Denmark

Quick Facts

Population:5,869,410 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 43,094 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Danish (includes Greenlandic (who are predominantly Inuit) and Faroese) 86.3%, Turkish 1.1%, other 12.6% (largest groups are Polish, Syrian, German, Iraqi, and Romanian) (2018 est.)

Government Type: Parliamentary constitutional monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): $325.6 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)

Introduction

The history of militant Islamism in Denmark dates back to the 1990s, when veterans of the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union were granted political asylum in the country. Today, violent Islamists are few in number and vastly outnumbered by non-violent Islamist groups. Nevertheless, a majority of political parties in the Danish Parliament regard Islam and Muslims with suspicion.

Islamist Activity

Several former *mujahideen* from the Soviet-Afghan war (1979–89) were granted political asylum in Denmark during the 1990s. One of the most prominent personalities in this group was an Egyptian, Talaat Fouad Qassem, a.k.a. Abu Talal (1957–1995), who was a high-ranking member of the violent Egyptian group al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya.[1] 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 subsequently went to Afghanistan, where he joined the anti-Soviet *mujahideen* and fought alongside Ayman al-Zawahiri. In 1992, he migrated to Denmark, where he was granted political asylum.[2]

Abu Talal was extremely well-connected to international *jihadists*. He had close ties to the late Egyptian cleric Omar Abdel-Rahman, the "blind sheikh" who was later indicted and arrested for conspiracy to conduct the 1993 World Trade Center Bombing among a series of other attacks against targets in New York. Abdel-Rahman visited Denmark twice (in 1990 and 1991),[3] and investigations of the World Trade Center attack revealed that three other Egyptians residing in Denmark – and part of the same milieu as Abu Talal – had direct links to the perpetrators of this attack.[4] Abu Talal is believed to have been the victim of an extraordinary rendition when he was intercepted in 1995 in Croatia by U.S. intelligence agencies while on his way to Bosnia. He was sent back to Egypt, from where he subsequently disappeared. Human Rights

Watch believes that he was tortured and executed.[5] Rahman died in 2017 in an American prison.

Said Mansour was another prominent early *jihadist*. Mansour hosted Omar Abdel-Rahman during one of the latter's visits to Denmark. An ardent supporter of the radical Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA), Mansour was involved in the distribution of the group's newsletter, *Al Ansar*, and was affiliated with the notorious London-based Islamist Abu Qatada.[6] 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 United States.[7] In 2007, Mansour was convicted of "incitement to violence" by the municipal court of Copenhagen and served a two-year prison term. He was released in 2009. In 2014, he was convicted for similar offences, stripped of his Danish citizenship, and deported two years later.[8]

Following the 2005 London bombings, a new iteration of militant Islamism appeared in Denmark. In contrast to the first generation of this phenomenon, as embodied by Abu Talal and Mansour, the second generation was primarily homegrown and included first-generation Danes.

After the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published a series of cartoons that depicted the prophet Mohammed in 2005, and the cartoons were recirculated by several Danish newspapers in 2008, Denmark became a high-priority target of al-Qaeda and like-minded groups in Europe.[9] From 2008 through 2010, six plots targeting either the *Jyllands-Posten* daily newspaper or one of its cartoonists were thwarted. The individuals behind the first two plots were Danish residents.[10] However, four plots were attempted by foreigners with no prior relation to Denmark, including one conceived by American citizen David Headley, who was also involved in the 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai, India.[11]

Although the Danish security and intelligence service has emphasized the threat of Islamist foreign fighters, the only Islamist attack perpetrated in Denmark did not involve one. In February 2015, a few weeks after the attack on French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, Danish-Palestinian Omar el-Hussein attacked a public meeting about freedom of speech and later a synagogue in central Copenhagen. Two people were killed, and several members of the police were wounded in those incidents. The perpetrator was subsequently killed by law enforcement personnel. 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.[12] Although there were no direct links between the two incidents, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the events and honored Hussein by publishing a glowing obituary in its online magazine, *Dabiq*.[13]

In May 2017, a seventeen-year-old Danish girl was convicted for plotting to carry out two terrorist attacks, including an attack on a Jewish school, *Carolineskolen* in Copenhagen, and her own school in the village of Fårevejle.[14] The girl was not part of an Islamist milieu, although she had been in contact with a returnee from Syria who had fought with both the Free Syrian Army and ISIS. While being held in custody, she wrote letters to another returnee convicted of having joined ISIS in Syria and stripped of his Danish citizenship.[15]

Since 2012, at least 158 Danish citizens and residents have joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq.[16] Journalist Jakob Sheikh has collected independent data regarding 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 one of the several *jihadist* organizations active in Syria, others have joined secular Kurdish groups or the Free Syrian Army.

The number of Muslims in Denmark is approximately 322,000, equivalent to 5.5% of the population.[17] Of these, only a very small fraction actively support violent forms of Islamism or belong to non-violent Islamist groups, according to the most recently available figures.[18]

Among the most controversial of those nonviolent organizations is Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT). Hizb ut-Tahrir has operated in Denmark since the mid-1980s, although the Danish branch of the organization was not formally established until the mid-1990s.[19] British HuT members were instrumental in establishing

the group's Danish contingent,[20] 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.[21] Although there are no official numbers, estimates prior to 2017 suggested that the group has between 100 and 150 active members, as well as the ability to attract approximately 1,000 people to public meetings. Since then, however, that number has decreased, with recent estimates by former members indicating that HuT now has well below 100 members in Denmark, most of who are inactive.[22]

Ideologically, HuT aims to reestablish a *caliphate* in the Muslim world. Therefore, unlike organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the group is opposed to the modern notion of the nation-state. Because HuT considers democracy an un-Islamic invention, its doctrine urges Danish Muslims not to engage in politics or take part in elections. 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 Denmark in January 2011 caused considerable controversy, as it endorsed continued resistance in Afghanistan, which was interpreted by many as encouragement to kill Danish soldiers.[23] Former HuT 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.[24] Various political parties have argued that HuT should be banned, and in 2015, after the terrorist attacks in Copenhagen, Minister of Justice Mette Frederiksen made yet another request to ban the group. However, after a total of three investigations, the Danish attorney general ruled that there were no legal foundations for such a ban.[25] In 2016, the city of Copenhagen banned HuT from renting space in any government buildings, and the group has not been notably active in several years.[26]

Aside from HuT, the Grimhøj Mosque in the city of Aarhus (Wakf) regularly attracts media attention. A majority of the men and women who travelled to Syria from the city of Aarhus once attended this mosque, which therefore has come under suspicion as being a hub of radicalization. Political initiatives to close down the mosque have hitherto been fruitless, however, because its *imams* have a constitutional right to free speech and therefore are deemed to have committed no infraction of the law.[27]

Islamism and Society

Muslim immigration into Denmark began in the 1960s and 1970s, when immigrants from Turkey, Pakistan, North Africa, and the former Yugoslavia made their way to the country to work. After the mid-1970s, a second wave of newcomers to the country took shape, made up primarily of refugees as well as the families of earlier immigrants who had stayed in Denmark. Conflicts and political repression 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 conflicts in Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, and Syria.[28]

Since September 11, 2001, public debate on Islam and Muslims in the country has become increasingly incendiary. 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 political majority. The DPP has been instrumental in articulating a "struggle of values" against Islam and Muslims, which it considers necessary in order to defend Christianity and "Danishness."[29] In public debates, politicians increasingly frame Islam and Muslims as security threats.[30]

Yet, today, the DPP is not the only party that adopts a critical and suspicious attitude towards Muslims, immigrants, and refugees (categories that are often conflated). A majority of the political parties in parliament do as well. These parties are the Nye borgerlige (The New Conservatives), Venstre (The Liberal Party), Konservative (The Conservative Party), Liberal Alliance (The Liberal Alliance) and Socialdemokratiet (The Social Democratic Party). A spike in the number of refugees in 2015 (primarily from

Syria and Afghanistan) prompted a public discourse that framed refugees as potential terrorists and a threat to the welfare of the Danish state, although there is no evidence available that supports the claim.[31] The inflammatory discourse framing refugees as a threat culminated in January 2016 with the passage of a controversial bill allowing Danish police to seize cash and valuables from refugees to pay for expenses related to their stay in Denmark.[32]

Islamism and the State

After the September 11th terrorist attacks and the subsequent London bombings in 2005, the Danish parliament passed two anti-terrorism acts (in 2002 and 2006, respectively).[33] The first act amended the Danish penal code by introducing a separate terrorism provision that increased the punishment for a variety of 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."[34] 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, monitoring internet communications is computer surveillance, and expanded ability to refuse or withdraw residence permits.

Following the July 7, 2005 subway bombings in London, Danish perceptions of the threat from militant Islamism changed. In order to prevent domestic radicalization, a series of preventive measures were set up by the Ministry of Immigration and Integration in tandem with the domestic intelligence service, 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.[35] 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.[36] This approach has embraced deradicalization exit-programs for persons who want to leave extremist groups, rather than counter-radicalization.[37]

To prevent Danish citizens and residents from going to Syria, a law was passed in 2015 that 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.[38] So far, the police have confiscated only a small number of passports in this fashion, however. Additionally, a new law adopted in June 2016 criminalizes the act of entering specific areas in Syria and Iraq without a preexisting travel permit issued by the Ministry of Justice.[39]

Also in 2015, the Aarhus municipal government launched the so-called "Aarhus Model" for countering and preventing violent extremism.[40] Primary responsibility for the Aarhus model is a collaborative effort between schools, social services, and the municipal police department. These offices then work in conjunction with the Aarhus University Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, the Danish Security and Intelligence Service, and private sector experts from relevant fields. The model itself uses a system of early warning sign identification to flag would-be violent extremists. If certain risk factors are observed after a police investigation, the individual in question will be contacted and state resources offered. These include mentoring programs, workshops, and inter-Muslim community dialogue, as well as the facilitation of a network for parents of radicalized youth, which can then exchange resources and ideas on how to raise a child in this specific situation.[41]

In April 2019, the Ministry for Immigration and Integration published a list of a total of 114 amendments that would allow police in Denmark to seize any and all "non-essential assets" – goods worth less than 10000 kroner (roughly $885) with no sentimental value – carried by asylum seekers.[42] The center-right Rasmussen government claimed the amendments were designed to help recoup the cost of refugee settlement; however, the legislation remains deeply controversial and divisive.[43] After the general

election in June 2019, Immigration Minister Inger Støjberg was replaced by Social Democrat Mathias Tesfaye, and The Danish People's Party lost their immediate influence on the government and legislation. So far, this has resulted in Denmark receiving 200 refugees from Rwanda with UN status. However, no other major changes of policy have as yet materialized.[44]

In October 2017, a majority of the parties in the Danish parliament expressed their support for a bill banning the *burqa* and the *niqab* from the public sphere. Thus, since August 2018, Denmark has joined the host of countries that have banned these garments.[45] Moreover, in August 2017, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which remains the largest party in the parliament, advocated the closing of all Muslim private schools in Denmark. This was most recently advanced by Mette Frederiksen, the current party leader and Prime Minister; she based her arguments on apparent cases of headmasters and teachers promoting terrorist organizations, the schools failing to support gender equality, as well as promotion of hateful and discriminatory attitudes toward the country's Jewish minority.[46] Although the government shifted in 2019 from a right-wing supported liberal and conservative to a social democratic government, the political line towards the country's Muslim minority has not changed in any major way.

Endnotes

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