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## **EXPLORING SWEDEN’S MUSLIM MINORITY: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the historical evolution, contemporary challenges, and future potential solutions of the Muslim minority in Sweden. It aims to trace the Muslim presence from its origins in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, largely associated with economic migration, to the significant demographic transformations brought by the 20<sup>th</sup> century waves of immigrants and refugees. Such developments shaped the cultural and religious fabric of Swedish society. Despite Sweden’s reputation for tolerance and equality, the Muslim minority continues to witness challenges in the form of discrimination, socioeconomic disparities, and obstacles to full social integration. Qualitative analysis methods are used in the entire study. This research paper identifies potential solutions, including enhanced cultural understanding, educational initiatives, and policies aimed at reducing disparities, which aim to facilitate the Muslim minority’s full participation in Swedish society. By delving into the historical context, current challenges, and prospects of the Muslim minority in Sweden, the findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on inclusive multiculturalism emphasizing the importance of acknowledging historical trajectories and addressing contemporary issues, there are opportunities for a harmonious and integrated future.

**Keywords:** Muslim Minority, Sweden, History, Challenges, Future.

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## Introduction

Sweden's contact with Muslims is ancient, according to recent studies, as this contact began during the Viking era, and the presence of a Muslim minority in Sweden has a rich and evolving history, dating back to the late 19th century when the first Muslim immigrants arrived, primarily driven by economic migration. Over the course of the 20th century, this minority community experienced significant growth due to immigration and refugee movements, reshaping the demographic landscape of the country. Interactions between the denizens of the geographical region now known as Sweden and the Muslim world antedate the Christianization of Scandinavia. Archaeological discoveries, including artifacts such as Arabic and Persian coins from the Viking Age (circa 800–1100), as well as Islamic design influences apparent in Viking Age adornments and jewelry, provide substantial evidence of well-established linkages. The historical accounts indicate that Vikings embarked on voyages to Muslim-ruled territories, notably in Muslim Spain (al-Andalus), establishing diplomatic relations with Muslim enclaves situated in the Mediterranean region.

Sweden, known for its commitment to tolerance and diversity, welcomed people of various cultural and religious backgrounds, including Muslims, with an ethos of multiculturalism. Religious affiliation has not been officially recorded in Sweden since 1930, resulting in all numbers being approximations and estimates. Researcher Tobias Hübinette has provided an estimation using statistics related to the birthplace of Swedish citizens or their parents. According to this data, he suggests that there may be around 1,022,850 Muslims in Sweden, constituting roughly 10,2% of the population as of December 31, 2016.<sup>1</sup> In the year 1930, Sweden undertook its most recent population census, which included an inquiry into the religious affiliations of its inhabitants. During this era, 15 individuals self-identified as adherents of Islam or members of diverse Asian faiths. This array of religious orientations encompassed Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, as well as the burgeoning Sufi movement that had taken root in Sweden. Worth noting is that *Statistiska Centralbyrån* (Statistics Sweden) did not furnish a detailed breakdown of the precise numbers within each faith category. As a result, drawing from SCB's statistical records, it can be surmised that the Muslim population in Sweden in 1930 fell within the range of 2 to 11 individuals.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hübinette, Tobia, *How many Muslims are there in Sweden? Perhaps a tenth of the population are Swedish Muslims*, (2017), accessed October 10, 2024. <https://tobiashubINETTE.wordpress.com/2017/03/14/muslimersverige-minoriteter/>

<sup>2</sup> SCB, *The Census on December 31, 1930*, accessed October 23, 2024. <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/aldre-statistik/innehall/sveriges-officiella-statistik-sos/folk-och-bostadsrakningarna/folkrakningen19101960/folkrakningen-31-december-1930/>

Archaeological discoveries and written records from other countries demonstrate that the people in present-day Sweden had interactions with Islam in the Middle East as early as the Viking Age.<sup>3</sup> King Charles XII resided in the Ottoman Empire for six years, from 1709 to 1714. During this time, he and Sultan Ahmed III initially formed a strong alliance, as they shared a common enemy in Russia. The king dispatched several scientific expeditions to the Ottoman Empire to gather information on Muslim culture, religion, language, music, architecture, craftsmanship, cuisine, and medical practices.<sup>4</sup>

A recent estimate suggests that in 2017, around 800,000 individuals, including asylum seekers, identified themselves in some way as Muslims in Sweden. The number of Confucians, Taoists, Hindus, and Buddhists has also increased, but not to the same extent as the Muslim population. The fact that Islam is now the second-largest religion in the country has highlighted the need for understanding how Islam can be practiced in Sweden, both as a religion and as a cultural identity.<sup>5</sup> However, the journey of the Muslim minority in Sweden has not been without its challenges. Despite Sweden's reputation for inclusivity, members of the Muslim community have faced various obstacles that hinder their full participation in Swedish society. These challenges encompass issues of discrimination, limited socio-economic opportunities, and difficulties related to integration and Islamophobia, difficulties in establishing Islamic schools that consider the Muslim identity of students, challenges facing Muslim women in Sweden, and other difficulties. Consequently, the situation calls for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Muslim minority's historical trajectory and current struggles.

As Sweden continues to evolve as a multicultural society, it is essential to explore these challenges and seek innovative solutions to ensure the harmonious coexistence of all its residents. This paper aims to delve into the historical evolution, contemporary challenges, and potential solutions pertaining to the Muslim minority in Sweden. By doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive multiculturalism, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging historical trajectories and addressing contemporary issues as essential steps towards a more harmonious and integrated future.

The research design employed in this study is primarily qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring the multifaceted aspects of the

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<sup>3</sup> Environmental analysis in religious studies, *Did the Vikings read the Quran?* accessed October 23, 2024. <http://religionsvetenskapligakommentarer.blogspot.com/2017/10/laste-vikingarna-koranen.html>

<sup>4</sup> Lindqvist, Herman, *Charles XII was our first multicultural king*, accessed October 24, 2024. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/kolumnister/a/wERwno/karl-xii-var-var-forste-multikulturella-kung>

<sup>5</sup> Pew Forum, *Europe's Growing Muslim Population*, accessed October 25, 2024. <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>

Muslim minority's experiences, challenges, and perceptions within Swedish society. It allows for an in-depth investigation, providing rich insights into the lived experiences of individuals and communities. Qualitative methods were chosen because they offer a comprehensive approach to understanding the nuances of the Muslim minority situation in Sweden. Content analysis methods of documents, media, research, and relevant historical sources were used. This method enables researchers to deal directly with information and analyses, and to reveal researchers' perspectives, narratives, and interpretations of the issues raised.

### **Historical Evolution of the Muslim Minority in Sweden**

This section provides a historical overview of the Muslim presence in Sweden, beginning with early encounters during the Viking Age and progressing through pivotal political, religious, and migratory developments. It examines the roles of individual Muslim figures, evolving demographic patterns, and the eventual institutionalization of Muslim life in Sweden. By mapping this trajectory, the section situates the contemporary Muslim minority within a deeper historical continuum.

#### *Islam and Muslims during the Viking Age*

There is an intriguing documentation about Vikings and the Scandinavian conditions provided by travelers from Muslim cultures who had made their way to Russia and Scandinavia. One example is the Jewish merchant Abraham ben Jacob al-Tartushi (1059–1127) from Cordova, who in the 960s embarked on a journey through Europe and visited places like Hedeby in Jutland, Denmark. The poet Yaḥyā ibn Ḥakam al-Bakrī (772–866), known as al-Ghazāl, also visited Denmark and Ireland. However, the most renowned account is likely the one detailing the encounter of the Andalusian traveler Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān (877–960) with the Rus people somewhere in the Volga region about 1100 years ago. One of the most famous descriptions is that of the Vikings' morning routine: “They are the dirtiest of Allah's creatures: they do not wash themselves after poo or pee, nor after intercourse, and do not wash their hands after eating. They are like stray donkeys. They come from their country and anchor the ships on the shores of Atil. It is a big river. At the beach they build large wooden houses. Ten or twenty people live in a house, sometimes a little, each with a bed to sit on. They have beautiful slave girls with them, intended for the merchants. One has intercourse with his slave while his companion looks on. Often a whole host of them behave that way, in each other's presence. If a merchant comes in to buy a slave girl from one of them and finds him in intercourse with her, he continues until he has satisfied his need. Every day they wash their faces and heads in the

dirtiest and filthiest water imaginable. It happens that every morning a slave comes with a basin of water. She hands it to her master, and he washes his hands, face, and hair, combing it in the sink. Then he cleans himself and spits in the water, yes, there is nothing dirty that he does not do in the same water. When he has done his part, the slave girl passes the sink to the next one and he does the same the comrade. And then she carries it on from one to the other until it has made its way to everyone in the house. And each one washes himself and spits in the sink and washes his face and hair in it”.<sup>6</sup> The Viking Age can be considered to have come to an end with the events surrounding the Battle of Hastings in 1066. After the 12th century, contacts between this regions and Muslim cultures became significantly more limited. However, this does not mean that travel to the east completely ceased, and once again, runestones bear witness to these adventures. But instead of tales of Vikings exploring Saracen lands, the later runestones tell of so-called *Jorsala* travelers – pilgrims who embarked on journeys to Jerusalem. As the status of Christianity rose, the title “*Jorsala* traveler” became as highly respected as “*Hadji*” for a Muslim pilgrim who had visited Mecca, according to archaeologist Ture Arne in the book “The Swedes and the East”.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Islam and Muslims during the time of King Vasa*

After the successful uprising against the Danes in the year 1523, Gustav Eriksson Vasa was crowned as the king of Sweden. He is regarded as the founder of the independent Swedish nation, which is why our national day is celebrated on June 6th. Gustav Vasa also played a pivotal role in Sweden's religious transformation by introducing the Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity, severing ties with the Pope, and making the church a state institution. It became mandatory for every Swedish citizen to profess the Evangelical-Lutheran faith. During the same period when Sweden established a unified church with Protestant Christianity as the state religion, the country initiated diplomatic relations with Muslim cultures that continued into modern times. The first Muslims who met Sweden hailed from the Tatar Kazan Khanate, a Muslim realm with Kazan as its capital, founded in 1438 in what Tatarstan is now. Despite Russia's conquest of the realm in 1552, some of its inhabitants continued to resist Russian rule. In 1556, an envoy named Bissura sought Swedish support against Ivan IV, also known as “the Terrible”. The communication from that era reflects language barriers, but Gustav Vasa and later kings attempted to find means of clearer communication with the Tatars.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wikander, Stig, *Ibn Fadlan, Arabs, Vikings, Värings* (Stockholm: Swedish Humanist Association, 1978), pp. 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> Axner, Marta, *Representations, stereotypes and news evaluation: report from media analysis of representations of Muslims in Swedish News*, (Stockholm: Discrimination Ombudsman, 2015), p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Zetterstéen, Karl V, *The diplomatic correspondence of the Crimean Tatars with it the Swedish government* (Uppsala: Royal Humanistic Science Society in Uppsala, Yearbook, 1952), pp. 7–16.

### *Islam and Muslims during the 17th and 18th centuries*

In the 17th and 18th centuries, there is evidence of several Swedes converting to Islam. One such individual is Johan Hjulhammar, a Swedish commander born in 1661, who adopted Islam. The limited information available about Hjulhammar indicates that in 1684, he journeyed to the East Indies and assumed the role of a commander in Batavia, present-day Jakarta on the island of Java in Indonesia. It is reported that he later traveled from Java to the Ottoman Empire, where he embraced Islam and subsequently vanished from our knowledge.<sup>9</sup> For example, the Swedish artist Ivan Aguéli (d. 1917) converted to Islam and adopted the name Abd Al-Hadi Aqhili, as early as the beginning of the 20th century. Aguéli had met Islam during his time in Paris, but it was primarily in Egypt, where he was initiated into the Shadhiliyya order in 1902, that his connection to Islam deepened. Another significant Swede, the translator Eric Hermelin (1860–1944), also played a crucial role in introducing Swedish readers to Muslim thinkers and mystics.<sup>10</sup>

### *19th Century to the 20th Century*

In all likelihood, Ebrahim and Akif were two, or quite possibly the only two, Muslims officially recorded in the 1930 census. Nevertheless, during the 1940s, the demographic landscape of the country underwent significant changes. An illustrative example of this shift is presented in the reflections of vicar Erik Klasson in the December edition of *Engelbrekts församlingsblad* in 1945. Klasson conducted a dual examination by reviewing church records and surveying the congregation, which extended from Ålkistan in the north to Värtahamnen in the east and Stureplan in the south. This region was inhabited by around 22,000 individuals, with the overwhelming majority being members of the Swedish Church. Nonetheless, there were also “301 followers of the Jewish faith, 228 Roman Catholics, 42 Greek Orthodox, 14 Methodists, 14 adherents of Christian Science, 6 Swedenborgians, 3 Baptists, 2 Monists, and 1 Muslim.”<sup>11</sup> Ebrahim Umerkajeff, the first documented Muslim, was affiliated with the Helsinki Mohammedan congregation. In Sweden, no comparable congregation existed at that point. However, during this period, as World War II was ending, more Muslim immigrants arrived in Sweden, mainly composed of Tatars with their origins in the former Nizhny Novgorod

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<sup>9</sup> Berg, Marcus, *Swedish slave in Morocco: An adaptation of the description of Barbarian Slavery Outside the Empire of Fez and Morocco in brief written by Marcus*, (Arboga: Arboga: Textab, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Lindahl, Per-Erik, *I can whistle Beethoven's sonatas! A biography of Eric Hermelin, Part 1, 1869-1909*, (Karlskrona: Bibliognosi, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> Klasson, Erik, *Congregation Chronicle, Engelbrekts församlingsblad, Christmas 1945* (Stockholm: Emil Holmberg's Printing Press, 1945), pp. 5-9.

Governorate, situated roughly 80 miles to the east of Moscow. A significant portion of this demographic can trace its ancestry to individuals whose parents had undertaken migration from the Ottoman Empire to Russia prior to the events of the Russian Revolution in 1917. In 1949, a group of individuals initiated the establishment of the nation's inaugural Muslim organization, known as the Turkish-Islamic Association in Sweden for Religious and Cultural Affairs.<sup>12</sup>

A significant portion of the Tatars who arrived via Finland during the concluding phases of World War II had originally held Russian citizenship but had defected to Finland, and some had even participated in hostilities against Russia. Following the war, they garnered the attention of Russian authorities, thereby compelling their flight to Sweden. Initially, the Alien Commission provided asylum to these individuals in specifically designated refugee facilities, often with Haparanda serving as the primary point of entry after crossing the border from northern Finland. Subsequently, they were repositioned in labor camps distributed across the country. These individuals were typically furnished with foreign passports, designating them as political refugees. Eventually, after many years of submitting applications and transitioning between different temporary employment positions, they were granted Swedish citizenship.<sup>13</sup>

Osman Ali Soukkan's birth in 1903 is noted as occurring to Turkish parents in the city of Štip within Macedonia, a region under the dominion of the Ottoman Empire at that period. However, his family's relocation to Izmir when he was a mere 2–3 years of age shaped his formative years. At the age of 27, Soukkan resolved to embark on a profound exploration of the world, commencing his journey astride a bicycle. This two-year sojourn encompassed a traverse of the European continent, culminating in his arrival in Finland during 1932. Subsequently, he established his residence within the Tatar community situated in Järvenpää, located immediately to the north of Helsinki. Soukkan assumed the role of an educator, providing instruction across a spectrum of disciplines, notably encompassing history, Turkish language, and Islamic studies. His students included a young woman named Emine Nisametdin (1920–2010), and their union in matrimony transpired in 1939. This marital alliance promptly bore fruit in the form of three children, one son, and two daughters. To sustain his family, Soukkan additionally embraced employment with one of the Tatar furriers and independently pursued entrepreneurial ventures.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Soukkan, *Türker, A Tatar Local Community in Sweden: A Minority Group in a Broad Historical Perspective* (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 1985), pp. 84–119.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Justice Archives, *Citizenship Act, Mänsur Nasretidin (M147)* (Norrköping: Police District, Immigration report number 234/67, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Sorgenfrei, Simon, *Islam in Sweden - the First 1300 years* (Stockholm: Blanka förlag, 2018), pp. 67–68.



**Photo 1.** Osman Soukkan leading prayer, probably late 1950s or early 1960s. Retrieved from *Türker Soukkan's private archive*.

### *Economic Migration*

During the period spanning from 1950 to 1970, a total of 625,000 individuals migrated to Sweden in pursuit of employment opportunities. Most of these immigrants originated from the Nordic neighboring nations, while a significant portion also hailed from Southern Europe, the Balkans, and Turkey. Remarkably, over half of these newcomers opted for permanent settlement in Sweden.<sup>15</sup> According to estimates, the population of individuals in Sweden identifying as ethnic or cultural Muslims exhibited a notable rise over a two-decade period, growing from approximately 500 individuals in 1959 to around 9,000.<sup>16</sup>

Until the mid-1960s, non-Nordic immigration into Sweden was driven by labor needs, primarily in industrial and service sectors, resulting in temporary labor migration, mostly involving young males. Their aim was to earn money during a fixed period, both for their own betterment and to support their families back home. However, many found Sweden's quality of life and socio-economic conditions attractive enough to become permanent residents, leading to Swedish citizenship acquisition and family establishment. Simultaneously, Sweden shifted its migration policy in 1975, moving away from assimilation towards a multicultural integration approach. This new strategy emphasized “equality, choice, and collaboration.” Immigrants and their communities gained more influence in deciding whether to adopt Swedish cultural elements or preserve their own traditions. This policy transformation reflects a fundamental change in Sweden's approach to immigration and multiculturalism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Byström, Mikael & Frohnert, Pär, *The history of immigration: from the "Folkhemmet" to today's Sweden* (Stockholm: The Delegation for Migration Studies, 2017), p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Karlsson Minganti, Pia & Svanberg, Ingvar, *Mosques in Sweden: a religious ethnological study of intolerance and administrative disempowerment* (Uppsala: Research Council of the Church of Sweden, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Byström, *The history of immigration: from the "Folkhemmet" to today's Sweden*, p. 70.

The first nationwide Muslim organization in Sweden is known as FIFS, or *Rābiṭah al-Jāmi‘at al-Islamiyyāt fī al-Suwid* in Arabic, and the United Islamic Communities in Sweden in English. Established in 1982, FIFS aimed to bring together various Muslim associations across the country and advocate for government support. It defines itself as a charitable, religious, and democratic institution, guided by *al-Qur’ān* and *as-Sunnah*, with a commitment to non-partisanship and inclusivity for all of Sweden's Muslims. FIFS seeks to foster unity within the Muslim community (Ummah) concerning religious, cultural, and political cohesion in the context of Sweden. Its objectives include supporting Swedish Muslims in preserving and strengthening their Islamic identity, enabling them to practice their faith within Swedish society. The organization is dedicated to spreading Islam through *Da‘wah*, encompassing activities from proselytism to setting a positive example of Islamic virtues through personal conduct. Furthermore, FIFS aims to provide comprehensive Islamic education for all Muslim children in Sweden and promote the teachings of Islam within the country. This multifaceted approach reflects FIFS's mission to engage with and support the Muslim community in Sweden.

### **Current Challenges Facing the Muslim Minority in Sweden**

The Muslim minority in Europe, and particularly in Sweden, faces a multitude of challenges and problems that have had a significantly adverse impact on their presence, identity, and culture. These challenges have been particularly pronounced in recent years, coinciding with the rise of far-right political ideologies and a waning influence of moderate voices. This paper identifies seven key challenges that hold critical importance, exerting a direct influence on Muslims in Sweden. These challenges are as follows: the escalating prevalence and expanding sphere of influence of Islamophobia, the crisis stemming from the Qur’ān-burning incident, its global ramifications, and the extensive global reactions, marking it as a distinct challenge. Furthermore, the pervasive racism targeting Muslims in Sweden, challenges related to limited social and economic opportunities, and various educational and integrations hurdles contribute to the multifaceted challenges faced by the Muslim minority in Sweden, it’s important to acknowledge that there are additional challenges that may fall into one of these categories. The seven titles mentioned above encompass various issues, including the past closure of Islamic schools, as well as the challenges faced by those responsible for the management of mosques and Islamic centers, particularly in terms of securing their buildings and properties to prevent potential losses in the event of damage. Moreover, we must also consider the challenges experienced by Muslim women, particularly those related to the *ḥijāb*, which is a prominent

Islamic symbol. These challenges often lead to increased levels of exclusion and discrimination within society.

### *Islamophobia*

FIFS, established in 1982, was Sweden's first nationwide Muslim organization. Its primary goal was to unite various Muslim associations and advocate for government support. FIFS is defined as a charitable, religious, and democratic institution that derives its guidance from *al-Qur'ān* and *as-Sunnah*. It emphasizes non-partisanship and inclusivity, welcoming all of Sweden's Muslims. FIFS's mission is to promote unity within the Muslim community (ummah) in the context of Sweden, focusing on religious, cultural, and political cohesion. It also strives to support Swedish Muslims in preserving and strengthening their Islamic identity, allowing them to practice their faith within Swedish society. The organization engages in *da'wah* activities, which range from proselytism to setting a positive example of Islamic values through personal conduct. Additionally, FIFS aims to provide comprehensive Islamic education to all Muslim children in Sweden and promote the teachings of Islam within the country. FIFS's multifaceted approach reflects its commitment to engaging with and supporting Sweden's Muslim community.<sup>18</sup>

The field of Islamophobia has received limited scholarly attention in Sweden and globally, making it challenging to draw comprehensive conclusions about its prevalence in Sweden. The scarcity of research hampers cross-study comparisons and the understanding of interrelatedness among various studies. Comparative research between Sweden and other countries is also virtually absent. Recent years have seen growing scholarly interest in Islamophobia in Swedish academic institutions, and the establishment of a dedicated scholarly journal on Islamophobia at Berkeley University indicates increased global academic attention. One reason for the limited research may be the relatively recent coining of the term "Islamophobia." Research in this area gained momentum when Muslim advocates highlighted Islamophobia's existence. Previously, Islamophobia was studied within broader contexts of inequality, including discrimination and racism. Additionally, it's crucial to note that the concept of Islamophobia remains a subject of ongoing debate, adding complexity to the research landscape. As a result, while there's a growing academic interest in Islamophobia, comprehensive research is still emerging, making it challenging to form definitive conclusions about its prevalence in Sweden and beyond.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gardell, Mattias, *Islamofobi* (Stockholm: Leopard förlag, 2011), p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> The Ombudsman for Discrimination, *Research on discrimination against Muslims in Sweden*, accessed October 25, 2024. <https://www.do.se/download/18.277ff225178022473141e2a/1618941270230/rapport-forskning-diskriminering-muslimmer-sverige.pdf>

### *Qur'ān Burning*

During the month of Ramaḍān in April 2022 and subsequently, Rasmus Paludan, an extreme-right politician associated with the Danish party Stram kurs, orchestrated a series of public events involving book-burning. Paludan, a controversial figure who has been convicted of hate speech on two occasions in Denmark and is widely recognized for his Islamophobic stance, was granted authorization by the Swedish authorities to conduct anti-Muslim demonstrations in various Swedish cities. These demonstrations featured the public incineration of copies of *al-Qur'ān* and speeches advocating the expulsion of Muslims.<sup>20</sup>

### *Discrimination*

The concept of race holds a unique historical trajectory in Sweden. Since the early 20th century, race has functioned as an integral component of the scientific classification system, used to establish the Swedish race as the world's supreme and most pristine white race. This framework fostered the proliferation of race biology as a discipline and sanctioned political agendas that promoted racial hierarchies, both domestically within Sweden and internationally.<sup>21</sup> This situation endured until at least 1958, when the Uppsala Race Biological Institute ceased its operations. Subsequently, from the late 1980s onward, the Swedish government introduced the concept of ethnicity in legal documentation related to issues of discrimination. Notably, in 2007/2008, the Swedish government removed the term “race” from all official documents, a change consistent with the actions taken by several other European nations.<sup>22</sup>

From 2003 to 2007, the Swedish National Board for Integration released reports focusing on the Muslim community in Sweden. These reports relied heavily on the Integration Barometer (IB), a recurring survey developed in collaboration with research scholars and entities. The IB's main purpose is to provide systematic insights into integration, ethnic diversity, ethnic discrimination, and racism. In their 2006 report, the Swedish National Board for Integration stated that Muslims in Sweden experience significant structural discrimination. This conclusion was supported by the observation that the public perception of Islam in Sweden is often associated with issues like female genital mutilation and honor killings, with the wearing of the veil seen as a symbol of female subjugation. These reports shed light on the

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<sup>20</sup> Expo, *SD and Paludan in a joint campaign of incitement against Muslims*, accessed October 11, 2024. <https://expo.se/2022/04/sd-och-paludan-i-gemensam-hetskampanj-mot-muslimer>

<sup>21</sup> Hübinette, Tobias, and Catrin Lundström, “Three phases of hegemonic whiteness: Understanding racial temporalities in Sweden”, *Social Identities*, 20: (2014), pp. 423–437.

<sup>22</sup> Carlson, Laura, *Critical race theory in a Swedish context*, SSRN Electronic Journal, accessed October 16, 2024. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2402587>

challenges faced by the Muslim community in Sweden, particularly in the context of public perception and structural discrimination.<sup>23</sup>

Borell has undertaken the task of compiling a comprehensive knowledge review about Islamophobic biases and hate crimes, acting on behalf of the Committee for State Support to Religious Communities (SST). To provide historical context, Borell refers to the earlier work of Hvitfelt, who had previously attested to the existence of biases against Muslims in Sweden as far back as the early 1990s.<sup>24</sup> This knowledge review, curated by Borell, comprises a diverse array of citations from both Swedish and international research establishments. Using these sources, Borell arrives at conclusions specifically tailored to the Swedish landscape. The central focus of this knowledge review revolves around the extent to which Muslims in Sweden can freely exercise their religious beliefs without falling victim to infringements or hate crimes. Borell's research inquiries delve into the prevailing attitudes and biases against Muslims within the broader societal context. Although the availability of data may be limited, Borell aptly observes that adverse prejudices and biases against Muslims are evident in both Sweden and across Europe.<sup>25</sup>

Numerous studies have explored Islamophobia, particularly examining how individuals may exhibit biased behavior toward those perceived as Muslims compared to non-Muslims. Ahmed conducted a “lost-letter experiment” to investigate these potential biases within the public sphere. The study's hypothesis is rooted in the idea that since the events of September 11, 2001, Muslims have often been subject to prejudiced attitudes, potentially leading to differential treatment. The research was divided into two segments. The first sub-study took place at Linnaeus University in Växjö during the autumn semester of 2006. It involved placing 100 envelopes, each containing 60 SEK, in various classrooms just before scheduled lectures. These unsealed, pre-stamped white envelopes had initials for a first name (to avoid gender-related biases), a last name, and an address but lacked a return address. Half of the envelopes were addressed to individuals with Swedish-sounding surnames (e.g., A. Andersson), while the other half were addressed to individuals with last names (e.g., A. Abdullah) perceived by the researcher as having a Muslim connotation. All envelopes shared the same address. This experiment aimed to shed light on potential biases in the treatment of individuals based on their perceived Muslim background.

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<sup>23</sup> The Swedish Integration Agency, *Racism and xenophobia in Sweden – Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia* (Stockholm: The Swedish Integration Agency's report series 2006:02).

<sup>24</sup> Borell, K., *Islamophobic prejudice and hate crime: A knowledge review* (Stockholm: SST writing series, 2012), No. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Bleich, E., “Where do Muslim stand on ethno-racial hierarchies in Britain and France? Evidence from public opinion surveys, 1988–2008”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 43, no. 3–4, (2009), pp. 379–400.

In the subsequent sub-study, 200 envelopes were employed in the same format as the previous phase. Half of these envelopes contained currency, while the other half contained a postcard. Envelopes with differing contents were evenly distributed among individuals with Swedish-sounding names and those with names suggesting Muslim origins. They were strategically placed near commercial establishments, on benches at the Central Station, under car windshields, and near phone booths and ATMs in the inner city of Stockholm in May 2007. Ahmed's analysis suggests that the results of both sub-studies consistently indicate the persistence of discrimination against Muslims. This conclusion is drawn from the observation that fewer people chose to forward the letters when the designated recipient had a name suggestive of Muslim heritage. Ahmed argues that the findings from the second sub-study corroborate those of the initial sub-study, indicating that this discrimination is prevalent in a broader context, extending beyond the academic setting of the first sub-study. The results from the inaugural sub-study conducted at the university produced noteworthy outcomes. They revealed that 29 out of 50 letters addressed to an individual with a Swedish-sounding name were returned, while the equivalent figure for an individual with a name suggestive of Muslim origins stood at 18. Consequently, a Swedish recipient received responses in 60% more instances.<sup>26</sup>

Bunar's work, titled "Hate Crimes Against Immigrants in Sweden and Community Responses," examines hate crimes against immigrants in Sweden, with a focus on the notable increase in documented Islamophobic hate crimes in recent years. This upward trend began in the early 21st century, involving various forms of harassment, threats, physical assaults, defamation, and incitement to racial hatred. In response to these developments, legislative changes were introduced, law enforcement agencies implemented proactive measures, and a societal initiative against racism was initiated in Sweden. Bunar argues that these actions have contributed to an increased awareness of hate crimes at both the societal and law enforcement levels. Furthermore, a concerning trend has emerged in which generalizations about Islam and the Muslim community have led to expectations for collective statements from Muslims. For instance, there is an anticipation that imams should publicly disassociate themselves from issues such as the subjugation of women or acts of terrorism, based on a generalized presumption of a connection between violence and Islam. This trend raises important questions about stereotypes and the impact of such perceptions on the Muslim community.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ahmed, A.M., "Muslim Discrimination: Evidence from Two Lost-Letter Experiments," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 40, no. 4, (2010), pp. 888–898.

<sup>27</sup> Borell, *Islamophobic prejudice and hate crime: A knowledge review*, No. 1.

In their work *Muslims in Sweden*, Ouis and Roald illuminate the multifaceted challenges confronting numerous Muslim women who choose to don the veil within the context of Swedish society.<sup>28</sup> Within the Swedish context, the veil has evolved to signify a distinctive sartorial feature among devout Muslim women. Across various Western nations, the image of a veiled Muslim woman often elicits associations with concerns regarding gender inequality and political statements.<sup>29</sup> The presence of a veiled Muslim woman is frequently perceived as provocative due to its representation of a detachment from the prevailing societal and political ideologies to which the majority subscribes. Following the September 11 attacks in the United States, the act of veiling has also become entangled with concerns about terrorism. Notably, the prevailing response to veiled Muslim women is characterized by a perception of heightened religiosity and piety in comparison to others.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Limited socio-economic opportunities*

Discrimination targeting individuals who identify as Muslims or are perceived as such constitutes one of the prevailing manifestations of bias. Notably, nearly one-third of documented cases reported within the context of Sweden during the period spanning from 2017 to 2021 pertains to instances of workplace discrimination.<sup>31</sup> The Equality Ombudsman (DO) references numerous interview-based investigations in which Muslim women, in particular, have recounted instances of employers exerting pressure on them to relinquish their head coverings while in the workplace.<sup>32</sup>

Several researchers, including members of a research team at Linnaeus University, such as Carlsson and Rooth, have significantly contributed to this body of research. Carlsson and Rooth conducted one of the pioneering investigations centered around the submission of simulated job applications to prospective employers, covering a range of twelve distinct occupations. The study's findings reveal that individuals with names suggesting Swedish origin receive interview invitations 50% more frequently than individuals whose names are characterized by the researchers as having an Arabic sound, potentially implying a Muslim identity.<sup>33</sup> A similar investigation illustrates that individuals with names such as Ali, Hassan,

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<sup>28</sup> Roald, A.S. and Ouis, P., *Muslim in Sweden* (Stockholm: Wahlström and Widstrand, 2003), p. 189.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>31</sup> DO, *Statistics 2015–2021* (Stockholm: Statistics of reports received by the Discrimination Ombudsman 2015–2021).

<sup>32</sup> Bursell, Moa, "Perceptions of discrimination against Muslims. A study of formal complaints against public institutions in Sweden". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(5), (2021).

<sup>33</sup> Carlsson, M. och Rooth, D-O., "Evidence of ethnic discrimination in the Swedish labor market using experimental data", *Labour Economics*, Vol. 14, No. 4, (2007), pp. 716-729.

or Mohammed have a diminished probability of receiving invitations for job interviews compared to those with the name Erik. This trend persisted even when Ali, Hassan, and Mohammed were portrayed as exceptionally amiable or proficient candidates in their application materials. Proficiency was communicated through more comprehensive and substantial professional backgrounds, while amiability was accentuated by referencing previous commendations or descriptions of their philanthropic activities. Although the response rate did not match that of applicants named Erik, the enhanced levels of competence and likability led to an overall improvement in the response rates for all demographic groups within the research. This study encompassed the analysis of 5,636 fictitious job applications submitted in response to 3,325 job postings across various Swedish workplaces.<sup>34</sup>

Otterbeck and Bevelanders conducted regression analyses to examine gender disparities, considering the parental socio-economic context and the geographical origins of respondents. The study revealed that boys born in non-Swedish nations exhibited higher levels of tolerance toward Muslims compared to boys born in Sweden. Similarly, girls born outside of Europe displayed more tolerance toward Muslims than those born within Europe. Regarding parental socio-economic status, only variables related to parental occupations with an academic background yielded statistically significant results. Economic factors, including the type of municipality, played a role. Boys from municipalities with high unemployment rates, manufacturing industries, and a significant immigrant population expressed less favorable attitudes toward Muslims. This trend was also observed in municipalities with representation of right-wing populist parties within the local council.<sup>35</sup>

### *Educational challenges*

Numerous instances have arisen concerning challenges faced by Muslim educators and students in practicing their religious rituals, such as daily prayers during breaks and fasting during Ramaḍān. Moreover, Muslim girls and women have encountered discrimination and biases for donning headscarves.<sup>36</sup> In 2019, within the Skurup municipality, representatives of the far-right Sweden Democrats (SD), with the support of the primary conservative party, the Moderate Party (*Moderaterna*), successfully garnered a majority vote in favor of a ban on headscarves, operating under the banner of “Equality is a norm here!” This decision elicited

<sup>34</sup> Agerström, J. *et al.*, “Warm and Competent Hassan = Cold and Incompetent Eric: A Harsh Equation of Real-Life Hiring Discrimination”, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 34, no. 4, (2012), pp. 359-366.

<sup>35</sup> Bevelander, P. och Otterbeck, J., “Young people’s attitudes towards Muslims in Sweden”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, (2010) pp. 404–425.

<sup>36</sup> Olseryd, Wallin, and Repo, *Brå Report 2021:3*.

substantial responses from Minority Civil Society Organizations (MCSOs) and was subsequently overturned by the Swedish Administrative Court, in recognition of the legal safeguarding of religious freedom enshrined in the Fundamental Law of Sweden, which is synonymous with the constitution.<sup>37</sup>

### *Integration issues*

In the 2007 report published by the Swedish National Board for Integration, Fazlhashemi discerns a discernible media discourse characterized by an orientalist and Eurocentric viewpoint. This discourse is typified by the division of societal groups into an “us and them” binary, designating the foreign as deviant and undesirable. The report's assessment underscores that the media's depiction of Islam frequently employs terminology that marginalizes Muslims, portraying them as “the other”, thereby isolating them from the broader Swedish society. In another report issued by the Swedish National Board for Integration, Lagerlöf investigates the evolving portrayal of Muslims and Jews within the online sphere. Over recent years, extremist organizations have progressively harnessed the internet as a medium for disseminating propaganda rooted in hatred.<sup>38</sup>

## **V. Potential Solutions**

The challenges facing the Muslim minority in Sweden, such as racism, Islamophobia, and marginalization, have broader societal implications. These challenges, like racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, and antisemitism, contribute to the development of negative attitudes and behaviors that undermine democratic and multicultural principles. This phenomenon is linked to a “political economy of hatred,” often exploited by political opportunists. When legal protections for the “Muslim” category are insufficient, these issues are often used in propaganda campaigns by those who seek to exploit public fears of the unfamiliar. Throughout the course of this research, it has become conspicuously clear that an expansion of knowledge is imperative to bolster endeavors aimed at discerning strategies to combat Islamophobic hate crimes, racism, and the myriad challenges encountered by the Muslim population in Sweden on a day-to-day basis. In the broader scholarly discourse, as underscored by academics like Borell,<sup>39</sup> there exists a noteworthy research lacuna within this domain. From a comprehensive perspective, there exist

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<sup>37</sup> DN, *The headscarf ban undermines the foundations of democracy*, accessed October 25, 2024. <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/slojforbudet-ruckar-pa-demokratins-grunder/>

<sup>38</sup> Lagerlöf, D., *Intolerance in cyberspace and the art of responding to it - In the Swedish Integration Agency* (Stockholm: The Swedish Integration Agency's report series 2007:03).

<sup>39</sup> Borell, *Islamophobic prejudice and hate crimes: A knowledge overview*, no. 1.

two inherent weaknesses in the existing research landscape. The first pertains to the dearth of well-established, evidence-grounded methodologies designed to mitigate the prevalence of Islamophobia and racism.<sup>40</sup> A critical issue pertains to the amalgamation of various hate crime instances, which can obscure the unique characteristics of individual categories. Further scrutiny is needed to elucidate the intersections among hate crime categories, including race, skin color, nationality, and gender. An intersectional analysis is envisioned to identify tailored strategies against Islamophobia and understand the consequences of altering vulnerability experiences on both individual and societal levels.

#### *Strengthened work against hate crimes within the judicial system*

Numerous human rights institutions in Sweden recognize the necessity of accentuating measures aimed at ameliorating the facets pertinent to the dispensation of justice. This necessitates the early detection of cases underpinned by hate crime motivations. Achieving this goal hinges upon the augmentation of comprehension regarding the structural intricacies of the legal framework and the multifarious manifestations of hate crimes. Such enhanced awareness enables the formulation of pertinent inquiries, especially in the context of incident reporting.<sup>41</sup> A multifaceted approach to enhancing these aspects encompasses diverse educational initiatives. For instance, a plausible strategy involves increasing the participation of law enforcement officers in training programs focused on democracy and hate crimes, a curriculum devised and administered by the police authorities. The early identification of hate crime motives also engenders the potential for these cases to be investigated by specialized entities such as democracy and hate crime task forces or designated hate crime investigators. This, in turn, is anticipated to yield an enhancement in the investigatory quality.

#### *Citizen dialogue on tolerance and respectful diversity*

Citizen dialogue aims to find a common basis for understanding in relation to respectful coexistence. Such a dialogue can bridge the gap between different generations, integrate Sweden's diverse population groups in a common dialogue and reach a common attitude for tolerance and against Islamophobia and racism. Citizen dialogue on tolerance and respectful diversity serves as a potent solution in the fight against racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia.

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<sup>40</sup> Löwander, B. and Hagström, M., *Antisemitism and Islamophobia – spread, causes and preventive work* (Stockholm: Forum for living history, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Kolankiewicz, M., *Anti-Muslim Violence and the Possibility of Justice* (Lund: Sociologiska institutionen, Lunds universitet, 2015).

This approach hinges on fostering open, constructive conversations among members of the community, irrespective of their backgrounds. It provides a platform for individuals to engage in dialogue, share their perspectives, and cultivate mutual understanding. As Abdulaziz Berghout notes, *Ta'āruf* (mutual acquaintance) in Islam is not limited to superficial knowing but entails the cultivation of relationships based on shared human dignity. This civilizational value offers a powerful framework for citizen dialogue initiatives that promote tolerance and dismantle stereotypes.<sup>42</sup> Citizen dialogue initiatives facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences, thus humanizing marginalized groups and dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions. By encouraging active participation and promoting empathy, these dialogues encourage a sense of belonging and interconnectedness within diverse societies. They also empower citizens to challenge discriminatory behaviors and promote inclusive policies. Ultimately, citizen dialogues on tolerance and respectful diversity empower individuals to become agents of change, contributing to the dismantling of systemic prejudices and creating more equitable and harmonious communities.

#### *Educational initiatives*

Research shows that there is a need to carry out more educational efforts about various forms of racism in history and today, aimed at school staff and other public employees, with a focus on quality assurance of public services' treatment of the public through work against racism and Islamophobia.<sup>43</sup> These efforts focus on equipping individuals with the knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary to challenge stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory beliefs. By fostering a curriculum that emphasizes diversity, cultural competence, and inclusivity, educational institutions play a fundamental role in promoting tolerance and empathy. Anti-bias and anti-hate education programs have proven to be particularly effective in addressing these issues. These programs help students understand the experiences of marginalized groups, thereby humanizing their peers and reducing the prevalence of harmful stereotypes. Additionally, educational initiatives can empower young people to become advocates for social justice, encouraging them to speak out against discrimination and contribute to more inclusive societies. In sum, educational interventions have the potential to reshape attitudes, promote empathy, and instill the values of tolerance and respect, ultimately countering racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia at their core.

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<sup>42</sup> Abdulaziz, Berghout, "The Concepts of *Ta'āruf* and *Tadāfu'* and Their Position in Dialogue from an Islamic Perspective," *Contemporary Islamic Thought*, Vol. 16, No. 63 (2011): pp. 85-89.

<sup>43</sup> Borell, *Islamophobic prejudice and hate crimes: A knowledge overview*, No. 1.

### *Policies to reduce disparities*

Recent leadership in Sweden has shown a lack of determination in tackling Islamophobia. Instead, Islamophobia has infiltrated the political sphere, reflected in governmental actions and initiatives. The government mandates issued to the Youth Board between 2006 and spring 2012 largely focused on Muslims and immigrants, particularly regarding issues such as forced marriage, honor culture, and marginalized youth. This disproportionate attention diverts resources away from addressing racism and Islamophobia. By associating these issues with the Muslim community, the government perpetuates stereotypes. An inquiry should be initiated to investigate how various authorities in Sweden have fallen short in safeguarding the personal security, education access, legal recourse, and freedom of religion for the Muslim minority.

Political solutions are essential in combating racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. Anti-racist policies can establish laws promoting equality and protecting marginalized groups from discrimination, addressing the root causes of these issues, such as socio-economic disparities. Political leaders should foster dialogue, promote diversity and cooperation, and support educational programs against discrimination. Moreover, politics should strive for fair and inclusive institutions that mirror society's composition. Through a strong political commitment to combating racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia, a more just and inclusive future can be realized. Moreover, as highlighted by Berghout, the *Qur'ānic* principle of *Tadāfu'* emphasizes the role of ethical contention in maintaining social balance—ensuring that power structures are moderated through values, conscience, and wisdom. This vision aligns well with policy approaches that seek equity and accountability in multicultural societies.<sup>44</sup>

### *Fiqh of Minorities*

The Muslim minority in Sweden, as well as in the West in general, faces a set of challenges that require comprehensive scientific examination at multiple levels, including jurisprudential, legal, intellectual, and cognitive dimensions. The complexity of these challenges requires a more in-depth and comprehensive exploration, based on the contributions of Muslim scholars from the past and contemporary times. While some work has been conducted in this field under the title (*Fiqh of Minorities*), it is still necessary to delve deeper into these issues by organizing workshops and conferences and creating accurate research papers. The aim of these endeavors is to build a strong jurisprudential and intellectual framework capable of effectively addressing the evolving dynamics and requirements faced by the Muslim minority within Sweden's unique social, cultural, political,

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<sup>44</sup> Berghout, “The Concepts of Ta‘āruf and Tadāfu’ ...”, pp. 98-101.

and legal context. This curriculum, which derives its origins from the principles of Islam and at the same time from the needs of Swedish Muslims, would include a multifaceted approach that integrates jurisprudential insights, legal analysis, and intellectual discourse. Its aim will not only be to provide practical guidance for addressing the challenges faced by the Muslim minority, but also to promote greater understanding of the distinct circumstances they face. It is then circulated to Muslim scholars, *Imām*, and religious leaders, and by doing so, can contribute to more effective community engagement, public policy advocacy, and the creation of an informed and resilient Muslim minority in Sweden.

## **VI. Participation of the Muslim minority in Swedish society**

This section explores how the Muslim minority contributes to social cohesion and cultural pluralism in Sweden through civic engagement, interfaith dialogue, and institutional participation.

### *The role of Muslims in advancing cultural pluralism and social cohesion*

Values of inclusive multiculturalism constitute a central part of the discussion on how to address and overcome the challenges facing Muslim minorities in today's society. Some scholars, such as Professor of Education Pirjo Lahdenperä, argue that the term multiculturalism implies the coexistence of many cultures within a society, such as Swedish society, but without necessarily implying interaction between them. In contrast, the term intercultural suggests a process that involves contact, interest, and interaction between these different cultures.<sup>45</sup> This philosophy embraces a societal model that not only tolerates diversity but actively promotes it. By endorsing values such as respect, openness, and equality, a foundation is established to build a society where all citizens, including Muslims, feel welcome and included. Today, Muslims play a significant role in advocating for these values and projecting a message of tolerance that emphasizes coexistence and demonstrates their commitment to Sweden, their home. They contribute to these efforts through a network of institutions and individuals. This participation extends to engaging in interfaith dialogues, introducing initiatives aimed at resolving issues concerning the Muslim minority, and working towards mitigating potential crises stemming from instances of racism. Muslims also actively welcome everyone to explore the Islamic religion and its culture by opening the doors of Islamic centers to the wider community. Numerous Islamic institutions in Sweden actively collaborate with the government and various stakeholders to advance comprehensive multiculturalism. They work

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<sup>45</sup> Lahdenperä, Pirjo, *The basis of values as an exclusive or inclusive discourse* in G. Linde (ed.), *Values and Swedish ethnicity*, (Lund: Student literature, 2001), pp. 116137.

jointly to combat racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. These institutions also spearhead educational programs and awareness campaigns designed to shift prejudiced attitudes. Simultaneously, they foster intercultural dialogue and cooperation through open and inclusive conversations and collaborative projects. By upholding the tenets of inclusive multiculturalism and promoting unity, these institutions contribute to shaping a more promising future for both Muslim minorities and society at large.

### *Pioneering Models of Islamic Institutions in Sweden*

The role of Muslim organizations in Swedish society has evolved significantly in recent years, warranting examination within the realm of social science research. These organizations have become integral components of Sweden's social fabric, offering religious services, facilitating cultural exchange, and advocating for Muslim minorities. They have also taken initiatives to encourage integration, cooperation, and dialogue with the broader society. In addition to engaging in interfaith dialogues, these organizations have actively participated in social projects aimed at enhancing social cohesion. This transformation underscores the multifaceted roles played by Muslim organizations in shaping the Swedish social landscape. This academic text will mention and highlight three organizations that have made significant contributions to multicultural society:

**FIFS** (The United Islamic Associations in Sweden) is Sweden's primary national Muslim organization, established in 1974. It operates as a non-profit, religious, and democratic faith community, uniting around 50 associations with more than 33,000 registered members. FIFS comprises a diverse array of associations, representing various interpretations of Islam and a rich ethnic tapestry. The organization places strong emphasis on minority representation and youth and women's inclusion in both association activities and leadership roles at local and national levels. FIFS serves as a conduit for its member organizations to engage with Swedish authorities and the government, advocating for their common interests. The organization is dedicated to fostering integration by fortifying the cultural and religious identity of Muslims in Sweden. FIFS envisions a society characterized by respect, diversity, and the participation of all its members. Faith communities, according to FIFS, should play a pivotal role in strengthening communities, raising ethical questions, enhancing civic engagement, and supporting vulnerable segments of society. Member associations are encouraged to maintain an open and inclusive approach to the local community and engage in partnerships with other

Muslim associations, municipalities, various faith congregations, and local community-building initiatives.<sup>46</sup>

**Ibn Rushd Study Association** is one of the ten state-funded study associations in Sweden. It stands out as the only study group in the country that extends a warm welcome to people from diverse backgrounds, inviting them to participate in its nationwide events. Ibn Rushd believes that being a Muslim in Sweden should not be seen as something separate but rather that Islam is an integral part of the country. The organization has two primary objectives: educating non-Muslims about Islam and empowering Muslims residing in Sweden. Ibn Rushd's activities encompass a range of initiatives, including organizing conferences, lecture series, study groups, and courses. The core mission of Ibn Rushd is to serve as a study association that illuminates both the opportunities and injustices that Muslims may encounter while simultaneously working to create a space for the expression and exploration of their identity.<sup>47</sup>

**The Islamic Federation of Sweden (IFIS)** is a primarily Stockholm-based organization with a mission to be active throughout the country. IFIS defines itself as an association with several key objectives. It seeks to preserve and strengthen the Muslim identity and presence in Sweden, allowing Muslims to practice their faith both individually and collectively, privately and publicly, while engaging positively in various aspects of society. The organization aims to be a natural source of support for the Muslim community in addressing diverse challenges and needs, all while contributing to the betterment of society based on Islamic values. IFIS has played and continues to play a significant role in fostering interfaith and intergroup dialogue within Swedish society. This includes engaging in dialogues on behalf of the Muslim minority with various Swedish governments, especially when faced with recent challenges that have negatively impacted the lives of many Muslims. These challenges encompass issues such as the closure of Islamic schools, attempts to ban the hijab in schools and government institutions, and harassment of Muslims in some institutions, cities, and media platforms. Consequently, the IFIS headquarters has emerged as a key venue where Swedish officials and ministers meet with its leaders to discuss matters of both public interest and the interests of the Muslim minority.

## **Conclusion**

The Muslim minority in Sweden is a relatively new minority that has its own unique challenges and needs. Although there have been some historical examples of cultural interaction between certain individuals and Islamic delegations from Viking Age Sweden, this has had limited

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<sup>46</sup> *The United Islamic Associations in Sweden's website*, accessed October 23, 2024. [www.fifs.se](http://www.fifs.se)

<sup>47</sup> Lundberg, Martin, *Ibn Rushd-a Study association in Motion*, (Stockholm: Folkbildningsrådet, 2011), pp. 29-48.

impact on Swedish culture and history. The minority began to make its presence known after the First World War, when many Muslim migrants came to Sweden in the hope of finding suitable work opportunities. This migration led to the creation of a suitable, democratic, and peaceful environment that attracted further immigration due to wars and challenges in the Middle East. Although there are no exact statistical data on the current number of Muslims in Sweden, some studies estimate that there may be around 500,000 to 1 million Muslims in the country. The Muslims in Sweden have founded organizations to preserve their identity, religion, and culture and to promote dialogue with other social groups. These include organizations such as the United Islamic Associations of Sweden (FIFS), the Islamic Association of Sweden, and the Ibn Rushd Study Association. These organizations have worked to create positive images of Muslims in Sweden as well as support and offer education, services, and knowledge about Islam for the whole society, but for Muslims too of course. At the same time, the rise of the extreme right in Swedish politics has increased fear and anxiety for Muslims. This has further exacerbated the challenges faced by the Muslim minority, including Islamophobia, racism, and social and economic constraints. It is important to explore these challenges carefully and seek practical solutions to promote social peace and mutual understanding. This includes promoting human rights and civil liberties for Muslims in Sweden and countering racism and Islamophobia through education and awareness. At the same time, there should be a special effort to develop a deeper understanding of the religious and cultural needs of the Muslim minority, including training for religious leaders. This could be a key to creating a more cohesive and harmonious Swedish social environment. There is an urgent imperative for increased research, scholarly studies, and systematic scientific conferences that comprehensively address the current situation of the Muslim minority in Sweden. This endeavor should encompass various aspects of the Muslim minority's interaction with society, spanning the political, social, media, economic, health, and psychological dimensions, among others. It is crucial to conduct studies targeting all segments within the Muslim minority, including men, women, children, youth, parents, the elderly, employees, students, the unemployed, Muslim leaders, Muslim politicians, and more. The primary objective is to articulate these challenges in a clear and concise manner and identify areas where improvements are necessary. These solutions should be developed in a scientific and methodical manner, devoid of emotional and scattered discourse. Achieving this necessitates the involvement of academic and research institutions, government support, and funding for these research projects, along with active participation from Muslim leaders and researchers in the generation of these studies and interpretations. It is also essential to engage in workshops

and conferences to provide balanced and realistic insights. Subsequently, these insights should be translated into practical projects in collaboration with various stakeholders across different Swedish institutions and organizations.

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