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Misrepresenting Muslims? Critical Perspectives on Migration Policy Change in Sweden 2015-2023



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Abstract

Drawing upon an analytical combination of critical security studies (CST) and intersectional theory (IT), we in this article focus on migration policy in Sweden 2015-2023 with a particular focus on representations of Islam and Muslims. Using thematic analysis, arguments, and statements raised by key political actors, i.e., the Swedish Government and the radical-right/retrotopian party Sweden Democrats, we study the threats as perceived to legitimize the Swedish Government's turn to a more restrictive stance. Exploring the official, justifying points of this policy turn, we also exemplify our approach by referencing policy repercussions related to the Russian attack on Ukraine. Outstanding findings in the material include continuous attempts to de-masculinize Muslim men who are constructed interchangeably as welfare recipients, violent and eager terrorists, exponents of criminal behavior in general, or failing in their role as protectors of women and children. All in all, these findings are representations of a particular 'Swedish' culture, the welfare state and individual responsibility implicating a mission to save a national 'We' from a foreign 'Them' built around negative stereotypes of Muslims. In addition to illustrating the analytical strength of securitization theory, we also demonstrate the complementary capacity of intersectional theory for an analysis of migration policy change.

Keywords

migration • Muslims • security • intersectionality • gender



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Misrepresenting Muslims? Critical Perspectives on Migration Policy Change in Sweden 2015-2023

After a period of rather generous migration policy, Sweden around 2015 turned toward becoming more and more restrictive as accentuated by the so-called Tidö Agreement 2023 between the four party liberal-conservative government and its allied populist, radical right party - the Sweden Democrats.¹ Following the Eastern uprisings ('Påskupploppen') in 2022, Sweden gained a reputation as a country where Quran burnings are legally allowed and conceived appropriate behavior by segments of the electorate and, so far, acceptable by the majority of political parties. Thus, the Quran burnings are recent expressions of a trend in a country not so long ago associated with multiculturalist policies and relative tolerance toward religious minorities but where intolerance against Muslims has become more common in Swedish society, triggered and legitimized by the Sweden Democrats, largely regarding 'Muslims' and radical 'Islamists' as synonymous.

However, the Diversity Barometer (Ahmadi et al., 2018) reported an increase in negative attitudes toward cultural diversity and attitudes toward Muslims in Sweden from 2005 to 2014. Later investigations, as well as the experiences of Muslims living in Sweden, have revealed a similar pattern. The 'no handshake' incident occurring in Sweden in 2016 is illuminating. Just after being nominated to the executive position of the Green Party, a Muslim man greeted a female journalist by putting one of his hands on his heart instead of shaking his hands. Exposing himself to criticism from feminists within his party (Ibrahim, 2016), the Minister for Upper Secondary Education and Knowledge (Holmqvist, 2016), proclaimed feminists outside party politics, as well as the Swedish Prime Minister, and after the heated debate in the media following this, the Muslim man withdrew from executive positions the day after. While the debate clearly indicated that there is no such thing as a particular Muslim view on handshaking, the reactions followed a well-established pattern where Muslim men and women are deprived of any possibility to claim religion to be relevant for them as politicians. They are tolerable only when they are not visible as Muslims. They might then be read as 'good' Muslims with the special task of disciplining 'bad' Muslims (Johansson & Darvishpour, 2020).

In the present article, Swedish migration policy change since 2015 is analyzed with a particular focus on representations of Muslims, which we consider a fresh take on the process whereby Swedish migration policy was substantially more restrictive (Fernandez, 2020). What arguments were raised in support of a more restrictive migration policy? How can these arguments be understood as gendered at the intersections between ethnicity and religion? We approach the topic from perspectives partly drawn from previous research on Muslims in Sweden (Elander et al., 2015), critical securitization theory (Elander et al., 2022), and intersectional theory (Johansson & Darvishpour, 2020). The purpose is threefold. First, an analytical combination of IT and CST is argued and constructed. Second, the potential of the approach is illustrated through a study of the changes in Swedish migration policy since 2015. Third, a concluding reflection is presented on the relevance of combining the two approaches in future studies.

Literature review

A rich scholarly literature exists on both Muslims and migration policy in Western politics in the 21st century. Cesari (2009) established a connection between attitudes toward Muslims in Europe and migration

¹Tidö is the name of a castle in eastern Sweden, where the new four-party coalition entered into a post-election agreement with the Sweden Democrats.



policy: 'Most Muslims [in Europe] are immigrants or have an immigrant background' (p. 2). She referred to figures indicating that Muslims constitute a substantial part of the population in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Belgium. Evidenced by Goździak and Mårton (2018) on anti-Muslim sentiments and rhetoric in Poland and Hungary—countries with virtually no Muslim population—Europe also has examples of 'Islamophobia without Muslims' (p. 130). The authors also indicated that the connection between attitudes toward Muslims and migration policy in Europe was strengthened by the European refugee crisis that appeared in late autumn 2015, with migrants coming from countries with predominantly Muslim populations. The policy responses in the various European countries (in general toward more restrictive measures) and the problem representations and discourses accompanying the measures taken have been studied intensely and extensively in national as well as cross-national contexts.

Exploring contemporary fears of Islam and Muslims in Europe and migration policy change, the critical security studies framework (Browning & McDonald, 2013) has proven extremely useful. Cesari (2009) illuminated the process whereby a 'Securitization of Islam in Europe' was taken place in the West after 9/11 as Muslims increasingly were associated with terrorism (and vice versa). Evranos (2023) studied the securitization of Islam in France. Moreover, referring to terrorist acts in the West from 9/11 and on, Huysmans (2006) critically approached European migration policy as a means of solving security problems. Bigo (2002) did less of the terrorism context but was successful in establishing a perspective on how immigration increasingly appears a security concern by technologies, administrative practices, the habitus of certain groups of professional workers, and neoliberal governmentality in a risk society trying to cope with unease. To this end, we can add many studies that apply a critical security studies lens to migration policy change in specific European country contexts.

Kaya and Tecmen (2019) conducted a discourse analytical study on manifestos and speeches of the ways in which five populist parties in Europe, Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, National Front (FN) in France, Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, and Golden Dawn (GD) in Greece, employ fear of Islam as a political instrument to mobilize their supporters and to mainstream themselves. The authors claim that these parties have recently generated a civilizational discourse to expand their electorate. Acknowledging the difficulties of pin-pointing M5S on any left-right scale, Kaya and Tecmen represent a research interest in right-wing populist/radical right political parties, a major force in migration policy change during last decades all over Europe. Considering the often very straightforward and open aversion against Islam and Muslims in the rhetoric or policy proposals of those political parties, critically studying these parties is valuable. In our view, however, studies in right-wing populist/radical right political parties often come at the expense of neglecting the articulation of prejudices and negative attitudes toward Muslims in mainstream politics. For some researchers (Johansson & Dashti, 2024; Bauer et al., 2023) this motivated them to study attitudes toward (Muslim) migrants by critically studying civic integration programs. This research also has great value. However, critically studying civic integration programs runs the opposite risk of leaving right-wing populist/radical right political parties aside investigations.

In our view, a particular strength of the critical security studies framework in relation to our research interest in representations of and attitudes toward Muslims and migration policy is its capacity to accommodate engagement with mainstream politics as well as with populist/radical right politics. However, while feminist approaches to security studies constitute a major strand within critical security studies, gender dimensions relating to attitudes toward Muslims and the hardening of migration policy in Europe (Goździak and Mårton, 2018) are somewhat under-researched. What is especially needed are more studies that draw on

insights from masculinity studies (Kimmel, 2017) that engage critically with the making of men as gendered beings, which includes acknowledging male privilege and power over women, differences among men (and women), and the costs of masculinity for men. Acknowledging differences within gender categories such as 'women' or 'men', intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 2013) has been particularly useful in taking those differences seriously, investigating them rather than making them invisible. Regarding the concern with ethnicity/race within intersectional theory, there is a body of research available that emphasizes the ethnification/rasification of anti-Muslim and anti-Islam rhetoric and sentiments, hence reproducing white supremacy over that perceived of as non-white. There is also a well-established scholarship on racialised masculinity (Norocel et al., 2020; Ferber, 2019; Kimmel, 2017).

Conceptual and Methodological Frameworks

We are primarily interested in how Muslims are being represented in Swedish national policy-making rather than their self-representation, although we give two brief examples of Muslim self-representation just to clarify the contrast between the two angles Muslims equated with 'Islamists' versus 'Muslims' in less radical versions. Even when not self-identifying as Muslims, some migrating from Muslim-dominated countries are nevertheless regularly positioned as 'islamists', i.e. stigmatized. For example, in Sweden 'Muslims' in general have been and are still often synonymously referred to as 'radical islamists', thus disregarding that in reality the label may include a wide range of possible Muslim self-identifications (NN1). Thus, some people identify with their religion, while others see themselves as cosmopolitans, connected to various cultures worldwide. All these identifications may also be complemented by identification with a particular nation, e.g., Sweden, Iran, Palestine, or Israel, and there are also generational differences. Indeed, religion can be a strong driver for collective action, as illustrated by individuals and groups of believers taking faith-based action on issues of welfare and social justice, or by terrorist groups inspired by fundamentalist interpretations of a particular religion (Herrington, 2021). Individual Muslims then choose different strategies to express their faith in terms of being 'retreatist', 'engaged' or 'essentialist/antagonistic' (Kinnvall & Nesbitt-Larking, 2011). In other words: 'Islamic imaginaries are highly diversified /.../ they should never be reduced to a mere anti-Western, anti-modern, ultimately anti-global resistance. They present us with various articulations of the global game of matching conflict and cohesion through civility' (Salvatore, 2016, p. 291).

According to data compiled by the Agency for Support for Faith Communities, there are probably around 450 000 inhabitants in Sweden being 'cultural Muslims' whereof one third being members of Muslim associations of various kinds (Larsson 2014, p. 114, 139). Just to illustrate the falseness of stereotyping most Muslims as outright Islamists, we give one male and one female illustration. An outstanding example of a non-Islamist, even non-confessional Muslim, in Sweden is Murrahem Demirok, son of a Turkish working-class immigrant, member of the Swedish Parliament and in February 2023 elected as chairman of the originally agrarian-nationalist Center Party². He says, 'I am not a believer. Religion has never succeeded in catching me. But I have my roots in a Muslim culture and call myself a cultural Muslim /.../ My life had been much simpler if I had never called myself a cultural Muslim, but I won't deny my origin, my family or who I am' (Murrahem Demirok as quoted in Orrenius, 2023). A Muslim woman working as a student curator contrasts this picture:

²The Center Party in the latest election to the Parliament 2022 received 7,1 per cent of the votes, as compared to 0.4 per cent by the outright Muslim party Nyans.



There is nothing making me as unsafe as when the Sweden Democrats repeat their hatred against Muslims, and the government parties just keep silent. Hatred that inspires those who burn Qurans, want to close mosques and say Muslims cannot become Swedes /.../ and want to reduce ourselves to two sorts of Muslims – the kind Muslim and the extremely dangerous Muslim /.../ I wonder whether people reflect upon how absurd it would be if other Swedes were also divided into two groups (Deland, 2023).

This quote illustrates how the trope through which anti-Islam sentiments express itself by the binary Good Muslim/Bad Muslim (Mamdani, 2002) – ‘the kind Muslim and the extremely dangerous Muslim’ in the quote – might be identified and experienced as threatening by an ordinary Muslim living her life on a non-elite level in contemporary Swedish society.

Regarding ‘security’, we focus on the making of security positions, i.e. ‘securitizations’ (Buzan, Waever & de Wilde, 1998) through constructions of a threat, reference objects worthy of protection, the need for emergency measures and departures from ‘normal’ politics and established rules of the game. ‘Securitization’ then is a rhetorical device that legitimizes policy change. This perspective has proven relevant in previous research on attitudes toward Islam, migration, and migration policy in the West (Cesari, 2009). Although research also shows the relevance of other interpretive frameworks for the understanding of migration policy change (Hagelund, 2020), we believe that CST is particularly relevant to our study as it draws upon insights from both the Copenhagen School approach ‘logic of exception’ (Buzan et al., 1998) and the Paris School ‘logic of routine’ (Bigo & McCluskey, 2018; Bigo, 2002), thus illuminating a crucial tension characterizing the insecure position of Muslims in Swedish migration and reception policy.

Applying the CST framework empirically in our study on Swedish migration policy, our focus is on locating and analyzing constructions of ‘threats’ and ‘reference objects’. Threats are conceived of in a broad sense and need not be ‘existential’ to be included in our analysis. The reference objects we study include state, nation, culture, ethnicity/race, civilization, neo-liberal subjects as well as gendered identities with a particular focus on masculinity.

The intersectional theory (IT) emphasizes the interplay between gender and other axes of power (Crenshaw, 2013). Applying this theoretical framework empirically in our study on Swedish migration policy, our focus is on the interplay between gender, race/ethnicity, and religion. Regarding gender focus is on the social construction of men, where we draw on Multi-Dimensional Theory (Mutua, 2012), capturing some of the precarious, non-additive positions of ethnic minority men related to the interplay between gender and ethnicity. For example, being subjected to ethnic profiling, some groups of ethnic minority men are at the greatest risk to be abused by the police as compared to any other category of people. Hence, in some situations, being a man cannot compensate for being disadvantaged by ethnicity/race, but only make things worse as stereotypes can be both gendered and ethnified/rasified. We also make use of the concept ‘de-masculinization’ (Ferber, 2019) to demonstrate that the masculinities of some groups of men are often dependent on making other groups of men appear as less than ‘real men’. Ethnicity/race is a typical case in point, which we also will draw on in our empirical study, as the white masculinity of ethnic majority men might be partly dependent on the de-masculinization of non-white ethnic minority men. Compared to the similar concept ‘feminization’, ‘de-masculinization’ has the advantage of making the reader more attentive toward relations among men, and the identity work, hierarchy making, and competition that often accompany these relations.

The study period is from 2015 to 2023. The sources are print newspaper articles in the four major Swedish dailies, Dagens Nyheter, Aftonbladet, Expressen, and Svenska Dagbladet, as well as the ‘Tidö agreement’



between the government parties and the right-wing Swedish Democrats party. Article search was conducted in the database of Retriever research and based on the use of words such as 'migration', 'migrants', 'migration policy'. In processing the material, the articles generated were scanned manually to identify those containing arguments and statements from key political actors. The key political actors we draw upon are the Swedish Democrats' (SD) party leader Jimmie Åkesson and the same party's Chairman of the Parliamentary [Riksdag] Committee of Justice Richard Jomshof, the current government's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, and former government representatives, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, Minister of Finance Magdalena Andersson, and Minister of Justice Morgan Johansson. Both debate articles signed by key political actors and news articles containing interviews with them were included. The articles fulfilling the selection criteria were read several times.

The data generated were qualitative and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis is 'a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). There are different ways to conduct thematic analysis; ours is a reflexive and critical one. It is reflexive in that it emphasizes the interpretation of data as a creative rather than a mechanical process and in that it acknowledges the active role of theory in any empirical investigation. The proposed method is critical because it identifies the latent aspects of the data beyond its semantic content, that is the words used. This involves identifying the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations and ideologies that shape and affect semantic content. The themes we detected emerged from an interplay between theory and 'data'. The coding was performed manually. Early on, we identified 'threats toward the welfare state' as one of the major themes, but as it later turned out when we engaged more with the literature on Muslims as a security concern in the West, we became less convinced that it qualified as one of the major themes and made it a less central, although still relevant, concern of the empirical analysis. By contrast, the liberal subject was identified as a major theme much later in the analytical process, as we tried to make sense of recent events in Swedish migration policy related to the Tidö agreement.

Dagens Nyheter, Aftonbladet, Expressen, and Svenska Dagbladet are the Swedish dailies with the most readers. Their readers come from all over Sweden. All four are published both in paper and online formats, with readers increasingly consuming online versions. Aftonbladet and Expressen are evening newspapers and have a younger audience compared to Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet, which are morning newspapers and have older audiences.

The Representation of Muslims in Swedish Migration Policy

In November 2015, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven announced the transition from the EU's most generous migration policy to a restrictive policy comparable to other EU countries. What followed next marks a radical shift from the open-hearted rhetoric that Conservative Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt expressed as recently as 2014 (Byström & Frohnert, 2017; Rosén, 2014). 'Temporary' border controls were introduced. The decision was then extended on many occasions, specified to be in line with minimum standards under EU law (Fridolfsson & Elander, 2021; Schierup & Scarpa, 2017; SOU, 2020). At the beginning of May 2018, the government officially announced that it would seek permanent restrictions on immigration (Dagens Nyheter, 2018). Partly because of several decided restrictive measures, the number of asylum seekers has decreased by 150,000 in a few years. In the summer of 2021, a decision was made to change the migration legislation

³A notable exception to the development described here is the new law that entered into force on 1 July 2018 – the so-called high school law – and which concerns minor asylum seekers provided they had arrived before 24 November 2015, waited for more than 15

in the Parliament, which meant further tightening the restrictive stance.³ The number of asylum seekers during 2023 was approximately 12,000 (Migrationsverket, 2024).

Securing Sweden and Western civilization

The tightening of migration policy from 2015 onwards can partly be understood from a problem definition arguing that, in particular, Muslim immigrants were considered to pose a severe threat to 'Swedish values' and 'Swedish culture'. Islam and Muslims were described by the Sweden Democrats as 'our biggest foreign threat' (Åkesson, 2009; see also Åkesson, 2010; Orrenius, 2021). The Sweden Democrat leader at the party's yearly meeting 2023 even suggested forbidding the building of new mosques and other Islamic symbols as well as tearing down existing ones 'where anti-democratic, anti-Swedish, homophobic, antisemite propaganda or information about Swedish society are disseminated' (Åkesson, as reported by Knutson, 2023). The current Sweden Democrat Chairman of the Riksdag Committee of Justice (notably not member of the government!) Richard Jomshof says: 'This is about Islam becoming an ideology threatening our society, our democracy. We have to surpass the binary reflex stating that criticizing a religion is the same as being an enemy to freedom of religion' (Jomshof as quoted in Dagens Nyheter, 2024, Nyheter, p. 10).⁴

A statement from the Sweden Democrat party leader Jimmie Åkesson in connection with the refugee flow caused by Russia's war in Ukraine expresses precisely the point of view that, based on cultural and religious distance to Sweden, there is a difference between 'deserving' and 'non-deserving' refugees:

The more distant the culture a group of individuals come from, the greater the problems this group poses for the society they come to. [Coming from a] Christian and largely Western country in our immediate area [...] I am convinced that the Ukrainian women and children do not, to any appreciable extent, come up with clan structures, gang crime, oppression of honor, organized grant fraud, or demands for religious privileges (Åkesson, 2022).

Referencing Imogen Tyler (2006) and Sara Ahmed (2004), we here notice a reproduction of the 'abject' migrant, which reflects how the Sweden Democrats leader understands himself as part of an imagined, national 'we'. This 'we' will then be associated with attributes defined in the opposite of the 'abject' migrant, who is portrayed as an undesirable, threatening figure in contrast to the image of the 'good migrant', for example, migrants from Ukraine who are constructed as white rather than non-white, and as above all as Christian non-Muslims and not a threat to Western culture and values. The SD party leader summarized the situation in Sweden in 2015 when restrictive migration policy measures were decided upon, saying 'When the whole population of the West is walking around and is afraid that it can collapse on any street corner, at any time, then it's in practice a state of war in which we are.' (interview with Åkesson in Brandel, 2015).

It can be problematized to what extent the 'we' implicated in the quote is a national rather than a European or even civilizational 'we'. While prominent Swedish Democratic party representatives as we have seen expressed at least some worries about threats to Swedish nation and society, the shift in right-wing populist

months on decision on their first application and were now ready to go to high school. This softening of the restrictive policy must be seen against the background that the government was dependent for its continued existence on parties that were critical of the new, restrictive migration policy post-2015.

⁴The current coalition inaugurated in late autumn 2022 includes three political parties: the Moderate Party, the Liberal Party, and the Christian Democrats. However, to get a majority of votes in parliament, they base their governing position upon negotiated support (The Tidö Agreement) from the Sweden Democrats, i.e. an exceptional arrangement in the history of Swedish parliamentarism, as the government is dependent upon an outside party being free to criticize and without governing responsibility. Just a few years before the 2022 election, leading representatives of the three parties in government said they would never make such an agreement with a party like the Sweden Democrats with their radical nationalist anti-Zionist or even anti-Jewish historical record (Hellström & Nilsson, 2010).

rhetoric toward emphasizing Western civilization rather than nation as that worth protecting (Brubaker, 2017; Kaya & Tecmen, 2021) is also identifiable in the sources we refer to above. In this context are Islam and Muslims portrayed as inconsistent with and therefore provocations and serious threats toward a Western civilization seen as fostering liberal values of secularism, tolerance, democracy, freedom, liberty, gender equality and gay rights. This dichotomization is false in that it builds on an extreme oversimplification of Islam and Muslims, the views and attitudes among radical Islamists being read as evidence of a one and only true Islam and Muslim position, when there in reality are numerous ways of understanding Islam. It also draws upon a very idealized, equally homogenizing view on Westerners, where, in reality, nonliberal views on gender equality, gay rights, and Christian nonsecular politics are common in most Western countries and in some of them, also clearly part of public policy.

From initially being a theme associated primarily with Sweden Democrats (SD) in Swedish politics, the imagined threat from Islam and Muslims against Swedish culture and Swedish nation-building has also been taken up by other parties (Kristersson, 2020; Busch Thor & Ekling, 2020). Considering the Swedish governments during this period of change in Swedish migration policy, securing Swedishness was a major concern. In particular were threats toward the Swedish welfare state caused by migration emphasized, which indirectly, though the association in Swedish national conscience of the welfare state with Swedishness, also became an issue about Swedishness. In a December 2017 newspaper interview, the Minister of Finance emphasized the threat to the Swedish welfare state from immigration:

A welfare state cannot be expanded at any time. We saw this very clearly in 2015, and that is where I think we can be self-critical [...] It is obvious that other European countries have more opportunities for housing and education. You get faster management and housing opportunities if you are looking for another European country (as quoted in Dagens Nyheter, 2017).

According to the current as well as the previous Social Democratic-led government, securing the Swedish welfare state in a time of global refugee crisis requires a radical change in immigration policy (NN5). This is due to the perceived lack of financial and administrative capacity of public institutions in addressing the situation. The Swedish governments also referred to the dismissive approach to receiving migrants taken by other EU countries (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017), thereby reproducing notions about Swedish exceptionalism in terms of being 'a humanitarian super power'. Further concerns about Swedishness included emphasizing the value of international collaboration, social rights, and the Swedish work strategy. As virtually all asylum seekers appearing at Swedish territorial borders 2015-2022 migrated to Sweden from countries with predominantly Muslim populations, the radical hardening of migration policy in Sweden during this period were even when not explicitly motivated in such terms largely measures increasing distance toward Muslims.

Muslims Working on Their Selves and Securing the Liberal Subject

While the distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' migrants mentioned overall is in line with and draw on the notion of a clash *between* civilizations, another trope whereby anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments is expressed is by rather emphasizing clash *within* civilizations. Mamdani (2002) discussed how distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims were made in the West in the context of terrorism after 9/11. Maira (2009) included women in the discussion on the productive role of distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims and showed the wider relevance of that binary. What is achieved by using this binary is placing individual



choice and responsibility at the center of discussions about Muslim conditions in society. Like the clash of civilizations rhetoric this is a way in which unjust social structures, colonialism, racism and discrimination are made invisible and can continue to reproduce itself. In what follows, the applicability in contemporary Swedish policy development regarding migration and Muslims is illustrated.

The current government, in its agreement with the right-wing/retrotopian Sweden Democrats, states that it will push immigration policy several steps further in a restrictive direction, implying that asylum should not be accepted in case an immigrant shows signs of 'improper conduct' ['bristande vandel/levnadssätt'] in a wide sense (Tidöavtalet, 2022). Not only having committed crime should be a reason for refusal to stay in Sweden. 'Improper conduct' could also be 'subsistence fraud' [bidragsfusk], 'anti-democratic talk' and contact with individuals and networks practicing or promoting violence. The government has launched a committee to present a detailed package of restrictive measures to be decided at the beginning of 2025. The Minister of Gender Equality states that 'only Swedish citizens have an unconditional right to stay in Sweden' and the committee should even consider the possibility of making individuals 'stateless' (Carp, 2023).

By introducing 'improper conduct' as a ground for non-acceptance to stay in Sweden, individual responsibility was introduced in the security discourse, hence legitimizing even more restrictive migration policy. Discourse focusing on migrants' individual responsibility coexists with discourse emphasizing other policy measures. Following its position as a free-riding support party to the government, the Sweden Democrats step-by-step raised demands for still more restrictive policy measures like bringing in military troops into the streets, enforcing suspected/potential criminals not leaving home and life-time imprisonment for as young as 13 year old criminals.

Indeed, there are Muslims who view it socially and politically desirable to separate Muslims from non-Muslims, i.e. 'extremists [who] articulate and aggregate dissenting voices, thereby amplifying the perceptions that globalization and discourses on terror are directed against them' (Nesbitt-Larking, 2010, p. 152). However, Muslims in Sweden are generally first- or second-generation immigrants, as in other societies employing various strategies of retreat, civil engagement, or sometimes essentialism (NN1). In this context, mosques are important not only as sacred places in a strictly religious sense but also as intellectual and social hubs for Muslims: places for creating both bonding and bridging social capital. Notably, this overall picture does not exclude the fact that there are also signs of fundamental Islamism popping up, especially in extraordinary cases such as the war between Hamas and the state of Israel. Whether such activism is related to interventions orchestrated by the state of Iran, the Egyptian Brotherhood, or other external sources or not is debated. For example, a heated debate has been held following a recently accepted PhD thesis on the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Association in Sweden (Egyptson, 2023). Notably, although the scientific quality of the thesis has been questioned (it passed with the votes 2-1 by the scientific board), the author himself says: 'I do not regard Muslims as a threat to Sweden. There are many good Muslims fighting against Islamism [...] many Sweden Democrats do not see the difference between Islam and Islamism.' (Sameh Egyptson, cited in Orrenius, 2023).

Securing White Masculinity

Professional migrants, to a very large extent Muslim men of war age, who maybe have been refugees from war, are a completely different matter than [Ukrainian] women and children who come by ferry from Poland. and not to any appreciable extent coming up with clan structures, gang crime, oppression of honor, organized grant fraud, or demands for religious privileges (Åkesson, 2022).



Recalling to statements from Sweden Democrat party leader Jimmie Åkesson in connection with the refugee flow caused by Russia's war in Ukraine, the abject and insecure migrant can also be understood as gendered. In the quote from the SD party leader, traditional notions of masculine and feminine are reproduced in that (some) women and children are made worthy of protection, while masculinity is linked to the role of defender of (some) women and children. Åkesson also has something to say here about 'Muslim men of war age, who maybe have been refugees from war' (Åkesson, 2022). In their context, such statements can be interpreted as attempts to de-masculinize Muslim men who, through migration, are implied to have failed in their role as protectors of women and children. Conversely, the care of Ukrainian women and children becomes part of the SD leader's re-masculinization of himself as a good protector.⁵ Such nationally and ethnically coded male-protector masculinity and the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' men implies a way of trying to distinguish between a desirable, Swedish masculinity and an undesirable non-Swedish masculinity typically attributed to Muslim men.

While protective masculinity is clearly at stake here, we would argue that gender, in line with intersectional theory, needs to be understood as intersecting with race/ethnicity. Therefore, the de-masculinization efforts of the SD-leader might be fruitfully thought of as articulating the superior position of a white man relative to non-white men, and white masculinity as superior to non-white masculinities. This does not exclude that there are also national, civilizational, Christian, secular, or whatever other aspects there are of this dichotomization and hierarchization of men, but as other possible reference objects are vague and often in conflict with each other, what in the end seems to be the issue is white supremacy, and more specifically in context of intersectional theory, white masculinity.

It should be emphasized that Muslim women and children are not clearly understood as worth protection in relation to such ethnically coded male-protector-masculinity. Emphasizing in an interview in 2015 that a significant number (if not most) most of the people who at the time sought asylum were potential terrorists threatening Swedes' physical integrity and physical security, the SD party leader said that '[t]he proportion of terrorists among children and women is probably lower than among men' while also adding: 'But you cannot be sure' (Åkesson, quoted by Brandel, 2015). The fear of Muslim women expressed here can be related to what Goździak and Márton (2018) refer to as a 'fear that Muslim women will bear lots of children and the local population will be outnumbered' (p. 135). Hence, the expressed fear of Muslim women in anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiments also seem in the end to be an aversion to perceived threats from those perceived as non-white.

Turning to mainstream politics, the de-masculinization of Muslim men also involved constructing them as welfare recipients, as the Minister of Finance did in 2017 as refugee migrants, many of them unaccompanied male migrants, were collectively portrayed in these terms (as quoted in Dagens Nyheter, 2017). In the spring of 2016, white masculinity entered mainstream politics in Sweden in connection with the 'no to handshake scandal' that flared up at the time. Following the unfamous comments from Social Democratic Prime Minister Stefan Löfven in media that 'men in Sweden must take women in hand', this resulted in the withdrawal of the Muslim Green Party politician Yasri Khan from party politics (NN4). The notion of fundamental differences in attitudes toward gender equality issues between ethnic Swedes and migrants from countries with predominantly Muslim populations was then already an integral part of civic integration programs ('Samhällsintroduktionen') targeting new arrivals (Bauer et al., 2023). Before that, it had also been

⁵Regarding the protector role masculinities, the distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' men and its colonial aspects see Spivak, 1988, famously addressing the issue of 'white men saving brown women from brown men'.



an integral part of the extensive discussion about honor-related violence that in Sweden saw the light of day after the murder of Fadime in 2002⁶ and which, among other things, resulted in public-funded initiatives in the state and civil society with men's group activities for migrant men. To this need to be added the recurring reproduction since 9/11 2001 of the figure of the culturally doped Muslim terrorist in Swedish news media reporting (Ghersetti & Levin, 2002). All in all, rather than being seen as an exceptional element in Swedish politics, particularly attributed to the Sweden Democrats, negative representations of Islam and Muslims have become part of the mainstream.

Muslim men were not explicitly mentioned in the Tidö agreement on 'inappropriate conduct'. Muslim men were, however, indirectly referred by the context of simultaneous discussion on gang shootings and street violence and stereotypical images of those men as particularly dangerous threats to the security of non-Muslim Westerners. However, as illuminated above in statements from the SD party leader about Muslim women (and children) as potential terrorists, Muslim women (and children) were also perceived as security threats. At a minimum, they were thought to legitimize all kinds of inappropriate conduct attributed to Muslim men. Hence, while traditionally being denied agency of their own, they were also required to behave more properly to avoid a non-acceptance of stay in Sweden.

Conclusions and reflections

What arguments did key political actors raise in support of a more restrictive migration policy in Sweden 2015-2023? How can these arguments be understood as gendered at the intersections between ethnicity and religion? These are the main research questions that we addressed in our study. We approached these questions by combining critical securitization theory and intersectional theory with a particular focus on masculinity. The arguments expressed by key actors concerned perceived threats to the welfare state, Swedish culture and values, and therefore Swedishness, as well as Western civilization, where Muslims often explicitly (typically by Swedish Democrats leaders) but as often implicitly (by government representatives) are included in problem representations in terms of threats to deal with. The arguments can be understood as gendered in terms of de-masculinizing male migrants from countries having predominantly Muslim populations by constructing them as dependent on welfare benefits, de-masculinizing Muslim men by constructing them as cowards and failing to live up to the norms of protective masculinity, and by constructing Muslim men as non-white threats toward (all kinds of) women, hence as threats toward Swedish/Western gender equality values. Hence, in addition to the various reference objects mentioned, the threats posed by Muslims also concerned gendered identities, racialized identities, and white supremacy.

Given the widespread associations between Muslims and terrorism in the West after 9/11, it may seem safe to use critical security theory in this analysis. However, there are many ways of conducting critical security studies, and we do think that some paths are more fruitful than others for throwing light on contemporary aversion in Europe against Islam and Muslims as well as the turn toward more restrictive migration policy. First, we find it important to avoid privileging the state as the primary object to be secured in 'securizations'. True, Muslims are repeatedly constructed as threats toward states, but they are also often increasingly constructed as threats toward many other 'things', be it Western civilization, Europe, whiteness, gender identities or whatever. In fact, it is often extremely unclear what in the end will be secured against perceived Muslim danger, where inconsistencies and the use of vague concepts are rule rather than exception.

⁶Fadime Şahindal, a Kurdish-Swedish human rights activist was born 1975 in Elbistan, Turkey. On January 21, 2002, she was murdered by her father as a case of honor-related violence. He was then punished with life in prison.



One way to make sense of securitizations is to see them as (in the end unsuccessful) ways to cope with ontological insecurity. Securitizations in the West involving Muslims need, however, also be understood as acts of racialization and ethnification of non-white people, hence as acts where white supremacy over non-whites, and the history of colonialism it draws on, are reproduced and legitimized. Essentializing the difference between groups and making invisible its dependence on a history of asymmetric power relations between those groups, securitization contributes to de-politization of societal problems where its history of asymmetric power relations between different groups is made invisible. In recent political agreements on Swedish migration policy, it also manifests through the logic of a neoliberal governmentality appealing to the wish to be included in majority society by passing as a 'good Muslim' clearly differentiated from the 'bad Muslim' by 'appropriate behavior'. Beyond securing neoliberal governmentality by appealing to 'the free will' of Muslims, framing the whole discussion on 'appropriate behavior' in terms of a security problem for the majority population make the segregation, social and economic injustices and the economic system and political ideologies that reproduce them invisible.

We further argue that a fruitful way to conduct critical security studies is to engage with intersectional theory. From the perspective of intersectional theory, gender is regularly at stake in securitizations targeting Muslims, just as ethnicity is, and these aspects intersect, resulting in specific positions of privilege, vulnerability, or both. In particular, intersectional theory provides new insights regarding the precarious positions of Muslim men in the context of stereotypical images of them as eager to terrorism or other forms of dangerous violence. Just as ethnicity and gender together shape specific vulnerable positions for black men who are at the greatest risk of being subjected to racial profiling by the police (Mutua, 2012), we suggest this is also the case for Muslim men. Within critical security studies, men (as gendered beings) and masculinity are somewhat under-researched, particularly Muslim men and masculinity. We argue that an intersectional perspective focusing on the interplay between gender and ethnicity is crucial for making sense of the positions and vulnerability of Muslim men in contexts where they are perceived as security threats. That is not to deny the precarious positions of Muslim women in intersections between gender and ethnicity, some of which we also touched upon in the findings, but rather to suggest more research on the costs of masculinity for men. The example of the Swedish Democrats party leader in a debate article portraying Muslim men 'in war age' as less masculine also suggests that masculinity indeed is a complex issue regarding Muslim men, as many stereotypical portrayals of them as extremely dangerous rather construct them as too masculine. Such tensions in white masculinity discourse between construing Muslim men as too masculine or lacking masculinity are worth exploring further.

The study of media representations is crucial. When studying print-media representations, media assume the status of a meta-player and a primary political player. This is because the other political players mentioned are, in the end, represented and filtered by the media. Further critical consideration of media representation is needed. This includes the perspective first introduced by Marxism, implying that media representation always serves the interests of dominant social groups. In the West, some of these groups are non-Muslim whites. There are different opinions about to what extent Media influences our attitudes by determining the content and shape of the news. Most research on media representation agrees, however, that media at least draws attention to certain directions, sets the agenda of the content of a public debate, denotes and classifies phenomena, and offers identification points (Johansson & Darvishpour, 2020).

In recent years, hate, prejudice, and discrimination against its Muslim minorities have damaged Sweden's international reputation. This country has for a long time (starting with labor market migration from

Turkey in the 1960s) hosting more Muslims relative to its population than almost any other European country while also gaining reputation from the 1970s and on for its multiculturalist policies as well as its liberal and generous policy on refugee migration. The right-wing populist party The Sweden Democrats, which has been represented in the Swedish Parliament [Riksdag] since 2010 and is now the second largest party with representatives in government office, has been key to this development. Thus, Sweden may be well on its way to join forces with many other Western societies where Islamophobia and negative attitudes toward Muslims are increasingly being institutionalized as part of mainstream politics (Goździak & Márton, 2018; Kaya & Tecmen, 2021; Cesari, 2009). Considering the radical shifts in Swedish official migration policy, the last ten years are also a reminder of both the logic of exception and the logic of routine in critical securitization analysis.



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