

Jewish-Muslim Relations in Sweden

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- Sweden has no reliable official statistics on the ethnicity or religious affiliation of the population, but it is estimated that some 300-350,000 Muslims live in the country. With Sweden's total population at about nine million, Muslims make up approximately 4 percent. It is equally difficult to estimate how many Jews there are, but a rough total is 15-20,000. The Jews are concentrated in and around the three major cities of Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö.
- There are few projects of interfaith dialogue or other forums for exclusive Muslim-Jewish interaction. However, there are some general organizations and councils of religious organizations in Sweden with participation by Muslim organizations, members of the Jewish community, as well as representatives of various Christian communities.
- On some issues of religious practice, the Muslim organizations and the Jewish community have a common interest in fostering understanding in the general Swedish society. The two most relevant issues are circumcision and ritual slaughter. From time to time there are calls in the public discourse to forgo the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion so as to curb, or even put an end to, these practices.
- The last decade has seen a rise in Jewish-Muslim tensions on the grassroots level, and attacks on Jews by Muslims have occurred. Tensions increased particularly with the outbreak of the Second Intifada.

Jews and Muslims in Sweden

The first Jewish community in Sweden was established in the late eighteenth century by permission of King Gustav III. Jews were not, however, allowed to settle outside of a handful of major cities until 1870, when the Jews of Sweden were emancipated. The first Jews to arrive in Sweden came from the Netherlands and Germany, and within a few generations many of them assimilated. In later years, poorer and more traditional Jews from Eastern Europe arrived, and they soon dominated the small Orthodox communities that still remain today. In connection to the Second World War and the Holocaust, Jewish refugees and survivors came to Sweden. However, the number of Jews in the country had never been great, and today the Jewish population is estimated at some 15-20,000. The main communities are in the cities of Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö.

The Muslim communities in Sweden were established fairly recently. In 1930, the last year a census was conducted in which the population was asked about their religious affiliation, only fifteen individuals claimed to be Muslim. Today, following significant immigration especially in the second half of the twentieth century, there are approximately 300-350,000 Muslims living in Sweden. Some 100,000 of them are organized in Muslim communities.

The origins of the Swedish Muslims are diverse, but significant groups have reached the country as refugees from war zones. Muslims with Turkish, Kurdish, [Iraqi](#), [Iranian](#), Lebanese, Palestinian, Bosnian, Somali, and Kosovo-Albanian roots can be found in Sweden. The three national Muslim organizations are: the United Islamic Congregations in Sweden (Förenade Islamiska Församlingar i Sverige, FIFS), the Muslim Council of Sweden (Sveriges Muslimska Förbund, SMF), and the Union of Islamic Culture Centers in Sweden (Islamiska Kulturcenterunionen i Sverige, IKUS).

As in most European countries, the Muslim population is a good deal larger than the Jewish one. In the case of Sweden, the proportion is roughly 20:1. The gap will presumably further increase due to continued Muslim immigration and higher birthrates among Muslims than Jews. In addition, the relatively high rate of intermarriage in the Jewish community hampers its growth.

Interfaith Dialogue

There is no organized forum of interfaith dialogue exclusively for Jews and Muslims in Sweden. However, there are a number of organizations where representatives of the Jewish and Muslim communities participate alongside representatives of various Christian communities.

The Church of Sweden was officially separated from the state on 1 January 2000. This was part of a reform to increase equality between the various religious communities in Sweden. Another part of this reform was that the government set up the Government Council for Contacts with the Religious Communities (*Regeringens råd för kontakt med trossamfundet*). It includes representatives of all the religious communities that receive some sort of public financial support, and its proceedings are headed by the government minister in charge of relations with religious communities.

This council is a forum for ongoing discussion on issues of interest to the state and the religious communities alike, where the parties involved can meet and exchange knowledge and experience. The council convenes three to four times per year. Although representatives of the Jewish and Muslim communities meet within its framework, it is not a forum for exclusively Jewish-Muslim dialogue.

Lena Posner-Körösi, president of the Central Jewish Council and of the Jewish Community of Stockholm, represents the Jewish community in the Government Council. She knows the Muslim representatives who usually participate in this and similar forums from these settings. She is skeptical about any potential outcome of different kinds of dialogue groups and does not think they amount to much.

"I'm hard pressed to point to any concrete results," she says and adds that "I wonder whether dialogue among leaders is best. Isn't it on the grassroots level that real interaction takes place?" She stresses that the alternative of no dialogue at all would be worse.[1]

Muslim Attitudes toward the Jewish Community

The Swedish Muslim representative who has the most interaction with the Jewish leadership in this type of setting is Helena Benouda, head of the Muslim Council of Sweden, which is an umbrella organization for a number of other Muslim organizations and associations in the country. The Jewish community is also in contact with Benouda when Jewish and Muslim organizations need to formulate common stances on various issues vis-à-vis the general society (see below).

Two other prominent Swedish Muslims with whom the Jewish community has been in touch on different matters are Muhammad Omar and Nalin Pekgul. Omar is editor in chief of the Swedish Muslim culture magazine *Minaret*, and Pekgul is president of the Social Democratic Women's Organization. She has repeatedly criticized political Islam and Muslim anti-Semitism in Sweden.[2]

The fact that Jewish and Muslim community leaders can work together on practical issues in Sweden does not, however, necessarily mean they see eye to eye. One example is the widely divergent views about Israel. During the Second [Lebanon](#) War in the summer of 2006, for instance, Benouda spoke at an anti-Israeli rally where Israeli policies were compared to the Holocaust.[3]

One of the organizations under the umbrella of the Muslim Council of Sweden is the Muslim Association of Sweden. In 2005, its chairman Mahmoud Jamil Aldebe was involved in controversy when the Swedish imam Abd al-Haq Kielan published an article in the daily *Expressen* claiming Aldebe had accused him of being "a Jew who has converted to Islam to create problems for the Muslims"[4] Such incidents cast doubt on the attitudes toward Jews even among some of the Swedish Muslim leadership.

The Children of Abraham

The Children of Abraham, run by the Christian-humanist Sigtuna Foundation, is a religiously and politically independent project that aims at conflict preemption through pedagogical work at all levels of the educational system. The project's homepage states that insufficient knowledge about culture and religion often causes misunderstandings, and that knowledge and empathy are crucial to overcoming this problem.[5]

The Swedish Jewish community is involved in programs and events organized by the Children of Abraham especially geared toward youth. The activities aim at spreading knowledge about the common roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The approach is to try and create empathy between members of the three religions and make them aware of the many common denominators between their faiths.

The starting point of the youth activities is the many similar stories in the religious traditions and specifically in the canonized holy texts of the three monotheistic religions—the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, and the Qur'an. The pupils listen to various stories about the characters who are common to the three religions, and then take on the role of one of these characters. The pupils are asked to imagine what life was like for these people, and express their thoughts on the topic—most commonly in writing but sometimes also through improvisations.

The method is also taught at lectures and seminars for educators. Ways of instilling understanding among pupils from the three monotheistic religions are also discussed in literature on the topic.[6]

At the university level, a recurring course at Lund University is called "Children of Abraham" and is conducted according to the principles of the project. The course description notes that despite the common roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there have been many tensions between them. One of the goals of the course is to explore the possibility of "Abrahamic ecumenism." [7] Although this course deals extensively with issues of dialogue and Jewish-Muslim relations, it is not specifically geared toward Jews, Muslims, or any other ethnic or religious group.

The course includes a trip to [Jerusalem](#), and while there the participants stay and study at the Swedish Theological Institute (STI). The STI's policy is to support Israel's right to exist "in secure and internationally recognized borders" as well as the Palestinians' right to a state of their own "free from occupation and oppression." The institute rejects anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and proselytizing among Jews and Muslims.[8] However, how and to what extent this is reflected in the STI's educational program is highly dependent on the staff and their personal viewpoints.

Common Interests vis-à-vis the Majority Society

Being a religiously observant Jew or Muslim in Sweden causes certain problems to the individual. Many of these stem from the fact that Judaism and Islam are religions that place great importance on behavior, unlike Christianity, which is primarily concerned with issues of faith and largely leaves behavioral patterns to the individual.

The Swedish Lutheran brand of Christianity is no exception. Hence there is no tradition of thinking about customs and actions in religious categories, but rather as cultural behaviors or even formalistic superstitions. The fact that Sweden is a largely secularized society, where religion is not given prominence in the public sphere, only adds to the widespread lack of understanding of the importance of ritual behavior among Jews and Muslims.

Despite the fact that Jewish and Muslim ritual practices are different, the two communities have a common interest in promoting their freedom of religion in a society that tends to rank this freedom relatively low in importance. Thus the Jewish and Muslim communities have a common problem in their relations with the majority society, and as often as they can, they tackle this problem jointly.

For the individual, issues such as dietary concerns in the school and the workplace, getting time off for non-Christian religious holidays, finding time to pray at work, and matters of modesty are obstacles that need to be circumnavigated in order to live as a religiously observant Jew or Muslim in Sweden. However, on a community level, Jewish and Muslim efforts to promote their common interests mainly focus on two legal issues: attempts to lift the ban on ritual slaughter, and to counter initiatives to ban the circumcision of boys.

Ritual Slaughter

Sweden has a longstanding ban on the religious slaughter of cattle. This ban is generally uncontroversial in Sweden, and the Animal Protection Act stands against the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion.[9] Reflecting the generally weak understanding that religion can require certain actions and ritual practices rather than just faith, the protection of animals has so far prevailed over any attempts to have the ban on shechita and halal slaughter lifted. The Muslim Council of Sweden has worked jointly with the Central Council of Jewish Communities and with Broderskapsrörelsen, the Christian Social Democrats' Association, for a removal of the ban.[10]

With the issue raised almost yearly by members of parliament sympathetic to Jewish and Muslim rights to practice their respective religions in Sweden, there is an ongoing debate on the topic. Some alterations have been made to the law, making it possible to perform ritual slaughter if the animal is stunned with electricity prior to the cutting of the throat. Although this method has been accepted by most Swedish Muslims, it is not in accordance with Halakhah and thus of no help for the Jewish community.

As things stand at present, however, there is little to suggest that shechita and halal will be legalized in Sweden in the foreseeable future. Typical of the arguments against legalization is a motion by MP Gudrun Lindvall of the Green Party from 27 October 1998. She writes that shechita causes "suffering and anxiety" to "large animals," and is concerned that religious communities and not veterinarians are consulted on the issue of ritual slaughter since, in her view, it is a question of animal protection.[11]

Circumcision

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a number of cases of circumcisions of Muslim boys that led to medical complications prompted a public debate and calls to prohibit all circumcisions for nonmedical reasons. Eventually, on March 2001, the government presented a bill proposing to regulate circumcisions of boys over the age of two months.

This legislation would have almost exclusively concerned Muslim boys since Jewish boys are circumcised on the eighth day after birth. The bill made it illegal to perform circumcisions without anesthetics, or for anyone to do a circumcision other than a certified physician or a person with a special license from the National Board of Health and Welfare. To obtain such a license one had to be connected to "a religious community where circumcision is a part of the religious tradition," in other words, the Jewish or Muslim community. The government thus sought to prevent malpractice as much as possible while safeguarding the freedom of religion.[12]

In a response, MP Tasso Stafilidis of the Left Party argued that the proposed legislation was insufficiently far-reaching. Proposing that circumcision be banned altogether, he adduced the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children must be protected against physical or psychological violence, harm, or abuse. He specifically referred to the convention's Article 24, which states that all measures should be taken to eliminate traditional practices that are harmful to children's health. Stafilidis' response was cosigned by four other MPs, three from the Left Party and one from the Social Democrats.[13]

Green and Christian Democrat MPs objected to the special exceptions given in effect to the Jewish community, where the vast majority of boys are circumcised on the eighth day. Ultimately the government had to adjust the legislation to these objections, and the rules about anesthetics and the licensing of the circumciser came into effect directly at birth.[14]

The legislation did not, however, settle the issue once and for all. Instead the public debate, including intermittent calls for a total ban on all circumcisions of boys, continues.[15]

Tensions on the Grassroots Level

The Jewish-Muslim contacts on the community level in Sweden function well though they are not particularly intensive. Jewish-Muslim relations on the grassroots level can, however, be troubled.

In recent years anti-Semitism among certain Muslim groups in Sweden has been somewhat noted and studied, though a major quantitative study has not yet been done. The only quantitative survey to date of anti-Semitism in Sweden was conducted by Henrik Bachner and Jonas Ring in 2004. They found anti-Semitism to be about twice as common among Muslims (11 percent of the Muslim respondents) than in the population as a whole (5 percent of all the respondents).[16] The qualitative research that has been done shows that anti-Semitism exists among some Muslims in Sweden, and that it is manifested on the Internet, in the attitudes of some Muslim pupils in Swedish schools, and in attacks on Jews and their institutions.[17]

This anti-Semitism among Swedish Muslims can be traced to the Middle East, where hatred of Jews is mainstream in many countries. Some of these are the countries of origin for many of the Muslims living in Sweden. When tensions, and the concomitant anti-Jewish propaganda, rise in the Middle East rises, anti-Semitic manifestations among Muslims in Europe, including Sweden, increase accordingly.[18]

Attacks on Jews

One of the most serious anti-Semitic incidents in Sweden during the Second Intifada involved a rally against anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and racism. Organized by the Liberal Youth Movement, it was held in Stockholm on 18 April 2002 and took care not to display any Israeli national symbols so as to avoid provocations. Nevertheless, the rally was assaulted by a passing anti-Israeli demonstration. Some sixty individual demonstrators, mostly of Middle Eastern extraction, physically attacked the rally participants, verbally abused them, and broke their banners, necessitating police intervention. Some of the rally participants, including Holocaust survivors, suffered injury and shock.[19]

The spread of Middle Eastern anti-Semitism to segments of the Swedish Muslim population reflects in part the increased access to the public discourse of these immigrants' countries of origin including the Internet, satellite television, and imams brought to Sweden. Animosity toward Jews can thereby more easily retain, or even strengthen, its hold over parts of the Swedish Muslim community. This is also augmented by the discrimination and exclusion from the Swedish majority society that many Muslims experience in their daily life.[20]

The best-known example of Muslim anti-Semitism in Sweden is probably Radio Islam. It began as a local radio station in Sweden in the 1980s but, after a much publicized hate-crimes trial in 1990, was forced to close down and its founder, Moroccan-born Ahmed Rami, was sentenced to six months in prison. This did not, however, stop him

from spreading anti-Semitic propaganda, and today Radio Islam can be found on the Internet where it propagates anti-Semitism in more than twenty languages. The site is indeed almost exclusively dedicated to a wide range of anti-Semitic material with very little content on Islam despite the name. The site is operated from the United States where freedom of speech is more widely defined than in most European countries.[21]

The limited contacts between Jews and Muslims are also partly due to the small number of Jews in the country. Another likely factor is the level of segregation of significant segments of the Muslim population. The fact that most Swedish Muslims have no or very limited contact with real Jews may make them more susceptible to anti-Jewish stereotypes disseminated by Middle Eastern sources. This risks, in turn, making it more difficult in the future to sustain contacts that could bridge the cultural gap and undermine stereotypical thinking and prejudice between the two communities.

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Notes

[1] Lena Posner-Körösi, personal communication.

[2] See, e.g., www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article328487.ab; www.dn.se/DNet/jsp/polopoly.jsp?a=551636; www.skma.se/2008/Leman.pdf [Swedish].

[3] Manfred Gerstenfeld, *Behind the Humanitarian Mask: The Nordic Countries, Israel and the Jews* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2008), 42.

[4] Abd al-Haq Kielan, *Expressen*, 3 October 2005 [Swedish].

[5] For more information, see www.abrahamsbarn.se [Swedish].

[6] www.abrahamsbarn.org/info.asp/id/30 [Swedish].

[7] www.teol.lu.se/pdf/kurskat0405/kurskat04-05.pdf [Swedish].

[8] www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?di=92279&ptid=0 [Swedish].

[9] See, e.g., "Betänkande 1996/97:KU14 Fri- och rättigheter," at www.riksdagen.se/webbnav/index.aspx?nid=3322&dok_id=GK01KU14 [Swedish].

[10] www.sverigesmuslimskarad.se/artiklar/04.html [Swedish].

[11] www.riksdagen.se/webbnav/index.aspx?nid=410&dok_id=GM02MJ516 [Swedish].

[12] Proposition 2000/01:81 [Swedish].

[13] Motion 2000/01:So44 [Swedish].

[14] Motion 2000/01:So42, Motion 2000/01:So45 [Swedish].

[15] See, e.g., www.svd.se/opinion/brannpunkt/artikel_1582121.svd; www.svd.se/opinion/brannpunkt/artikel_254837.svd; www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/article431139.ab [Swedish].

[16] Henrik Bachner and Jonas Ring, *Antisemitiska attityder och föreställningar i Sverige* (Stockholm: Forum för levande historia, 2004), 133 [Swedish]. It should be noted, however, that the total number of Muslim respondents was limited and the exact figures should be viewed with caution.

[17] See, e.g., Mikael Tossavainen, "Det förnekade hatet: Antisemitism bland araber och muslimer i Sverige," Svenska Kommittén Mot Antisemitism, Stockholm, 2003 [Swedish]; www.jcpa.org/phas/phas-tossavainen-f05.htm.

[18] Tossavainen, "Det förnekade hatet."

[19] Gerstenfeld, *Behind the Humanitarian Mask*, 97.

[20] Tossavainen, "Det förnekade hatet"; www.jcpa.org/phas/phas-tossavainen-f05.htm.

[21] <http://www.radioislam.org/>.

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