

# Swedish Muslims

## Demographic Composition

In order to avoid discrimination, Sweden does not keep demographic statistics on religion. For this reason, information on the Muslims in Sweden is based on estimates. The relevant report drawn up by the independent research agency PEW Research Center can be consulted to attain the most reliable estimates. According to the report, as of 2010, the estimated number of Muslims living in Sweden is 451,000, which accounts for 4.9% of the whole population.

Because the country does not keep statistics on religion, it is impossible to reveal which ethnic groups constitute this Muslim minority. Nevertheless, some independent studies on the subject can be a good starting point. According to an important study cited on the website of *Islam Awareness*, Sweden hosts the most heterogeneous Muslim minority in Western Europe, consisting of Muslims from about 40 different countries. Even though the numerical superiority of a group within such a heterogeneous structure changes over time, according to official statistics from 2013, the majority of Muslims in Sweden originally come from Iraq and Iran. These two nationalities are followed by Muslim immigrants from Somalia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Following these, immigrants from Turkey (Turkish or Kurdish) constitute a significant part of the Muslim population in Sweden. In addition to these, many Syrians, who have had to flee their country after the civil war broke out in 2011, have chosen Sweden as their country of residence.

Given the high number of Iraqis, the increasing number of Syrians, the significant number of Lebanese, and the Somalis who speak Arabic in addition to their own languages, it can be said that Arabic is the most commonly spoken language among the Muslim minority in Sweden.

Making up a heterogeneous structure, Middle Eastern, African and Eastern European Muslims have, as can be estimated, distinct cultural and everyday practices. The most significant manifestations of this are seen in the form of language and clothing. The other signs pointing to a heterogeneous structure among Muslim groups are the establishment of mosques and congregations according to ethnicity and distinct religious practices based on the difference of denomination. Integration into Swedish society is another area where differences in cultural and everyday practices become visible, even though there may be no direct link. In addition to language and clothing, the other factors that play a part in integration are age, gender, education, acquaintance with technology prior to migration, and the political situation of the home country, etc.

Consequently, immigrants account for the majority of the Muslim minority in Sweden. However, immigrant groups show differences based on when they arrived. For example, migration from Iraq started most significantly in the 1970s following the Iraq-Iran War, and continued in the 1990s following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the American occupation. The Somalis and Syrians, on the other hand, have arrived more recently.

## Historical Background

As has been mentioned above, the Muslim minority in Sweden mostly arrived in the second half of the 20th century by means of migration. This does not mean, however, that Muslims were not present in Sweden prior to that. Despite the difficulty in obtaining information concerning Muslims in Sweden prior to the 20th century, it is possible to garner some information on Muslims who stayed periodically and then returned. A study by historian Jonas Otterbeck shows that having strengthened its power relations with the Ottoman Empire based on strategic support in the early 18th century, and due as well to growing debt, the Kingdom of Sweden introduced certain freedoms concerning the religious lifestyle of people of different religious affiliations entering the country. During the reign of Charles XII, for instance, Muslims and Jews who arrived from the Ottoman Empire in 1718 had the right to practice their religions for the duration of their stay. A report by Arvsfonden offers more explicit information in relation to later periods. According to the report, the last census which has information on religious affiliation was conducted in 1930, and the number of Muslims in Sweden was registered as 15. While the reliability of this information is open to debate, it offers a general idea about the presence of Muslims in Sweden. According to the same report, the first large-scale Muslim migration to Sweden took place right after the Second World War, when some

hundred Tatar immigrants arrived. Remaining marginal until the 1960s when labor immigration started, the number of Muslims has been increasing rapidly since then. Immigrants from Turkey and Yugoslavia constitute the majority of Muslim immigrants who came to Sweden between 1960-70 as part of the labor migration. Family members of these workers continued to migrate here throughout the 70s. Muslims who came to the country in the 1980s-90s – such as those from Iran and Iraq – are mostly political immigrants. Meanwhile, the main reason for Muslim immigration after 1990 was, as in the cases of Bosnia, Iraq and Somalia, civil war. A similar reason accounts for the recently increasing numbers of Muslims from Afghanistan and Syria.

As can be seen in the short summary offered above, Muslim settlement in Sweden does not go back many years. It is very difficult to acquire information on the present situation of the Tatars who were the first Muslim group to migrate *en masse* to Sweden. Their small numbers, or the fact that many of them returned to their country after the war, may account for this situation. After all, they had not come from afar, but from neighboring Finland.

## Socioeconomic Situation

Education in Sweden is compulsory between the ages of 7-16, and is called *grundskoleutbildning*. As compulsory education is free, access to education is equally available for everyone at first. Those who wish can obtain *gymnasieutbildning* after studying for three more years. It is possible to continue with university education after that. Additionally, vocational or linguistic training for adults is offered at such institutions as the *komvux* and *folkhögskola*. Even though there are statistics on the education levels of people based on age and gender, there is none that is based on religious affiliation. However, given the immigrant status of many Muslims, statistics on the educational level of immigrants by country of origin offer a general idea about how educated Muslims in the country are. Based on this data, the statistics published by the Swedish Statistics Institute offer the following table:

### Educational levels of immigrants aged 25-64 by country of origin as of 2013

The above table (2013) classifies the education levels of foreign-born individuals aged 25-64 into four categories. According to this, while the proportion of educated people is low among the Somali and Turkish immigrants, it is very high among those who were born in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iran. It is necessary to point out that this table includes everyone regardless of religious affiliation, but offers information on the situation of Muslims by including Muslim-majority countries.

Muslims in Sweden also have their own educational institutions. The following evaluations can be made based on Jenny Berglund's study, *Muslim Schools in Nordic Countries*, published in 2012: The first Muslim school was opened in Malmö in 1993. As of 2012, the number of schools reached 15. While nine of these schools have been classified as "Islamic" by the Swedish National Agency for Education, six were classified as "Swedish-Arab", etc. These schools are autonomous bodies offering basic education and regulated by local Muslim associations, but they are funded by the state. The general strategy of these schools' educational policies is to add Islamic religious education classes (on the Quran, the history of Islam, etc.) to the national curriculum. Even though it is difficult to find statistical studies on the economic situation of the Muslim minority in Sweden, data on foreign-born individuals offers some relevant information. For example, as of 2012, the average income per consumption unit of foreign-born individuals aged 20 and above was equal to 75% or three-quarters of the income of Swedish-born individuals. It is possible to estimate that Muslims, who are mostly foreign-born, have a similar income-based economic situation. The following are among the major determinants for the economic status of Muslims: educational level, including knowledge of Swedish, having or lacking a profession that produces an income and the nature of this profession, medical conditions that affect working conditions, support from relatives or close associates from country of origin, and economic support from the Swedish state. The last article should be dealt with separately in the case of Sweden, known as a social welfare state, because Sweden offers benefits to minorities under different names (child benefit, housing benefit, etc.). For example, as of 2011, the amount of benefits given to foreign-born couples, married or cohabiting, was 10 times higher than what was given to Swedish-born couples. Information on level of education, one of the determinants of economic status, has been provided above. Another important factor is whether one has or lacks a profession that produces income, and the nature of the profession. According to official statistics, as of 2013, while the unemployment rate among Swedish-born individuals aged 16-64 was 6.4%, it was 16.3% among foreign-born individuals. Unemployment is especially common among foreign-born individuals aged 25-54. Nevertheless, the rate of foreign-born individuals registered as employed is 63.4%. People employed somewhere rather than owning their own businesses or working for

their relatives constitute the majority of this group. On the other hand, those who used to engage in agriculture in their home countries have very limited job opportunities in Sweden which is not an agricultural-based country, and this keeps the mostly foreign-born Muslim minority from making a living in this sector.

The major contributors to non-governmental endeavors are organizations endorsed by the Swedish Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities (Förenade Islamiska Församlingar i Sverige/FIFS, Sveriges Muslimiska Förbund/SMuF, Islamiska Kulturcenterunionen i Sverige/IKUS, Svenska Islamiska Församlingarna/SIF, Islamiska Shiasamfundet i Sverige/ISS, Bosniakiska Islamiska Samfundet/BIS) and Islamic organizations (Sveriges Muslimiska Råd/SMR, Islamiska Förbundet i Sverige, Svenska Muslimer för Fred och Rättvisa/SMFR, Ibn Rushd Studieförbund, Svenska Islamiska Akademien, Sveriges Unga Muslimer etc.). FIFS (1973) was the first of these organizations to be established. Some members later broke away to form SMuF and IKUS. There are over 100 organizations linked with these three. SMR was established in 1990 as an umbrella organization for all Muslim organizations. Among the most significant duties of Islamiska Förbundet i Sverige is the administration of mosques in Stockholm. The Muslim peace movement SMFR was established in 2008. Svenska Islamiska Akademien is a non-profit association publishing a magazine entitled *Minaret*. Meanwhile, there is Sveriges Unga Muslimer, a youth organization. In addition to these organizations which are active nationwide, there are local organizations such as Mevlana Sällskapet i Göteborg.

## Political Situation

Sweden, officially the Kingdom of Sweden, has a type of government called a unitary parliamentary constitutional monarchy. This means that the country has both a democracy and a king who is subject to democracy.

There are five officially-recognized national minorities in Sweden: Jews, Roma, the Sami people (indigenous), Swedish Finns and Tornedalians. The reason for their official status as minorities is that they have been living in Sweden for a long period. With official recognition comes state commitment to protect the languages and cultures of these people. However, as has been shown, no Muslim community has resided in Sweden for long enough to be recognized as a national minority. This is the main reason why policies to do with Muslim communities are called “immigrant, refugee and asylum seeker policies” rather than minority policies.

The immigrant policy of Sweden has been taking shape since the 1960s when labor migration started. While the Swedish government and parliament determine migration policies, care is taken to make policies that are in accordance with EU regulations. The subject of integration became part of these policies in the 1990s. However, with regards to immigration policies and the subject of integration, it is difficult to find information on or documents dealing with policies directed specifically at Muslims. Reports on discrimination and Islamophobia can be consulted for such information. For example, one such document was presented by the Swedish United Nations Association to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2013. In the document, suggested policies concerning Muslims focus especially on hate crimes and the elimination of stereotypes and prejudiced statements from school textbooks. The Swedish Muslims in Cooperation Network has prepared an alternative report emphasizing the need for statistics on religious affiliation.

Even though there has been no significant widespread change in policies or attitudes toward Muslims since 9/11, it is impossible to say that the event has had no effect whatsoever on the lives of Swedish Muslims. In accordance with EU decisions, the Act on Criminal Responsibility for Terrorist Offenses was introduced in 2003. A detailed survey is needed to determine the effects that this law and similar laws have had on the lives of Muslims.

Muslims can be represented by any party or party representative they feel close to. There is, in addition, a party named Politisk Islamisk Samling (the Political Islamic Union) founded by Muslims. However, the party is not active politically. Concerning the right to vote and to stand for election, Muslim representatives can join parties with more political activity. Mehmet Kaplan, a member of Miljöpartiet de Gröna (the Greens), can be given as an example.

In addition to politicians, organizations that move from the local to the general (some of which have been

mentioned in the third section) also play a part in creating links between Muslims and the government. Sveriges Muslimska Råd, mentioned above as an umbrella organization, emerges as the most general. This organization concerns itself with religious and social issues against integration and discrimination. It does so in cooperation with various administrative units.

Even though there is no consensus regarding the definition of social rights, among the articles in the European Convention on Social Rights are the following: the right to work in fair and safe conditions, the right to the preservation of health, the right to social security, and the right to own property. In relation to the granting of these rights, there is no inequality at an official level or in theory affecting Muslims. Shortcomings in practice will be dealt with below.

The following regulations apply to Muslims in Sweden when traveling abroad. Because the majority of Muslims in Sweden are immigrants or come from an immigrant background, they choose to visit their countries of origin, if conditions are favorable. The most commonly visited countries are Iran, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkey. Because of security concerns, visits to countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria are relatively low. Another important determinant for destinations preferred by Muslims in Sweden is the presence of relatives who also migrated to the country. Somalia's neighbor Kenya or the Gulf countries surrounding Iraq, for example, are among the countries chosen for this reason.

### **Problems Faced by Muslims**

Until the 1960s, and even up to the 80s, Sweden had a very homogeneous composition. The transition from such a homogeneous composition to a heterogeneous one, where within a short time people from hundreds of distinct ethnicities and cultures constituted 20% of the population, was not without its problems. However, through personal knowledge and observation we can say that Sweden has had a less problematic process in comparison to countries which would experience a lot of problems if faced with a similar situation. The reasons for this can be the subject of another study.

The following are some of the problems faced by Muslims in Sweden. According to the report "Hate Crime," based on data from the Swedish Crime Survey 2012, it is estimated that 1.2% of the population aged 16-79 were subject to 151,000 xenophobic crimes in 2011. But not all hate crimes were registered in the reports. According to the same report, about 310, that is 6%, of over 5,000 hate crimes reported in 2012 where the motivations were known, were Islamophobic in character, and the majority of these crimes were verbal. However, the report does not reveal the ethnicity of the perpetrators. Xenophobia and racism are accepted as one and the same in the report. This means that data on xenophobia holds true for racism as well. The names of some groups associated with racism are also mentioned: the Party of the Swedes (Svenskarnas Parti/SvP, not to be confused with Sverigedemokraterna/SD) and the Swedish Resistance Movement (Svenska Motståndsrörelsen) are among these. However, these groups are not very active.

The subject of how society and state view Muslims requires in-depth sociological research. This is because different assessments apply to different groups (general public, academics, party members, intellectuals, etc.) for differing reasons. Nevertheless, Carlbom's thesis can be consulted for a general explanation of the situation. It is known that academics and researchers have a certain influence on the perspectives of both society and those in administrative positions. According to Carlbom, the decisive ideology in determining this group's attitude toward Islam and Muslims in Sweden is multiculturalism. Furthermore, it can be said that this has a hegemonic position, resisting opposing opinions.

Despite the presence of various institutions and laws aimed at fighting discrimination, when it comes to Muslims, Sweden is not free of discrimination. Even though there are no statistics on the subject, there is relevant fieldwork. For example, according to a study conducted by Ahmed and Ekberg who evaluated discrimination related to work and property rights, applying under a foreign name may have a negative influence. A similar situation is observed in housing applications. Fieldwork on discrimination focuses especially on these two areas: work and property rights.

Obviously, there is no civil war or ongoing conflict in Sweden. However, there is a gang problem that is becoming increasingly visible. The forming of local gangs, popular especially among young people, makes its effects felt at various times and places with various gangs fighting each other, vandalism, mugging and robbery. Even though the percentage of Muslim involvement in these gangs is not known, immigrants

constitute the majority of gang members. While the determinants for this require further investigation, the following reasons are commonly cited: low numbers of high schools and higher level education for young immigrants, the high unemployment rate in this group, limited financial resources, the need to join a gang – especially in an effort to fit in – in places populated densely by immigrants, shortage of alternative activities and a lack of familial influence on and control over young people. Thus, a minor event resulting from said reasons or similar ones may evolve over a short time to cause serious damage through involvement in gangs. A prime example are the 2013 Stockholm riots which spread to other cities around the country and saw arson attacks on cars and clashes with the police.

The extent to which widespread gang culture is present among Muslims is unknown, but it can be said that there is a tendency of marginalization, especially among young immigrants. The major reasons for this have been mentioned above. In addition to these, there are tendencies towards marginalization and radicalization which are known to exist directly among Muslims. The most outstanding manifestation of these is the case of young people trained to fight in the Middle East and Northern Africa. While there is no information accessible to us revealing how many young people join what type of organizations, it is clear that the young people involved are highly likely to be chosen from among those people mentioned above. Hence, the similarity between the reasons for involvement in these groups and in the aforementioned gangs.

It is clear, from what has been said so far, that immigrants, and by extension the Muslim minority, experience higher levels of poverty, but also that the low socioeconomic levels of immigrants is not the outcome of a planned, systematical policy of impoverishment or alienation from economic life. Negative policies targeting Muslim minorities, such as population movement, displacement, or restriction on travel within country/city borders, do not apply to Muslims living in Sweden. Those who fall outside the legally-defined framework may face deportation, but, criticisms aside, this is a possibility that arises in very specific cases that require further specification of laws and is not an unlawful and oppressive practice.

Freedom of thought and expression are rights protected by law and exercising them is encouraged in Sweden. What follows is one of the latest pieces of relevant legislation: Yttrandefrihetsgrundlag/Constitutional Legal Freedom (1991: 1469). There are, however, certain exceptions in these laws protecting freedom of thought and expression. One example is the section of the law which covers the sharing of pornographic content. There are, in addition, 18 violations defined by the law as arising from the misuse of the freedoms of thought and expression, which include: high treason, warmongering, espionage, defamation, inciting racist hatred, etc. In conclusion, there are no laws or associated practices directly targeting Muslims and the exercising of their freedom of thought and expression. Just as freedom of thought and expression is under the protection of law, “Everyone has the right to practice their religion by themselves or in a community” is a section included in the fundamental legislation.

It has already been said in relation to education that Muslims can establish their own schools. By way of extension, there is no obstacle to their receiving education in these schools or in other schools. There are no such practices as hijab bans at any level of education, including kindergarten level. Even veils covering the face were definitively permitted in 2006. The only exception to this is when, in environments such as laboratories, the veil constitutes a risk to health and safety and therefore is not permitted.

Another constitutional and legal regulation concerns arbitrary arrest and detention. According to the Country Report on Human Rights Practices, in 2013 there were no cases of arbitrary or unlawful killing or politically-motivated forced disappearances reported in Sweden.

Instances of forced labor are also absent in Sweden. Undeclared labor that disregards a person's right to social security is also out of the question. The penalties that apply are highly dissuasive. Said practice covers everyone without distinction between race or religion.