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► **To cite this version:**

Piero Simeone Colla. In Sweden, burning Qur'ans threaten to send the country's history of tolerance up in smoke. 2024. hal-04387899

HAL Id: hal-04387899

<https://hal.science/hal-04387899v1>

Submitted on 12 Jan 2024

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THE CONVERSATION

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Danish-Swedish extremist and politician Rasmus Paludan as he burns a Quran in front of the Turkish embassy in Stockholm on January 21, 2023. Tobias Hellsten/Wikipedia , CC BY-NC

In Sweden, burning Qur'ans threaten to send the country's history of tolerance up in smoke

Published: January 10, 2024 5.59pm CET

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Languages

English

Français

Long known for its multiculturalism, Sweden has recently witnessed unprecedented tensions accompanied by palpable and, alas, justified concerns about the safety of Swedish nationals abroad.

Last summer, demonstrators in Ankara, Beirut, Islamabad and Jakarta set fire to the Swedish flag. In Iraq and Lebanon, protests also boiled over, with demonstrators alternately throwing cocktail molotovs and storming the country's embassies. And in Brussels on 17 October, two fans of the Swedish football team who were in the city to watch the Belgium-Sweden match were killed by a man who claimed to have been inspired by the Islamic State.

Since last year's events, the Swedish government has advised its citizens to exert caution while travelling abroad, a shock for a country that has long been identified with relatively generous migration policies and a concern for intercultural dialogue.

Anti-Islam provocations and threats of violence

The upsurge in hostility has one cause: burnings of the Qu'ran. Although the sacred text first went up in smoke in Denmark in 2010, desecrations have since been more frequent in Sweden. The trend's initiator is a 41-year old Danish-Swedish dual citizen, Rasmus Paludan, trained as a lawyer. The leader of a Danish party called "Hard Line" (*Hart Stram*), Paludan emerged a few years ago as a critic of the "Islamisation of European societies". *Hart Stram* won 1.8% of the vote in the 2019 Danish parliamentary elections, but was excluded for manipulating the lists of signatures required to file candidacies.

In response, Paludan turned to Sweden, where immigration-related issues have increasingly stirred controversy in the past decade. In 2020, he burned a Qur'an in Rosengården, a district of Malmö, where almost 90% of the inhabitants are of foreign origin. Paludan's actions sparked an upsurge in violence. While he was banned from entering the country, as a dual national he was able to continue his activities, and even attracted emulators, such as Iraqi refugee Salwan Momika.

Together, Paludan, Momika and their imitators target sites with the explicit aim of exacerbating tensions, including places of Muslim worship, neighbourhoods with a high concentration of immigrants and in front of Muslim countries' embassies. In the spring of 2022, Paludan embarked on a series of desecrations across Sweden that he dubbed an "election tour". These led to violent clashes in several towns and a deterioration in the country's image in the Middle East. An umpteenth provocation in the vicinity of the Turkish embassy in January 2023 provoked a virulent reaction from Ankara, to the point of compromising the first item on Sweden's foreign policy agenda: NATO membership.

Indeed, the Turkish Parliament reacted by calling for Sweden's application – which had been formalised seven months earlier – to be rejected. For several days, Sweden's official agency for cultural diplomacy counted w interventions per hour on social media in Turkish, denouncing Paludan's actions without Swedish authorities intervening.

In June, at the opening of the *Aid al-Adha* festivities, burned a Qur'an in front of Stockholm's Grand Mosque. It triggered a deluge of protests, with the League of Arab States and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation protesting against the intolerable... tolerance of Swedish justice. In Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and other Muslim countries, demonstrators called for a boycott of Sweden, or even revenge against the country.

In response, in August the Swedish counter-espionage agency, SÄPO, raised the alert threshold for terrorist attacks against the country to level 4 (out of 5). This was a return to the climate of 2016, when the war in Syria triggered a historic surge in the number of refugees.

Homegrown causes and a new split in the political spectrum

While the spate of anti-Islam actions is the work of transnational players, it is in Sweden that they manifested themselves most conspicuously. The interethnic tensions that have shaken the country since the migrant crisis of 2015-2016 and the proliferation of settling of scores between gangs, have helped to create a fertile ground. According to the Swedish government, Russia has also sought to use its networks to fan the flames of conflict between long-settled Swedes and newcomers. The Kremlin's goal is to destabilise a country that has strongly supported Ukraine since Russia's invasion in February 2022, to the point of ending two centuries of neutrality to join NATO.

The controversy comes at a time when domestic policy has been marked by a turning point: the breakthrough in September 2022 of the Sweden Democrats (SD), a far-right party with neo-Nazi roots. It succeeded in part by making its stand against immigration – based on the premise of a “war of civilisations” – the focus of its discourse. While liberal-conservative Ulf Kristersson leads the government, the Sweden Democrats give him a majority through their support. This allows them to inject their obsessions into the country’s debates. Their latest proposal is the demolition of many of the country’s existing mosques.

Sweden Democrats leader Jimmie Akesson (left) and moderate party leader Ulf Kristersson, future prime minister, at the press conference announcing the formation of a coalition government in Parliament in Stockholm, 14 October 2022. Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP

The multiplication of Qur'an burnings has only served to exacerbate the Islamic world’s concern that such acts are becoming commonplace. But Muslim communities are also outraged by the inaction Swedish authorities, which is in stark contrast to neighbouring countries such as Denmark and Finland. How can we explain the stance of Swedish officials in the face of this phenomenon, at a time when the political security situation appears (according to Prime Minister Kristersson’s 2022 Christmas speech) to be “the worst since the end of the Second World War”?

Legal and cultural reasons for governmental action

The technical reason most often cited to explain the prevalence Qur'an burnings in Sweden is the lack of a legal arsenal to prohibit it. Laws banning blasphemy and the defamation of religion were struck down more than 50 years ago, so the issue of the formally curbing such provocations that the discussion has crystallised.

To date, Sweden’s courts have been reluctant to invoke two relevant articles of country’s criminal code, which punish, respectively, “vexatious behaviour” and “incitement to racial hatred”. The former requires the offensive impact of the gesture to be proven – and not just probable. In the latter case, the current interpretation among judges is that insulting a religion is not the same as discriminating against an ethnic group. At present, administrative courts of appeal have overturned police bans on Paludan and Momika’s actions.

Faced with an outcry that unites not only Erdogan, Vladimir Putin and Victor Orban but also the United Nations’ Human Rights Council, the parties in the government coalition oscillate between criticism of the Qur'an burnings and a refusal to “give in to foreign diktats”. Sweden’s Social Democrat party, now in opposition, seems to be leaning toward a readjustment of the legal arsenal.

It should be remembered that while the principle of freedom of expression has been a pillar of Sweden's national identity since the 18th century, legislation often prompted by political emergencies has restricted its scope. Since 1933, for example, Swedish citizens have been forbidden to wear clothing revealing their political affiliation. In 1996, a man who wore a Swedish flag decorated with mythological figures and the word *Valhalla* on national day was convicted in court. In 2014, artist Dan Park's collages – depicting the hanging of three coloured individuals, identified by name, as if after a lynching – earned him a heavy fine, six months in prison and the destruction of his works.

The reluctance to change the law today can be explained by the rejection of the idea that the sphere of the sacred can be the object of guardianship or *ad hoc* bans. Attacking a “symbol” – as the public prosecutor ruled in the Qu'ran burning in front of the Turkish embassy – is never illegal, as long as the demonstration does not target flesh-and-blood believers.

In a polarised political spectrum, the dispute has contributed to a hardening of positions. While the Sweden Democrats perceive an opportunity to set themselves up as defenders of a national virtue – tolerance, extended to extreme expressions, of the right of assembly – the government is engaged in a perilous balancing act: denouncing the exploitation of Islamophobia by foreign powers that are often highly undemocratic, while dissociating itself from repulsive manifestations of xenophobia. A public enquiry, launched in August to examine revising the standards on freedom of expression, will deliver its conclusions on 1 July 2024. Relying on well-established consensual mechanisms, the government is seeking to break a deadlock that places Sweden in an outlying – and uncomfortable – position.

This article was originally published in French