence, the world is bigger than the mosque, the world is in need of service. Serving only the mosque and the community is not an acceptable Islamic practice!”²⁶

In The Netherlands alone, there are 150 mosques affiliated with the *Diyanet*,²⁷ while there are a total of 206 Turkish mosques, 140 Moroccan mosques, and 50 Surinamese mosques. Mosques are seen by immigrants as important institutions that provide national

ties. However, although there are no research data on this topic, it has been observed that young people's interest in mosques has decreased recently,²⁸ and this trend was seen among the interviewees. Although the Ummah requires solidarity between Muslims of all nations, ethnicities, and races, the division of mosques along ethnic-national lines, such as Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese, is an obstacle to cooperation (Yükleyen 2012, pp. 43–44). These disparate Islamic communities have an ambivalent relationship with each other since their relations are based on conflicting ethnic-national loyalties to the global community of the Ummah, as well as competition for resources (Warner and Wenner 2006). Furthermore, there is a direct link between the decline in young people's interest in mosques and the spread of the new understanding of the Ummah among young people.

For those of the third generation, the choice between collectivity and individuality further revealed a new religious interpretation among young people in Europe that is sensitive to their individual needs. The individuality of the third generation and the related transformation of the definition of religiosity were highly disturbing for the older Turkish generations in The Netherlands. The third generation's new understanding of religiosity not only included criticisms of institutionalized religion and the collectivity developed through it but also dismantled the concept of "enclosure"—a dismantling that unsurprisingly was led mostly by women as the group most oppressed by institutional structures. As Anthias and Yuval-Davis emphasized, the duties of maintaining cultural integrity and protecting and perpetrating cultural and ethnic values given to women, especially in a xenophobic environment, could also be a source of pressure and a means of surveillance of women (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992). Consequently, through their cultural criticisms, third-generation women were trying to bring an end to this control and pressure. Although all girls and boys aged 4–16 received similar religious education, every interviewee from the Turkish community acknowledged that women were stricter in their adherence to Islamic rituals. After mentioning the meanings attributed to motherhood, one female third-generation respondent added the following to the list of the reasons why women were more faithful to Islam:

"In our community, after reaching a certain age, men become more outgoing, while women, on the other hand, remain more within their own communities, being under stricter control. For this reason, more women engage in religious conversations and religious education, and consequently, are more informed about religious issues."²⁹

While religiosity was considered safe for women and contributed to the continuity of the community, the women interviewees reported an important crisis that was not in line with the community's views, namely the turn to Ummahtism as a means of liberation from the community control described above. Third-generation women, particularly those seeking to unburden themselves from the expectations of the traditional Turkish community, seek freedom within the Islamic religion by embracing Ummahtism, and the Ummahtist worldview for these women is shaped by a spiritualist Islamic interpretation. Although at first it may seem like they have been influenced by the Islamic morality of Rumi or the Masnavi, both schools of thought being part of the Turkish-Islamist orthodoxy, the intellectual references of the third generation come from different traditions. Women seeking liberation instead follow religious thinkers like Yasir Qadhi, Nouman Ali Khan, Mufti Ismail Menk, and Yasmin Mogahed, who preach in English on YouTube and identify with spiritualism rather than mysticism. Following the 2000s, the Islamic morality passed down to the third generation from their parents evolved into spiritualism after reinterpretation by the new generation of Turkish Muslims in the West. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the two religious paths. While spiritualism calls on individuals to become more inward-looking and embrace the devout individual's relationship with the Western/Westernist/non-Muslim society, Islamic morality calls on individuals to return to their communities.

It was also apparent during the study that while third-generation Turkish Muslims were emerging from their closed community, they differed from previous generations by

communicating with other, non-Turkish Muslim communities. These discussions reflected the efforts of members of the third generation to respond to various problems by claiming Dutch–Muslim subjectivity with a pan-Islamist perspective. In seeking answers, the youngest generation is rapidly moving away from the national (*milli*) and taking refuge in the global (*Ummah*). In parallel to these changes, they define themselves as Muslims rather than as Turks.

6. Conclusions

After the settlement of immigrant Muslims in Europe, the connection between Islam and specific territories has become increasingly uncertain. The global dynamics of the modern era make it challenging for an interpretation of Islam devoid of national ties to establish itself in Europe. Turkish Islam is also affected by this shift. A significant factor is that immigrant Muslims, particularly those living in Europe, are becoming more open to interacting with both other Muslims and the non-Muslim societies around them. This interaction inevitably leads the younger generation to move away from national ties and towards Ummahism, a more global and flexible concept. As a result, both the interpretation of Islam and the understanding of the community established by Islam are undergoing radical changes with the new generation.

Interviews with three generations of Turks living in The Netherlands indicate spiritualism rather than Islamic morality is rapidly becoming the more compelling religious path for young people, especially among women who are looking to break out of their culturally enclosed communities. Upon encountering the West, Islamic morality implores immigrants to keep a tight grip on their own culture and close themselves in with members of their home nation in their host communities, whereas spiritualist Islamic interpretations suggest individuals open themselves to new community experiences by generating individualized approaches of how to live in the West as Muslim subjects, thus opening up new pathways to integration into their host nation. Spiritualism stands out as an important option for those situating themselves at the center rather than on the periphery of the society in which they live.

In fact, for the new generation, rather than a collective coming together of Muslims as in the tradition of the Ummah, being part of the global world of Islam appears to have become an idealized metaphor for individual liberation of young Turkish immigrants, and for them it is an idea that does not compromise their Muslimness. From the third generation's point of view, it is apparent that Ummah has neither defined borders nor distinct nationalist claims, and so it is impossible for any authority to emerge that will have total political power over the younger generation. In this regard, young people turn to an abstract definition of "Ummah" to legitimize their detachment from the community, with young women being the loudest voices expressing a desire for this detachment that liberates them from traditional community obligations.

Thus far, this new journey into international pan-Islamism has no legible "national" idea for the third generation, nor is there yet an organized movement they can readily join. Beyond the risks posed by the ontological category of Ummah for Turkish Islamism, i.e., the decline in popularity of its traditional practices, its redefinition by a new generation of Turkish immigrants who want a more individualistic interpretation of religion could be a major stumbling block for the future of Turkish Islamism.

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Notes

- ¹ Number of Turkish nationals resident in The Netherlands from 2010 to 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1284990/turkish-nationals-population-netherlands/#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20there%20were%20422,thousand%20less%20than%20in%202021> (accessed on 1 February 2023).
- ² It is a party founded in 2014 by Turks in The Netherlands against anti-immigration and Islamophobia. It is currently represented in the Dutch parliament with 3 MPs. See its program at <https://www.bewegingdenk.nl/> (accessed on 4 February 2023).
- ³ The fieldwork was supported by a grant received from TÜBİTAK-BİDEP for the project numbered 1059B191900630, while the Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society of the Leiden Law School hosted the study.
- ⁴ The period in which I conducted my fieldwork coincided with curfews in The Netherlands at certain times. Places where people could gather, such as cafés and libraries, were periodically closed, and only a certain number of people were allowed to gather in houses. At these times I continued my semi-structured interviews online.
- ⁵ See these two books for Ziya Gökalp's approach on this subject: (Gökalp 1918) and (Gökalp 1923).
- ⁶ The translation of the works of Sayyid Qutb, Mawdudi and Hasan al-Banna into Turkish in the 1960s that gained popularity in Turkish-Islamist literature are reflections of this excitement.
- ⁷ Muhammed Celâleddîn-i Rumi (known as Mevlânâ in Turkish) was a 13th century Sunni Muslim poet, jurist, scholar, theologian and Sufi mystic. Although he was born in Belh, Khorasan in 1207, he spent most of his life in Konya, Anatolia.
- ⁸ Hannah Arendt, in the *Roots of Totalitarianism* (9–68), states that nationalism ceased to be a major concern for Europe in the 20th century, and in fact it began to spread to countries outside of Europe. According to Arendt, in this new era, the rise of imperialism replaced the rise of nationalism in Europe.
- ⁹ In Turkish, the words *milli* and *ulusal* both mean “national”. The concept of *milli* is Arabic in origin but is still widely used in the Turkish language. *Milli* and *ulusal*, however, also have their own political connotations. People on the right wing or with right leanings tend to use *milli*, while those who are left or left leaning use mostly *ulusal*.
- ¹⁰ “Büyük Doğu Marşı”, <https://www.antoloji.com/buyuk-dogu-marsi-siiri/> (access on 3 March 2023).
- ¹¹ For a summary of Necip Fazıl Kısakürek's arguments on Turkish-Islamism, see (Kısakürek 1968).
- ¹² For Fatma Aliye's views on women's issue, see the article “Nisvan-I İslam and Bir Fransız Muhariri”, *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete*, (1896), 189.
- ¹³ Interview with P., 10 March 2021, Amsterdam, Zoom meeting.
- ¹⁴ Statistics on the immigrant population in The Netherlands, unlike other countries, are not based on nationality or country of birth, but rather ethnicity. The Dutch government debated the distinction between allochtonen (foreigners) and autochtonen (natives), allochtonen being the antonym of the Greek concept of “autochthon”, which means native. Allochtonen in formal usage refers to people born outside The Netherlands, or at least to have a parent born outside The Netherlands. An additional distinction is made between Western and non-Western allochtonens, with Western immigrants comprising allochtonens from Europe (excluding Turkey), North America, Oceania, Indonesia and Japan, and non-Western immigrants comprising allochtonens from Turkey, Africa, the rest of Latin America and Asia.
- ¹⁵ In the first agreement between Turkey and The Netherlands, male workers from Turkey were temporarily admitted. After 1970s, however, it was found that these male workers chose to stay in The Netherlands permanently rather than temporarily and thus sought family reunification.
- ¹⁶ Interview with M., 6 April 2022, Rotterdam, face-to-face meeting.
- ¹⁷ Since The Netherlands is not seen as a territory of Islam, the first generation in particular could not consent to being buried there. With the establishment of Muslim cemeteries, burials began to take place in The Netherlands among those of the second generation. Nevertheless, both the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey and other Islamic communities continue to aid the transfer of bodies to Turkey for burial.
- ¹⁸ The *verzuiling* (pillarization) system, which was systematized from the 1870s to the 1920s and endured until the 1960s, is a social structure that is unique to The Netherlands. This structure acknowledges religious and cultural differences, but also puts forward a social contract that can hold these differences together. In the pillarization system, Dutch society is categorized into four different and isolated social groups: Catholic, Calvinist, Liberal and Socialist. Each of these four groups is called a pillar. The political system is built religiously and ideologically on these pillars (Kaya, *İslam, Göç ve Entegrasyon...*).
- ¹⁹ Currently, there are nearly 3000 mosques in Germany alone, from around 30 in the 1970s.
- ²⁰ See Note 16 above.
- ²¹ Interview with A. 28 June 2022, Rotterdam, face-to-face meeting.
- ²² Interview with B., 30 May 2021, Leiden, face-to-face meeting.

- ²³ I do not suggest that the relationships between the Dutch and Turks are smooth today, however, the causes of tension are different for those of the third generation and those of the previous generations.
- ²⁴ Interview with F., 26 February 2021, Amsterdam, Zoom meeting.
- ²⁵ Interview with R., 28 May 2021, Leiden, face-to-face meeting.
- ²⁶ Interview with E., 22 May 2021, Leiden.
- ²⁷ “Şube Cami Adresleri”, <https://diyanet.nl/hizmetlerimiz/subelerimiz/sube-cami-adresleri/> (access on 12 December 2023).
- ²⁸ Muslims in Europe have now begun to hold such discussions among themselves, see: “Why are Young Muslims Disengaged with Mosques”, <https://urbanmuslimz.com/news/uncategorized/why-are-young-muslims-disengaged-with-mosques/> (accessed on 12 December 2023).
- ²⁹ Interview with Z., 18 October 2021, Leiden.

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