

Sweden's protests against Islamophobia highlight the polarised views of Swedish citizens toward Muslims

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Protests took place in Sweden at the turn of the year following a number of arson attacks on mosques in the country. [Jenny Berglund](#) writes on Sweden's Muslim community and the varying attitudes among the Swedish population toward Islam. She notes that while there is evidence of increasing numbers of hate crimes against Swedish Muslims, the picture is complex, with a strong body of public opinion existing which is supportive of religious freedom and immigration.



On 2 January, as a reaction to the attempted firebombing of an Uppsala mosque, hundreds of Swedes gathered together to paste hearts, flowers and messages of love on the mosque's front doors – a public display known colloquially as “[love-bombing](#)”. Moreover, large [demonstrations of solidarity](#) with Swedish Muslims were held in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, not only in response to the Uppsala attack, but also in opposition to several others that had taken place over the Christmas holidays.

The first occurred on Christmas day in the city of [Eskilstuna](#). A fire (still under investigation) suddenly broke out while seventy Muslims attended prayers at a Somali-based “basement-mosque”. While most of the attendees managed to escape unharmed, five worshipers had been injured to a point that required hospitalisation. On the very next night in the same city, the windows of another basement-mosque were intentionally smashed, and four nights after this, in the city of Eslöv, yet another was set ablaze. Finally, in the early hours of New Year's day, the above-mentioned Uppsala attack took place.

While these attacks clearly indicate that Islamophobia is on the rise in Sweden, the many public displays of support throughout the country also signal that numerous Swedes are outraged by these attacks and actively favour a multi-religious Sweden.

Islam in Sweden

The current number of Muslims living in Sweden is commonly placed at around 450,000. Of these, approximately [110,000](#) are thought to be formal members of one or another Islamic congregation, and approximately 100,000 are thought to be school-aged or younger. Muslim immigration to Sweden began in the 1950s and 60s with labour migration, and continued in the 80s with the establishment of a liberal refugee policy. Although its refugee policy has somewhat tightened since that time, in 2013 Sweden [accepted](#) a larger proportion of refugees than any other country in the European Union.

In the latest election at the end of last year, however, the strongly anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim [Sweden Democrats](#) received nearly 13 per cent of the vote, making it the third largest party in Sweden. Additionally, the Swedish media is often seen depicting Islam in a negative light, with Muslim immigrants regularly portrayed as being backward and resistant to democracy, secularisation and the separation of church and state.

Moreover, for whatever reason, a varied body of research indicates that Islamophobia and [hate crimes](#) are on the rise in Swedish society. This, however, is only one side of the story, since other studies show that over the years there has been a decrease in the number of Swedes who believe that the country contains “[too many foreigners](#)” as well as a steady show of support for the free expression of religion. In a study concerning non-Muslim views of Muslims and Islam, it was found that when non-Muslim Swedes come to know their Muslim neighbours, many of their apparent prejudices and [misgivings diminish](#).

Swedish Islam

Muslim representation in Sweden encompasses a large variety of ethnic, religious and political outlooks as well as a wide range of language variations. It is thus impossible to speak of the Swedish Muslim community in static, homogeneous terms, and far more accurate to speak of Muslim *communities* and multiple *Islams*. The point is that Islam in Sweden is represented by a highly diverse Muslim population, which includes Turks, Palestinians, Syrians, Kurds, Moroccans, Iranians, Iraqis, Pakistanis, Bosnians, Kosovo Albanians, Somalis and Afghans as well as a number of Swedish converts.

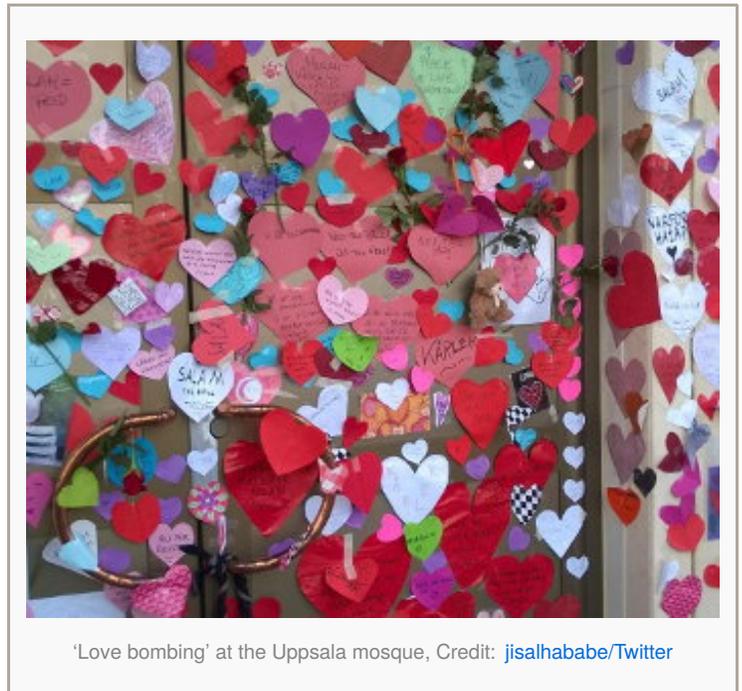
In Sweden, Muslim organisations that fulfil certain requirements are eligible to receive financial support from the Commission for State Grants to Religious Communities (*Samarbetsnämnden för stöd till trossamfund* or *SST*). The qualification is that the given religious organisation maintains and strengthens the essential fundamental values of Swedish society and plays an active role in the community. The aim of such grants is to create an atmosphere in which minority religious communities are enabled to provide standard religious services such as spiritual counselling, pastoral care, religious instruction, and the like. While most of Sweden's local Islamic organisations are connected to national "umbrella organisations," there are also groups that tend to remain apart from such larger entities. An example is the [Salafists](#), who prefer self-segregation as a matter of doctrine and are sometimes referred to as a Western Islamic "[counter-movement](#)".

While there may be certain notable cases in which Muslim minority values clash with the standard values of Swedish society – e.g. gender equality, sexual mores and familial interrelations – such clashes tend to be the exception rather than the rule. Both the [World Values Surveys](#) and a Swedish survey known as [Religion som resurs?](#) indicate that [Muslim values](#) in Sweden and in Europe are gradually evolving towards those of the European countries that constitute their new homes. Moreover, the [Open Society Report on Muslims in European Cities](#) (including Gothenburg) has found Muslims to be more supportive of religious freedom than non-Muslims, and thus has recommended that the general population's commitment to human rights be strengthened.

Swedish scholar [Susanne Olsson](#) has argued that while Swedish Islam largely remains in compliance with Swedish secular norms, Muslim activists that reject the private expression of religion and attempt to publicly negotiate established normative boundaries quickly become rejected by Swedish society. A prime example of this concerns the public attempt by certain Swedish Muslims to argue for the establishment of Sharia family law – a matter about which Sweden's Muslim communities appear to be divided, with some organisations embracing the idea and others repudiating it. In this regard, Professor [Anne Sofie Roald](#) finds support for Sharia law mainly among first-generation immigrants, with the second generation tending to believe that Islam does not require it, not least because their values regarding gender equality are in keeping with general Nordic values. The manner in which the Nordic welfare state model has affected Islamic institutions and values has been thoroughly discussed in ['Public Islam' and the Nordic Welfare State: Changing Realities?](#)

Molotov cocktails and love-bombings

There are few purpose-built mosques in Sweden, with most places of worship consisting of a room in the basement of a suburban apartment complex or office building – the so-called "basement-mosque". The [mosque that was attacked in Uppsala](#) on New Year's day is purpose-built and was established in 1995. Because of its minimalist



Nordic design, it has become known among some of the locals as the “IKEA-mosque”.

Osman Said, who has lived in Sweden for over thirty years and is one of the mosque’s directors, notes that such acts of violence and vandalism are rare. He explains that when the mosque was newly built its was often plastered with xenophobic graffiti and that over the years there has been the occasional threat. From his point of view, this recent assault was not a spontaneous “lone-wolf” attack, as has been suggested, but was instead a well-coordinated event. The perpetrator had evidently attempted to break a mosque window with a large stone but was unable to do so due to the thickness of the glass, which also prevented the Molotov Cocktail that had been thrown from inflicting anything more than superficial exterior damage.

This notwithstanding, the event has caused Said to have extreme concern not only for the safety of the Mosque’s congregation, but also for Sweden’s international reputation. He also notes that such an event can have a negative impact on the Swedish economy, in that foreign companies might hesitate to invest or do business in Sweden if it is seen as a xenophobic country. According to Said, the mosque’s imams and leading representatives regularly emphasise the importance of following Swedish law and working for the good of Swedish society. While he has been both shaken and immensely troubled by the assault on New Year’s day, he is also extremely grateful for the “love-bombing” that occurred thereafter: the outpouring of support by hundreds of people who came to the mosque with hearts, flowers and messages of solidarity.

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