

SWEDISH MUSLIM CONGREGATIONS

– Summary of a research project

Islam is the fastest growing religion in Western Europe today. As a consequence, the emergence and growth of Muslim religious congregations is one of the most important changes that have taken place within the European third (or voluntary) sector in the last 20 years. However, more often than not, these congregations are described as “enclaves” or “integration traps” isolating new citizens from the rest of society, a picture that has remained largely uncontested due to a lack of more extensive research.

The intention of the *Swedish Muslim Congregation* project is to present – for the first time in Europe – nationally representative data about the activities and roles of local Muslim congregations. We have concentrated primarily on three problem areas:

Our aim, *first*, has been to map the congregations' demography and activities (especially the extent of voluntary social work). *Second*, we have investigated Muslim experiences of the reactions of others in their surrounding environments, as reported by congregation representatives. To what extent do Muslim congregations encounter local opposition and support? *Third* is our focus on Muslim congregation collaboration with other organizations and public institutions. The Scandinavian welfare model boasts a long established emphasis on collaboration between third sector, municipal and state organizations. Are the Muslim congregations able – and willing – to connect to the established forms of cooperation that already exist in Sweden between the public and third sectors?

An essential part of the project is the nationwide questionnaire sent to the 147 local Swedish Muslim congregations that we identified, to which we received 105 replies (a 71 percent response rate). Non-response analysis showed no

statistically significant differences in response propensity that could be connected with the different existing schools of Islam, nor with the type of municipality (metropolitan, small town, rural district, etc.)



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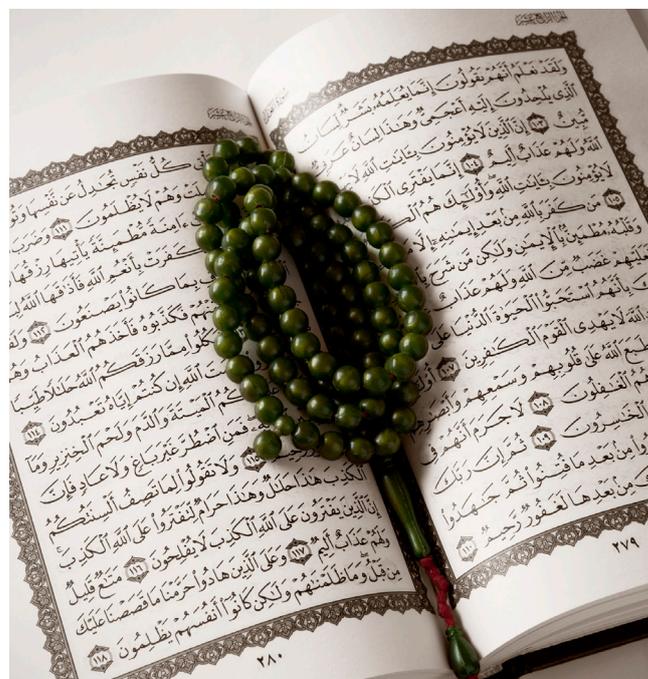
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Muslim congregations – A demographic profile

The largest group among Muslim congregation members comes from Europe, defined as persons from member countries of the Council of Europe (44.9 percent). Next follows the group comprising the various Arab nations (26.2 percent), then other countries of Africa (14.5 percent) and the other Asian countries (14.4 percent).

The congregations' ethnic composition varies from the homogeneous to the widely heterogeneous. Ethnic diversity is the dominating characteristic, however, and the average of distinct ethnic groups is four. Only about one-fifth of the congregations are entirely homogeneous, i.e., contain only members from in effect a single ethnic group. In other words, the vast majority of Muslim congregations in Sweden are a melting pot for the faithful with backgrounds in different cultural and local Islamic traditions.

Women make up 40 percent of the membership and stand for most of the congregations' social work. Roughly 40 percent of members are 17 years or under, while 10 percent are over 65.



Voluntary social work

Muslim social work embraces both mutual support among congregation members and social activities within the surrounding local community.

Outreach activities of different kinds make up an important part of the voluntary social work. Almost half of the congregations organize visits to hospitalized persons and organized activities directed to older persons in various forms of senior housing are common. More than one-fourth of the congregations carry out activities for persons incarcerated in prisons. The Imam or specially appointed visiting groups meet with inmates who wish to discuss religious issues or who simply want some social exchange. Some of the larger congregations also have special follow-up programs for released prisoners.

Another important part of congregation activities is offering support to persons newly arrived in Sweden. Organised activities for recent immigrants exist in roughly one-fourth of the congregations. The forms of these activities cover a wide register and can be anything from informal study circles in the Swedish language to lectures on the functioning of the Swedish society.

In the congregations' inner work, family counseling and conflict guidance play a large part. Roughly 60 percent of the responding congregation representatives stated that they were active in the area of guidance and counseling. Further, activities directed to children and youth are an often highly prioritized area. The kernel of these activities is study of the Qur'anic classes, which is tradition in the mosques of countries with a Muslim majority population and takes place also in the majority of Swedish Muslim congregations. Here, studies of the Qur'an, and of the common theological language of Islam, Arabic, is central, but there is a great deal to suggest that these religious courses increasingly are being expanded to include discussion of how one can live as a Muslim in Sweden.

Besides studies of the Qur'an, about half of the congregations carry out other organized activities for children and youth. The forms of these activities vary from simple outings and sports activities in the smaller congregations to ongoing summer vacation activities, summer camps and scout groups in the medium and large sized ones.

Co-operation

The new Muslim congregations increasingly are becoming partners in the established forms of local cooperation between the third sector and the municipalities. Almost half of the congregations are represented, for example, in local consultation organs or in housing area committees of various kinds.

It is also relatively common for Muslim congregations to initiate contact with local politicians, with 47 percent stating that they have invited representatives of political parties to participate in mutual discussions.

But Muslim congregations do not only involve themselves with the municipality and local politicians. They also cooperate with other third sector organizations, e.g., tenant associations, educational associations, women's crisis centers, temperance organizations and other religious communities. One-third of the congregations collaborate in local cooperation groups for religious communities and many more congregations state that they would be positive to such cooperation if only given the chance.

At the same time, there are reservations. Islam in Sweden is a heterogeneous and complex mosaic of different directions, traditions and practices. In this heterogeneous context, there are both tendencies to openness and to introversion. There are Muslim communities in Sweden where far-reaching demands for religious purity obstruct the work of overcoming segregation and growing alienation. However, the available data show that openness and a desire for cooperation are in general the *dominant characteristics* among the congregations. Through this research project, it has also been possible to study the inner and outer factors that support and encourage openness and cooperation.

Internal factors

In the West European discourse on Islam, it is sometimes argued that the social work of the Muslim communities is part of a self-elected isolation from the surrounding society. Our project shows that statements of this type are without true foundation. The Swedish Muslim congregations that carry out

the most extensive social work are also those that are most open, most involved in cooperation with other organizations and institutions, and have the most positive experiences of the Swedish society.

But what other characteristics do the communities share that are important for the degree of openness and cooperation?

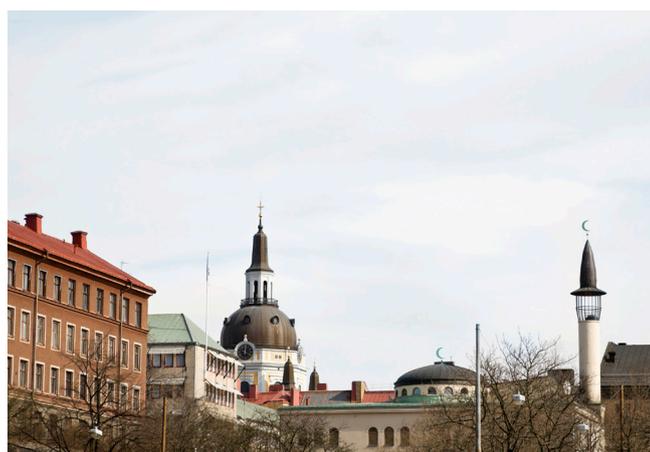
Such factors as the age of the congregation, it turned out, had no bearing on the degree of openness or inclination to cooperate. Neither was the extent of openness and cooperation affected by to which of the schools of Islam the congregation adhered. However, the number of different ethnic groups within a congregation correlates positively with openness and inclination to cooperate. This means, in brief, that openness to different religious traditions within Islam – the precondition for a multi-ethnic community – also corresponds to a greater openness towards the society at large and a strong emphasis on collaboration with other organisations.

External factors

The internal characteristics of the congregations are naturally not the only factors that influence cooperation in practice. Cooperation demands two sides, and various conditions in the surrounding environment may either encourage or be detrimental to such relations. So, what outer conditions may have a bearing on Muslim congregation cooperation with other groups?

An entirely fundamental precondition for any cooperation is the Scandinavian welfare model, which boasts a long established emphasis on collaboration between third sector, municipal and state organizations. For Islam in Sweden, which is so highly synonymous with local, from each other independent organizations, opportunities for cooperation are above all created within the local community.

We found – hardly surprisingly – a connection between inclination to cooperate and experience of support from the surrounding local community. More unexpected, however, was that cooperation is also positively correlated with the amount of opposition, for which the explanation is as follows. When religious communities are exposed to hostility, e.g. through aggressive letters to the press or the vandalism of property, this seems to have a mobilizing effect on the potentially sympathetic organizations and individuals in the community, who rise up to defend the right of Muslim congregations to practice their faith. When these opposite forces become visible, it then also becomes possible for Muslim congregations to identify allies and to develop cooperation with new partners.



We found as well that congregation's attitudes to cooperation are connected to local socioeconomic conditions. Cooperation is less extensive in large and relatively well-off municipalities, and more widespread in smaller and socioeconomically less favored ones. The explanation for this is a combination of opportunities and problems. The dealings of Muslim congregations with public municipal activities, but also with other third sector organizations, are probably facilitated in smaller municipalities where there is also greater incentive to cooperate in order to meet and master the social challenges.

Opposition and anti-Islamic currents

As the immigrants Muslims in Western Europe often are, they encounter xenophobic hostility, exclusion and discrimination, but added to this, they also encounter anti-Islamic prejudice. Anti-Islamic attitudes have deep roots in Europe and – above all since the September 11 terror attacks – these negative trends have intensified.

How, then, are active Muslim believers and congregations in Sweden affected by these anti-Islamic tendencies?

An alarming finding is that one-fourth of Muslim congregations have suffered criminal forms of harassment. Such actions have a strong coupling to two types of situation. First and foremost international events associated with Islam. The repercussions of these events on the local plane illustrate the close relation between local resistance activities and the national and international anti-Islamic discourse. The other type of situation concerns local visibility. When a congregation launches plans to build a new mosque or to inaugurate new premises, the presence of Islam in the public space becomes concrete and antagonists find that they have a representation of the "alien" in their midst against which to direct their rage.

However, a majority of the representatives of Muslim congregations are of the opinion that they *most often* encounter respect. The situation can thus be described as complex rather than only negative. Such a view is also close to the ones communicated in comparative European studies concerning general public attitudes to Islam. Xenophobia and anti-Islamic sentiment appear to be less prevalent in Sweden than in other investigated West European societies.

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