

American Foreign Policy Council

DENMARK

QUICK FACTS

Population: 5,593,785 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 43,094 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Scandinavian, Inuit, Faroese, German, Turkish, Iranian, Somali

Religions: Evangelical Lutheran (official) 80%, Muslim 4%, other (denominations of less than 1% each, includes Roman Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Serbian Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Baptist, and Buddhist) 16% (2012 est.)

Government Type: parliamentary constitutional monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$302.6 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated January 2017)

OVERVIEW

In February 2015, a few weeks after the attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris, a young man of Palestinian background attacked a public meeting about freedom of speech and subsequently a synagogue in central Copenhagen. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the incident, which is believed to be the first Islamist attack to take place in Denmark. In recent years, the Danish government's focus on violent Islamism has centered on the issue of foreign fighters travelling to Syria and the potential threat they could pose when they return. According to the Danish security and intelligence service, PET, approximately 135 people have travelled from Denmark to Syria since 2012.¹

The history of militant Islamism in Denmark, however, dates back to the 1990s, when veterans of the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union found safe haven in the country. Today, violent Islamism in Denmark remains far from a well-organized domestic phenomenon, although there have been notable instances of homegrown extremism among Dan-

ish Muslims, with individuals joining foreign militant movements such as al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab and the Islamic State. In the main, however, violent Islamists are very few in number and vastly outnumbered by non-violent Islamist groups.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Militant Islamism in Denmark dates back to the 1990s, when several former *mujahideen* from the Soviet-Afghan war (1980-89) found safe haven there. One of the most prominent personalities in this group was an Egyptian, Talaat Fouad Qassem aka Abu Talal (1957-1995), who was a high ranking member of the militant Egyptian group *al-Gamaat al-Islamiyya*.² In 1982, Abu Talal was sentenced to seven years imprisonment in Egypt for his alleged role in the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. He escaped during a prison transfer in 1989, and in 1992 an Egyptian court sentenced him to death in *absentia*.³ In 1989, he went to Afghanistan, where he joined the anti-Soviet *mujahideen* and fought alongside his personal acquaintance, Ayman al-Zawahiri. In 1992, he migrated to Denmark, where he was granted political asylum in three years later.⁴

Abu Talal was extremely well-connected to international *jihadists*. He had close ties to Egyptian cleric Omar Abdel Rahman, the “blind sheikh” who was an unindicted co-conspirator in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, and who visited Denmark twice (in 1990 and 1991 respectively) ahead of that failed plot.⁵ Investigations of the World Trade Center attack revealed that three other Egyptians residing in Denmark—and part of the same milieu as Abu Talal—were directly related to the perpetrators of this attack.⁶ Abu Talal was also well-connected to Anwar Shabaan,⁷ head of Milan’s controversial Islamic Cultural Institute, which has been the subject of terrorist investigations since the 1990s. Abu Talal is believed to have been the victim of an early form of extraordinary rendition, the extrajudicial kidnapping and transfer of a person across national borders, when he was intercepted in 1995 in Croatia by U.S. intelligence while on his way to Bosnia. He was apparently sent back to Egypt, where he subsequently disappeared.⁸

Another prominent member of this first generation of *jihadists* was Danish-Moroccan Said Mansour. Mansour hosted Omar Abdel Rahman during one of his visits to Denmark. An ardent supporter of the Algerian terrorist group GIA, Mansour was involved in the distribution of their newsletter, *Al Ansar*, and was affiliated with the notorious London-based Islamist Abu Qatada. Mansour ran a publishing house, Al Nur Islamic Information, through which he disseminated material inciting Muslims to violence. (Materials from Al Nur were subsequently found worldwide at locations related to terrorist investigations in Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium and the U.S.).⁹ In 2007, Mansour was convicted of “incitement to violence” and was released in 2009. Five years later, he was convicted for similar offences and this time stripped of his Danish citizenship.¹⁰

Following the 2005 London bombings, a new iteration of militant Islamism appeared in Denmark. In contrast to the first generation of the phenomenon, embodied by Abu Talal and Mansour, this second generation is primarily homegrown in nature, and often includes first-generation Danes. The first cases of Islamist terrorism in Denmark after the London bombings were strictly homegrown plots, planned by Danish citizens or residents with few links to Islamist milieus abroad. Since 2007, however, Islamist terrorist plots have also involved “returnees” who have come back to Denmark after joining militant Islamist groups abroad, or—in the aftermath of the so-called “cartoon controversy”—by foreigners with no prior connection to Denmark.

After the outbreak of the cartoon controversy in 2005, and in particular after the republication of the cartoons by several Danish newspapers in 2008, Denmark became a high-end target of militant Islamist organizations, including of al-Qaeda and like-minded groups (*Lashkar-e Taiba*, AQIM, AQAP, and *al-Shabaab*), as well as of autonomous cells operating in Europe. From 2008 through 2010, six plots targeting either the *Jyllands-Posten* daily newspaper or one of the cartoonists have been thwarted. The people behind the first two plots were Danish residents, but in 2009 and 2010, four plots were attempted by foreigners with no prior relation to Denmark.¹¹

In December 2010, a Tunisian living in Sweden and two Swedish citizens of Arab descent were arrested on the outskirts of Copenhagen. Yet another Swedish-Tunisian was subsequently arrested in Sweden. All four men were convicted for planning to access *Jyllands-Posten*'s office in Copenhagen and subsequently kill as many employees as possible. The Swedish group was well-connected internationally. One of the convicted previously had spent several years in a training camp in North Waziristan; another had been arrested in Pakistan and Kenya on prior occasions.¹²

Since 2012, a number of Danish citizens and residents has joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq. The Danish intelligence Service, PET, estimates that 135 people at the minimum have traveled to the conflict zone to date.¹³ Jakob Sheikh, a journalist from the Danish daily *Politiken*, has collected independent data about 77 Danish citizens or residents who have traveled to Syria, with interesting results. It appears that not all of those who have traveled to this location are *jihadists* or Islamists; while some have joined Islamic State or the Nusrah Front (now Jabhat Fatah al Sham), others have joined secular Kurdish groups or the Free Syrian Army. Irrespective of their affiliation, a large majority of Danish foreign fighters are born and raised in Denmark. A small number of Danish foreign fighters have been convicted upon their return.

Although the Danish security and intelligence service has for years emphasized the threat of Islamist foreign fighters, the first Islamist attack perpetrated in Denmark did not in fact involve a former foreign fighter. In February 2015, a few weeks after the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, Danish-Palestinian Omar el-Hussein attacked a public

meeting about freedom of speech and later the same day a synagogue in central Copenhagen. Two people were killed and several police were wounded, while the perpetrator was subsequently killed in a shootout with police. Hussein was a petty criminal who had just been released from prison, when—apparently inspired by the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks—he decided to carry out violence of his own. The Islamic State subsequently claimed responsibility for the events, and honored Hussein by publishing a glowing obituary in their online magazine *Dabiq*.¹⁴

The incident is reflective of a larger trend. A majority of the people involved in recent terrorist plots and attacks—in Denmark as well as in other European countries—have a background in criminal environments and not necessarily in radical Islamist groups. Hence, the link between Islamism and terrorism, which is often taken for granted, must and is being examined more closely. The idea of radicalization as a process, where someone increasingly comes under the spell of radical Islamist ideology, no longer has the same analytical traction as it did ten years ago. Pathways eventually leading to terrorism are rarely processes from ideology to violence, but more often lead from one form of violence (gang related crime) to another (terrorism).¹⁵

However, the number of Muslims in Denmark who actively support violent forms of Islamism is very small. Militant Islamists are by far outnumbered by Muslims involved in non-violent Islamist groups. Among the most controversial is *Hizb ut-Tabrir* (HT). *Hizb ut-Tabrir* put down roots in Denmark in the mid-1980s, although the Danish branch of the organization was not formally established until the mid-1990s.¹⁶ British HT members were instrumental in the establishment of the group's Danish contingent,¹⁷ and the movement's Copenhagen leadership committee was subsequently elevated to head the group's regional affairs, as reflected in its current title "*Hizb ut-Tahrir* Scandinavia."¹⁸ The organization has an estimated 150 active members, but attracts around 1,000-1,200 people to its public meetings.¹⁹

Ideologically, HT aims to reestablish a Caliphate in the Muslim world. Therefore, unlike the classical Muslim Brotherhood, the group is against the modern notion of the "nation-state." HT considers democracy an un-Islamic invention, and urges Danish Muslims not to engage in politics or take part in elections. It does, however, seek to engage in debates with select intellectuals. The organization as a whole does not engage in violent activities, but supports "defensive *jihad*" in places such as Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan. The group's public meeting in January 2011 caused considerable controversy, as it endorsed continued resistance in Afghanistan, which was interpreted by many as encouragement to kill Danish soldiers serving there.²⁰ Former HT spokesperson Fadi Abdullatif was convicted twice for "threats, flagrant insults and incitement to murder" against Jews, as well as against former Danish prime minister (and former NATO Secretary General) Anders Fogh Rasmussen.²¹ Various political parties have argued that HT should be banned, and in 2015 after the terrorist attacks

in Copenhagen, the Minister of Justice, Mette Frederiksen, made yet another request to ban the group. However, the Danish Attorney General have at several occasions ruled that there were no legal foundations for such a ban.²²

The extremist group, The Call to Islam (*Kaldet til Islam*) used to be very visible in public and regularly attracted media attention. It had close ties both to the former London-based cleric, Omar Bakri Mohammed, and to his successor in the UK, the notorious Anjem Choudary, who in 2016 was convicted for pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. Back in 2012, The Call to Islam organized demonstrations in front of the French and U.S. embassies, where Bakri and Choudary intervened by delivering speeches from abroad that were screened in front of the embassies. Similarly, they have demonstrated against a parade honoring Danish veterans from the war in Afghanistan; publicly announced the establishment of sharia zones in certain areas of Copenhagen; and during the 2015 elections for parliament, they urged Muslims not to participate in elections and even tore down the election posters of Muslim candidates. After 2012, several people from this group traveled to Syria, where they joined the ranks of the Islamic State; some of them—including the leader-figure Shiraz Tariq—were later reported dead.²³

Aside from HT and The Call to Islam, The Grimhøj Mosque in the city of Aarhus (*Wakf*) regularly attracts media attention. A large number of the young men and women who travelled to Syria from the city of Aarhus used to attend this mosque, which therefore has come under suspicion of being a hub of radicalization. Political initiatives to close down the mosque have hitherto been fruitless, however, because the imams have a constitutional right to free speech, and therefore are deemed to have committed no infraction of the law.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Muslim immigration to Denmark began in the 1960s, and proceeded in essentially two waves. During the 1960s and 1970s, immigrants from Turkey, Pakistan, North Africa and the former Yugoslavia came to Denmark to work. After the mid-1970s, a second wave of newcomers to the country was made up primarily of refugees, as well as the families of earlier immigrants who had stayed in Denmark. Conflicts in the Arab and Muslim world (including the Iran-Iraq war, as well as the civil wars in Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia, and Somalia) also prompted Muslim immigration to Denmark, as have the more recent wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

While no official census of Muslims in Denmark exists, some preliminary data is available. As of January 2016, the proportion of Muslims in the total population was estimated to 284.000, which is 5 % of the total population. One year before, the number was 4.7% and the increase is a result of the large number of Syrian refugees who came to Denmark in 2015.²⁴ Denmark's Muslim community is ethnically very

diverse. The largest group are Turks (19.9 percent), followed by Iraqis, Lebanese (Palestinians) and Syrians (9.3 percent, 8.7 percent and 8.5 percent, respectively).²⁵ Today, the main contingents of refugees come from Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia.

A precise estimate of the level of support for violent Islamist groups among Danish Muslims is difficult to obtain since the Danish intelligence service does not make such estimations public. Similarly, it is difficult to identify the reasons some Danish Muslims are attracted to violent Islamism; a general climate of Islamophobia in Denmark is often cited as one such cause, but many other factors also play into such attraction.

It is, however, beyond doubt that, since September 11, 2001, public debates on Islam and Muslims have become increasingly incendiary, culminating with the publication of the infamous 12 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and the surge in the number of refugees seeking asylum in 2015. The year 2001 coincided with the rise to power of a minority right wing government that—for the first time in Danish history—depended on parliamentary support from the country’s anti-immigration and Islam-critical nationalist party, the Danish Peoples Party (DPP), to gain the majority. The DPP has been instrumental in articulating a “struggle of values” against Islam, which it considers necessary in order to defend Christianity and “Danishness.”²⁶ In public debates, Islam and Muslim are increasingly framed as a security issue.²⁷ Successive ministers of foreign affairs have for instance maintained that Islamism constitutes “the most important totalitarian threat today.”²⁸ A spike in the number of refugees in 2015 (primarily from Syria and Afghanistan) has prompted a public discourse that frames refugees as potential terrorists and a threat against Danish values. The current minister for integration, Inger Støjberg, has at several occasions urged Muslims who are not supportive of “Danish values” to “buzz off to their countries of losers.”²⁹

Recently, several other parties on the far right with ambitions of running for parliament have made their appearance alongside the DPP (in particular the *Nye Borgerlige* and *Danskernes Parti*). These parties argue for an even tougher approach to refugees and immigrants than does the DPP, and repeatedly question the “Danishness” of Muslims, including those who are born in Denmark and hold Danish citizenship. In September 2016, an opinion poll estimated that DPP and *Nye borgerlige* would get 22.6 % of the votes in case of an election.³⁰

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

After the September 11 terrorist attacks and the London bombings in 2005, the Danish parliament passed two Anti-Terrorism Acts (in 2002 and 2006 respectively).³¹ The first Act *de facto* amended the Danish penal code by introducing a separate terrorism provision (Chapter 13, §114) that increased the punishment for a variety of

previously-proscribed acts if carried out with the *intention* of “frightening a population,” or destabilizing “the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization.”³² The maximum sentence for committing an offense under the new terrorism provision was raised to life in prison. This Anti-Terrorism Act also penalizes the provision of financial services to terrorist groups and gives authorities new tools to fight terrorism, including secret searches; the logging of telephone and Internet communications; easier access to computer surveillance; expanded ability to refuse or withdraw residence permits, and so forth.

Following the July 7, 2005 subway bombings in London, Danish perceptions of the threat from militant Islamism changed, and the greatest danger became seen as primarily “homegrown” in nature. In order to prevent the domestic processes of “radicalization,” a series of preventive measures was set up by the Ministry of Integration in tandem with PET, which established a preventive department in 2007. Over the years, this host of preventive measures has morphed into a “Danish model” that has attracted worldwide attention.³³ The Danish approach to preventing extremism and radicalization is based on extensive multi-agency collaboration between various social-service providers, the educational system, the health-care system, the police, and the intelligence and security services.³⁴ This approach has abandoned the idea of doing “anti-radicalization”—that is, changing the extremist mindset—in favor of “disengagement,” i.e. exit-programs for persons who want to get out of extremist environments in Denmark.³⁵

To prevent Danish citizens and residents from going to Syria, a law was passed in 2015, which made it possible for the police to administratively confiscate passports from people who had the intention of travelling to Syria or to similar conflict areas.³⁶ So far, the police have confiscated only a small number of passports. Moreover, a new law adopted in June 2016 criminalizes the act of entering specific areas in Syria and Iraq without a preceding travel permit issued by the Ministry of Justice.³⁷

ENDNOTES

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