



DENMARK

Quick Facts

Population: 5,605,948

Area: 43,094 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Scandinavian, Inuit, Faroese, Turkish, Polish, Syrian, German, Iraqi

Religions: Evangelical Lutheran (official) 76%, Muslim 4%, other (denominations of less than 1% each, includes Roman Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Serbian Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Baptist, and Buddhist) 20%

Government Type: Parliamentary constitutional monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$306.7 billion

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated November 2017)

In February 2015, 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 focus of Danish governments on violent Islamism has centered on the issue of foreign fighters travelling to Syria or Iraq and the potential threat they could pose when they return. According to the Danish security and intelligence service, PET, approximately 145 Danes have travelled to Syria or Iraq since 2012.¹ Due to the rollback of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, this travel pattern has stopped, and the threat of violent Islamism in Denmark has changed in nature, becoming largely one of homegrown threats and radicalization.

The history of militant Islamism in Denmark, however, 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. In October 2017, in a sign of that hostility, a majority in the Parliament expressed their support of a bill banning the burka and niqab in the public sphere.²

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY:

Militant Islamism in Denmark dates back to the 1990s, when several former mujahideen from the Soviet-Afghan war (1979–89) were granted political asylum there. 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.³ 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 three years later.⁴

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 an unindicted co-conspirator in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Abdel-Rahman visited Denmark twice (in 1990 and 1991) 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—had direct links to the perpetrators of this attack.⁶ 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 agencies while on his way to Bosnia. He was sent back to Egypt, from where he subsequently disappeared. Rights watchdog Human Rights Watch believes that he was tortured and executed.⁷

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 United States).⁸ In 2007, Mansour was convicted of "incitement to violence" and served a two-year prison term. He was released in 2009. Five years later, he was convicted for similar offences and this time stripped of his Danish citizenship.⁹

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, this second generation was primarily homegrown in nature and often includes first-generation Danes. The first signs of Islamist terrorism in Denmark after the London bombings were homegrown plots, involving Danish citizens or residents with links to the radical activist organization *Sharia4UK* in London. 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 reproduction of those cartoons by several Danish newspapers in 2008, Denmark became a high-priority target of al-Qaeda as well as of like-minded groups in Europe. From 2008 through 2010, six plots targeting either the *Jyllands-Posten* daily newspaper or one of its

cartoonists have been thwarted. The individuals behind the first two plots were Danish residents. Yet in 2009 and 2010, 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.¹⁰

Although the Danish security and intelligence service has emphasized the threat of Islamist foreign fighters, the only Islamist attack perpetrated in Denmark did not in fact involve a former foreign fighter. 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 police were wounded; in those incidents. The perpetrator was subsequently killed by the 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. 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 their online magazine *Dabiq*.¹¹

Since 2012, at least 145 Danish citizens and residents have joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq.¹² As ISIS has declined in those countries, travel to this region by Danish extremists has stopped. However, journalist Jakob Sheikh 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 Nusra Front (now *Jabhat Fatah al Sham*), others have joined secular Kurdish groups or the Free Syrian Army. Irrespective of their affiliation, the vast majority of Danish foreign fighters are born and raised in Denmark. One in seven are Danish converts to Islam.¹³

These numbers confirm a general tendency. In contrast to the first and second generation of violent Islamism, milieus supportive of Islamist terrorist groups today have become more diverse. In May 2017, a seventeen-year-old Danish girl was, for instance, convicted for preparing two terrorist attacks, including an attack against a Jewish school. The girl was not, strictly speaking, part of an Islamist milieu, although she had been in contact with a returnee from Syria who had fought with both the Syrian Free 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.¹⁴

However, the overall number of Muslims in Denmark who actively support violent forms of Islamism is negligible. Militant Islamists are by far outnumbered by Muslims involved in non-violent Islamist groups. Among the most controversial is *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HT). *Hizb ut-Tahrir* put down roots in Denmark in the mid-1980s, although the Danish branch of the organization was not formally established until the mid-1990s.¹⁵ British HT members were instrumental in the establishment of the group's Danish contingent,¹⁶ 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*.¹⁷ Although there are no reliable figures as to the actual number of HT members, the organization has an estimated 100–150 active members, but attracts around 1,000–1,200 people to its public meetings.¹⁸

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. 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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 has at several occasions ruled that there were no legal foundations for such a ban.²¹

Aside from HT, 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 apparently 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 1970s, when 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 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.

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 percent of the total population. One year before, the number was 4.7 percent, and the increase is the result of the large number of Syrian refugees who came to Denmark in 2015.²² 70 percent of Muslims in Denmark are Danish citizens.²³ 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).²⁴ In 2017, the main contingents of refugees came from Syria, Morocco, Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Iran.

Since September 11, 2001, public debates on Islam and Muslims have become increasingly incendiary. 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 and Muslims, which it considers necessary in order to defend Christianity and “Danishness.”²⁵ In public debates, politicians increasingly frame Islam and Muslims as a security threat.²⁶

Yet today it is not only the far right nationalist party DPP that adopts a very critical and suspicious attitude towards Muslims, immigrants, and refugees (categories that are

often conflated). Rather, a majority of the political parties in parliament do as well. 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 to the welfare of the Danish state, although there is no evidence available that supports this claim.²⁷ The 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.²⁸

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE:

After the September 11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent London bombings in 2005, the Danish parliament passed two anti-terrorism acts (in 2002 and 2006, respectively).²⁹ 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.”³⁰ 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 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.³¹ 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.³² This approach has abandoned the idea of doing anti-radicalization—that is, changing the extremist mindset—in favor of disengagement—that is, exit-programs for persons who want to get out of extremist environments.³³

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.³⁴ 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.³⁵

The state does not only interfere with Islamists in security-related cases. 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. Denmark will thus join the host of countries that recently have banned these garments.³⁶ Moreover, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which is the largest party in the parliament, has recently advocated the closing down of all Muslim private schools in Denmark. The party-leader, Mette Frederiksen, argue that there are cases of headmasters and teachers promoting terrorist organizations, that the

schools do not support gender equality, and that they have a hateful attitude to the Jewish minority in the country.³⁷

ENDNOTES

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