

# **SWEDEN 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for “the freedom to practice one’s religion alone or in the company of others” and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The government facilitates revenue collection for 15 diverse religious groups through the taxation system, and distributes publicly funded grants to 42 applicant religious groups in proportion to membership. The police initiated a national strategy to combat hate crimes that included the establishment of permanent hate crime units focusing on, among other things, religiously based hate crimes in the three largest urban areas and increased hate crime detection and prevention capabilities nationwide. National and local authorities granted expedited permission for Malmo’s Jewish congregation to install video surveillance equipment at its facilities. Some Muslim groups continued to express concerns about profiling in existing and proposed anti-terror legislation. Some Muslim and Jewish communities also expressed concern about restrictions on animal slaughter, and some Jews said the laws on circumcision interfered with their religious traditions. The prime minister and other government officials repeatedly stated their public support for religious freedom in general and the protection of the Jewish community in particular. Politicians participated in public demonstrations condemning violence against mosques and synagogues.

The number of recorded hate crimes and cases of discrimination based on religion increased for all groups. Reports of anti-Muslim hate crimes increased 50 percent, anti-Christian hate crimes increased 75 percent, anti-Semitic hate crimes increased 38 percent, and hate crimes against all other religious groups increased 23 percent. Muslims, especially women, were targets of verbal and physical abuse. Arsonists targeted two mosques and two churches using Molotov cocktails. An imam and a rabbi in Gothenburg received bomb and death threats on separate occasions.

U.S. embassy staff and U.S. government visitors, including the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, met with state and local authorities to advocate for increased protection of religious minorities. The Ambassador condemned anti-Semitism in a speech on International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Senior embassy staff visited religious leaders in Malmo to promote religious tolerance in response to reports about anti-Semitism. The U.S. embassy sponsored the participation of a young civil society leader working against anti-Semitism and xenophobia on a U.S. government exchange program aimed at promoting religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 9.8 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the Church of Sweden (Lutheran), approximately 64.3 percent of citizens are members. According to government statistics and estimates of religious groups, other Christian groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Pentecostal movement, the Missionary (or Missions) Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), total less than 7 percent of the population. Researchers estimate that approximately 4.5 percent of the population is Muslim. According to the Official Council of Swedish Jewish Communities, Jews number approximately 20,000 and live mostly in large cities.

Smaller religious communities are mainly concentrated in larger cities and include Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, and members of the Church of Scientology, Word of Faith, International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), and the Unification Church.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides "the freedom to practice one's religion alone or in the company of others." The law mandates that there be no limitation of rights or freedoms on the grounds of religious opinion.

The constitution instructs public institutions to combat discrimination based on religious affiliation. Complaints about discrimination for religious reasons in the private sector, in the government, or by a government agency or authority must be filed with the Discrimination Ombudsman (DO). The DO represents an individual in the event of legal proceedings.

The constitution states "the opportunities of religious minorities to preserve and develop a cultural and social life of their own shall be promoted." No one is obliged to belong to a religious community or "divulge religious beliefs in relations with public institutions."

Recognition or registration is not required to carry out religious activity. Faith communities are taxed similarly to nonprofit organizations.

According to the law, animal slaughter must be preceded by stunning and/or the administration of anesthetics to minimize the animal's suffering

The law stipulates that male circumcision may be performed only by a licensed doctor or, for boys under the age of two months, in the presence of a person certified by the National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW). The NBHW has certified *mohels* (individuals who conduct ritual Jewish circumcisions) to perform the operations but require an anesthesiologist or other medical doctor to accompany them.

The government facilitates fundraising by religious groups by offering them the option of collecting membership fees through the internal revenue service in exchange for a one-time fee of 75,000 Swedish kroner (SEK) (\$8,883) and an annual fee of SEK 21 (\$2.50) per member per year. Religious groups participating in the scheme freely choose what percentage of members' annual taxable income to collect, at a median rate of 1 percent. In addition to the Church of Sweden, 14 religious organizations participate in the scheme, including the Roman Catholic Church, two Muslim congregations, and two Syriac Orthodox churches.

The government provides publicly funded grants to religious groups through the Commission for State Grants to Religious Communities (SST), a governmental body under the authority of the Ministry of Culture. The SST does not give priority to any one religious group, and registration with the SST is not mandatory to establish or operate a religious organization. Religious groups can apply for grants from the SST, which are distributed in proportion to membership size.

Individuals serving in the military are given the opportunity to observe religious customs. The military offers food options compliant with religious dietary restrictions and allows time off for appropriate mourning periods. Each military district has a chaplain who holds the position regardless of his or her religious affiliation. In religious issues, the chaplain represents his or her own faith but is responsible for arranging contact with military chaplains from other faiths as requested. Some regiments have an imam to facilitate Muslim soldiers' religious observance. Jehovah's Witnesses are exempt from national military service. Armed forces guidelines allow religious headwear. Individuals serving in the military may observe their particular religious holidays in exchange for not taking time off on public holidays.

Religious education to include all world religions is compulsory in public and private schools. Parents may send their children to government-supported independent religious schools, which must adhere to government guidelines on core academic curricula.

Hate speech laws prohibit threats or expressions of contempt for persons based on several factors, including religious belief.

Law enforcement authorities maintain statistics on hate crimes, including religiously motivated hate crimes. Authorities can add a hate crime classification to the initial reporting or to existing charges during an investigation, as well as at the trial and sentencing phase of a crime, as appropriate.

### **Government Practices**

Some Muslim and non-religiously based political groups continued to criticize the government's implementation of antiterrorism laws and its proposals for more expansive antiterrorism legislation. Critics said both existing and the proposed new laws included profiling and risked stigmatizing and placing collective blame on the country's Muslim community as a whole.

Politicians, media, and Jewish groups criticized and called for the resignation of Bjorn Soder, a member of the Sweden Democrats and second deputy speaker of parliament, for stating in an interview that "you must distinguish between citizenship and nationhood" and that he believed that "most [people] of Jewish origin who have become Swedes should abandon their Jewish identity." Soder remained in his post.

A September ruling by the Swedish Broadcasting Commission criticized the country's national publicly funded radio broadcaster, Sveriges Radio, for a segment in which one of its reporters asked the Israeli Ambassador if Jews bore some responsibility for increased anti-Semitism. Sveriges Radio retracted the segment and issued a public apology.

Some Muslim groups and all Jewish groups stated they considered the requirement for stunning and/or administration of anesthetics to be in conflict with their respective rituals for animal slaughter. The Muslim community remained divided over whether the legal requirement to stun or anesthetize animals before slaughter conformed to halal requirements. The Jewish community reported that the laws

concerning the slaughter of animals effectively prevented the production of kosher meat. Most halal and all kosher meat was imported.

Some Jews stated the law on male circumcision interfered with their religious traditions.

The government established permanent police hate crime units in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmo as part of a national strategy released in March to combat hate crimes, including religiously motivated hate crimes.

In August local authorities gave Malmo's Jewish congregation expedited permission to place four video cameras outside the city's synagogue as a security measure. Authorities granted permission after four weeks, compared to the customary five months.

The government distributed SEK 77.6 million (\$9.2 million) to 42 religious groups in 2014, including to the Uniting Church in Sweden, the Swedish Pentecostal Movement, the Roman Catholic Church, the Islamic Cooperation Council, the Jewish Central Council, the Swedish Buddhist Cooperation Council, and 17 Christian Orthodox churches.

In June the government appropriated SEK 7 million (\$829,000) for the protection of religious groups. The funds will be managed by the SST, from which religious groups can apply for grants to improve security measures.

In January the prime minister spoke at the Great Synagogue of Stockholm on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The prime minister affirmed the government's support for the protection of the Jewish community and stated "your right to practice your faith is a human right that we must never betray."

The government-funded Living History Forum continued its efforts to educate youths about intolerance to Jews, Muslims, and other groups, using the Holocaust and other crimes against humanity as its starting point.

School-sponsored visits to Holocaust sites such as Auschwitz were common educational tools. Students participated in such trips regardless of religious background. The Living History Forum estimated that 10 percent of all primary and secondary school students had visited a Holocaust site as part of their education.

In January local and national politicians, including the minister for culture and democracy, participated in protests against attacks on mosques and in gatherings to support religious freedom.

In February Prime Minister Stefan Lofven joined more than 500 people in the creation of a human “ring of peace” around the Great Synagogue of Stockholm in response to a lethal armed attack on the Jewish congregation in Copenhagen. The prime minister stated in his speech: “Now it is up to us to stand up for religious freedom and never let hatred take power over our lives. We must ensure that all people can feel safe in our country.”

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to the government’s National Council for Crime Prevention (NCCP), individuals reported 1,248 hate crimes directed at Muslims, Christians, Jews, and other religious groups to the police in 2014, the most recent year for which figures were available. One-half of one percent of respondents aged 16–79 in an NCCP study stated that they had been the victim of an anti-religious hate crime in 2013. Reports of anti-Muslim hate crimes increased by 50 percent to 492 in 2014, which constitutes the highest figure since the category was first included in statistics in 2006. The most common forms of anti-Muslim hate crime were unlawful threats/harassment (40 percent), hate speech (30 percent), and violent crimes (12 percent). Sixty violent anti-Muslim hate crimes were reported in 2014. The NCCP reported that women were targeted in a majority of reported anti-Muslim hate crimes, predominantly in conjunction with wearing veils.

In 2014 the NCCP registered 267 anti-Semitic crimes during the year, compared with 190 in 2013, a 38 percent increase. This was the highest registered level of anti-Semitic hate crimes since 2009. Anti-Semitic incidents included threats, verbal abuse, vandalism, graffiti, and harassment in schools. These incidents were often associated with events in the Middle East and actions of the Israeli government, and Jews were at times blamed for Israeli policies.

Reported anti-Christian hate crimes increased by 75 percent to 330 in 2014, which constituted the highest figure on record. The most common forms were

vandalism/graffiti against churches, graveyards, and other Christian buildings (49 percent) and unlawful threats/harassment (35 percent). Twenty-seven violent anti-Christian hate crimes were reported.

Reported hate crimes against religions other than Islam, Christianity, or Judaism totaled 159, including 37 violent hate crimes. The number of hate crimes reported in this category has grown steadily from 20 cases in 2011. .

In February five Muslim women told the media about being victims of repeated verbal and physical abuse in public for wearing veils.

In January a TV show called “Uppdrag Granskning” (Mission Investigation) sent out a reporter wearing a *kippa* (yarmulke) to test attitudes towards Jews in Malmo. The reporter was cursed and told to “get out.” A dozen men shouting anti-Semitic slogans threatened the reporter and people in apartments overhead threw eggs at him. In a follow-up show, the reporter asked why he was met with such hatred. The perpetrators said it had to do with the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The Jewish community cancelled all activities, including religious services, on November 18 and 19 as a precautionary measure due to an increase in the national terrorism threat level by the security police.

On International Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27, a neo-Nazi group blocked the entrance to the offices of a local newspaper in Falun with signs stating “the Swedish people are not interested in any whining about dead Jews.” The incident was reported to the police as hate speech.

A video posted on social media in October showed pro-Palestinian protestors in Malmo allegedly chanting “slaughter the Jews” and “stab soldiers,” and called on others to carry out “terror attack after terror attack.”

Academics and the Jewish communities in Stockholm and Malmo stated that youth of Middle Eastern origin perpetrated many of the anti-Semitic hate crimes.

On January 8, an individual threw a can filled with pork through the window of a mosque in Mariestad along with anti-Muslim graffiti. A day later, a bomb threat was reported concerning a mosque in Gothenburg during a Friday prayer service.

A young civil society leader reported receiving numerous threats during the year as a result of his work to promote religious tolerance and combat anti-Semitism.

In August, an arsonist threw three Molotov cocktails at a church in Amal. Vandals attacked a church in Norberg nine times in the spring, including painting Nazi graffiti and attempting arson.

More than 1,500 people gathered in the country's largest cities in January to protest recent attacks on mosques and support religious freedom. In February local politicians and the general public participated in a *kippa* walk in Malmo, in which Jews and non-Jews wore Jewish symbols to protest anti-Semitism following the attack against the Great Synagogue of nearby Copenhagen in which a Jewish man was killed. On February 27, hundreds of youth formed a 'ring of peace' around a synagogue in Stockholm to demonstrate solidarity two weeks after the killing. The demonstration was organized by several activist groups, including Young Muslims against Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia and Young Roma.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The Ambassador and other embassy officials engaged regularly with the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Culture, the Commission for State Grants to Religious Communities, the National Coordinator to Combat Violent Extremism, and national and local police on issues related to overcoming religious tensions, increasing religious tolerance, and protecting specific religious groups.

The embassy hosted a number of speakers and nongovernmental associations from the United States to promote appreciation of religious diversity and the role of minority religious communities, especially the Muslim community, in a vibrant society.

On International Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27, the Ambassador spoke about the need to combat anti-Semitism at an event in the Great Synagogue of Stockholm. The Ambassador said: "We must all condemn anti-Semitism, intolerance, and discrimination – whenever and wherever we are faced with it. That is how we honor and remember the millions who perished, and the few that survived. Never again. Never again." The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with leaders of the Jewish community at the national and local levels throughout the year, and supported initiatives to enhance the community's security and welfare.



In March the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism visited Stockholm and Malmo. The special envoy and U.S. embassy representatives met with the minister for culture, the minister for home affairs, and the mayor of Malmo to encourage them to strengthen their efforts to combat anti-Semitism. The special envoy also met with Jewish representatives in both cities to discuss their ability to practice their religion freely and safely. The special envoy further underscored these messages through an op-ed piece and a panel discussion on the issue hosted by the Ambassador. The Ambassador and the special envoy also participated in a ceremony in which Raoul Wallenberg's family placed his Congressional Gold Medal on display at the parliament. Raoul Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews from the Holocaust and was posthumously made an honorary citizen of the U.S. in 1981.

On August 27, the U.S. embassy participated in the third annual awarding of the Raoul Wallenberg Prize to promote religious tolerance.

In September the U.S. embassy sponsored a young civil society leader working against anti-Semitism and xenophobia for a three-week program for civil society representatives in the United States to study grassroots efforts to promote religious freedom. The participant was subsequently promoted religious tolerance through speaking at schools and in the media.

U.S. embassy representatives visited Muslim and Jewish leaders in Malmo in April and September to promote interfaith tolerance and signal U.S. support for religious minorities.