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Migrants Turned into One

Representation of Swedish Muslim Immigrants
in Swedish Society

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After she had stood up against her father, Pela Atroshi, a Swedish immigrant, was murdered in Iraqi Kurdistan in June, 1999 (Johansson & Hård). Then in January 2002, Fadime Sahindal, also of Kurdish origin, was shot in the head by her father after he found out she had a Swedish boyfriend. These two killings, especially the one of Fadime who had went to the media for help and had spoken in the parliament about integration, sparked a debate on integration and honor-killings (Williams). Yet, the chief investigator of ethnic discrimination and power structures denied that there were any organized honor-killings related to culture (Eriksson). In this essay I will investigate how Muslims are represented and portrayed in Swedish society; I will relate this to the securitization of migration debate; and I will identify problems with how this representation has been carried out and the consequences it has had.

Firstly, there is a need to make a clarification; “Muslim” refers here not only to migrants actively believing in or practicing Islam but also to other groups such as deists, atheists and so forth. “Muslim” is rather as a keyword for all ethnic groups and religions of migrants coming from the Greater Middle East, Central Asia, and so on; in effect it becomes a term for ethnicity and culture rather than religion.¹ Inevitably, when unifying such a large and diverse group under one name they are reduced to a single entity, which is unfair and incorrect (Kaya: 39), but since this essay discusses the representation of these individuals a common term for them is necessary to use.

To understand these issues of representation better, the concept of securitization needs to be introduced. Doty points out that no issues are real security issues by their own nature but that they are constructed, or securitized, and become an instrument of control through this process. However, this is not to say that the actors, the “securitizers,” are fixed or that they are necessarily elites or power holders of society, but that these issues might as well be

¹ Not all Muslims living in Sweden are immigrants; however, the number of ethnic Swedish Muslims are relatively few and do not consist a significant group of society per se.

securitized by the general public. By this process, migration and immigration issues are placed on the on the political agenda and are present in the political discourse as a mean of control, a mean of governmentality. (Doty: 72f). She also relates this to the migration debate: “Immigration and refugee movements come to be seen as invasion necessitating strategic action along the lines of more traditional threats to national security” (77). However, in Sweden, the state often has been passive and turned a blind eye on certain issues, and serious debating on multiculturalism, immigration, and related issues have been politically and socially unacceptable. This is observed by one Swedish social anthropologist:

Even though the situation has changed over the years, it is still politically sensitive to criticize immigration policy in general, or ethnic diversity, or to say anything that might be interpreted as negative about immigrants or the multicultural society. Public presentations which are interpreted – often via the logic of guilt-by-association – as too critical may be understood to imply that the speaker is against a multicultural society *per se*; or that he/she is a racist (Carlbom: 20f)

Another person who touches upon this as well is Sara Mohammad, who is of Iraqi-Kurdish origin and chairwoman of an organization protecting immigrant women’s and girls’ rights.² During a seminar she alleges that her organization has been called islamophobic and even racist after claiming that there is a culture of honor-killings also in Sweden (e.g. the two cases I conveyed in the introduction); a culture that many, herself included, came to Sweden to escape from. Moreover, she criticized, for instance, how boys and girls are separated during swimming classes in schools with a high prevalence of Muslim immigrants, tacit rules in Swedish-for-beginners (SFI) classrooms making men and women not to sit next to each other, and hymen reconstruction surgery for the wedding nights. In her view these phenomena are the result of a feebleness of Swedish society where conservative immigrants are appeased and

² The name of the organization is “Glöm aldrig Pela och Fadime” (GAPF) and was founded in remembrance of Pela Atroshi and Fadime Sahindal.

human rights of Muslim and Swedish children are different; what would never been an accepted treatment of a Swedish child is accepted for a Muslim child in the name of tolerance and diversity (Mohammad). These are exactly the type of issues I argue are important and should be given serious attention; however, according to both Mohammad and Carlbom debates on such issues have been socially and academically unacceptable for a long time.

In the long run, this dampened and silenced a necessary, unavoidable debate. Moreover, it has lead to that the securitization debate effectively has been coming from the roots rather than from elites or state actors; Islamism and fundamentalism in particular are denied or marginalized in the public discourse (Carlbon: 106). Consequently, there has been no real debate on how to cope with Muslims in Swedish society and this, I argue, has proven detrimental since discontent linked to multiculturalism and Islam has not been able to air through socially accepted channels and public debates; instead it has found other ways and voters have turned elsewhere. As some areas of discussion regarding Islam have been “indiscussible” both on an academic and a political level, a vacuum has been created for non-established parties to seize.

This came to the fore when Mona Sahlin, ex-party leader of the Social Democratic Party, was thanked for her service by the other party leaders in her last parliamentary debate before withdrawing from top-tier politics. All of them gave her a gift and commented on what they thought were her strong sides and praised her for the work she had done; however, the leader of the Sweden Democrats, Jimmie Åkesson, did not follow suit: “I do not have a gift, but I do of course want to thank her for the inspiration. The Sweden Democrats is part of the heritage that Mona Sahlin leaves behind and for that we can thank you.”³ (“Tack och adjö”). What Åkesson alluded to was that Sahlin, who earlier had been Minister of Integration, had been

³ In original language: ”Jag har ingen present men jag vill förstås tacka henne för inspirationen. Sverigedemokraterna är en del av det arv som Mona Sahlin lämnar efter sig och det kan vi tacka dig för.”

part of the tradition of ignoring or diminishing issues relating to immigration and multiculturalism and that it, in turn, leads to the rise of the Sweden Democrats.

Further, this silence from the political establishment and media, I argue, is essential in understanding the Sweden Democrat immigration discourse. The Sweden Democratic Party and its members have been, and still remains, a marginalized and socially stigmatized both on a political and social level (“Sparkad för”); however, at the same time they have been growing quickly the last few years (“Allmänna Val”). What makes them different from other mainstream political parties is that they are openly and sometimes harshly criticizing immigration and multiculturalism, and securitizes such issues. The argumentation is oftentimes primordialistic and clearly singles out Islam as a threat. For instance, in a polemic in Sweden’s largest newspaper Åkesson alludes to the Swedish visual artist Lars Vilks who lives under death threat after having depicted the prophet Muhammad as a so called “roundabout dog,” mentions that over ten Islamic terrorist organizations have established themselves in Sweden, and that prominent members of some Muslim groups propose Sharia law—and concludes that Islam is inherently different and cannot likely be integrated (Åkesson). Regardless of the actual truth of these statements, it does appeal to a growing number of people because the Sweden Democrats are the only party that acknowledges, or securitizes, issues with Muslims.

Using Doty’s conceptualization again; much of the securitization discourse in Sweden resembles what she outlines as societal securitization. That is, much of the discourse, coming from the Sweden Democrats in particular, is about issues of national identity and the threat of it being transformed into something unrecognizable (Doty: 74). To exemplify this, consider the following quotation taken from the party program of the Sweden Democrats:

We find that a far too great immigration flow in a serious way has come to challenge the Swedish national identity and cohesion within the country. ...

The primary aim with our politics is to reestablish a common, national identity and thus a strong internal solidarity in the Swedish society.⁴

(“Invandringspolitiskt Program”)

This is an example of societal security with an explicit reference to identity just as is outlined by Doty; immigrants do not pose a threat primarily by challenging the state sovereignty; rather, in a more fundamental way they threaten society through an essential alteration of it by not adhering to the (Swedish) national identity (77f). Another fundamental aspect of the Sweden Democrats immigration policy is to increase foreign aid to “areas of crisis” and deal with humanitarian problems in those areas and therefore lessen the push factors for migrants (“Invandringspolitiskt Program”); this, by extension, justifies keeping migrants from coming to Sweden in the first place and relates to the more traditional view of viewing security as being confined to nation-states and borders (77).

Another essential factor required for producing “an enemy within” (which is present in this discourse) is the process homogenization of the enemy: to make “the other” be perceived as one coherent group. One can see clear examples of this reflected in Swedish society. As Carlbom puts it: “Being equal according to [Swedish] multiculturalism is being equal *vis-à-vis* an Other who is imprisoned in his/her own cultural tradition, a slave under various cultural norms which must be followed” (Carlbom: 21). That is, “the Others,” the Muslims, are attributed one set of characteristics while Swedes, the dominant group, are attributed another set. These characteristics are, however, superficial and unreal because they are static and would require unprecedented conformity (21f).

At the same time, supposed spokespersons of Muslims are often representing views that are reinforcing stereotypes about Muslims. In a documentary called “The Battle over Muslims”⁵

⁴ In original language: ”Vi [finner] att en alltför stor invandring på ett allvarligt sätt har kommit att hota den svenska nationella identiteten och sammanhållningen i landet. ... Det primära målet med Sverigedemokraternas politik är att återupprätta en gemensam nationell identitet och därmed också en stark inre solidaritet i det svenska samhället.

produced by the Swedish state television (SVT) representatives of four major Islamic organizations in Sweden were interviewed. The following are just bits and pieces of what was said by them in the documentary: Ahmed Al-Mofty, chairman for the Islamic Information Association, says: “If someone asks me: ‘can I listen to pop- or rock music,’ then I say: ‘no, listen rather to the Quran.’”⁶ Abdirisak Waberi, chairman for the Islamic Association, says: ”The last word, after discussion and dialogue, belongs to the man because he uses reason while women use emotions”⁷ (“Slaget om Muslimerna”).

These views, naturally, are not shared by a majority of Muslims (Carlbom: 130), and yet all these men are influential on a political level and are frequent participants on televised debates—making it appear as though they are speaking for one, coherent Muslim people. Also revealed in the documentary is that they have access to the Swedish government when issues about Muslims are on the agenda (a photograph is shown in the documentary with the Prime Minister of Sweden and representatives of the Islamic Association during the Mohammad-caricature crisis); consequently, these types of organizations have become a legitimate way for decision-makers to “satisfy and understand the Muslim population,” and have come to represent what these “Muslims” believe. According to Carlbom this is because of a lack of significant scholarly debate about Islam or Islamism and as a consequence, Islamists and conservatives are in power to define what Islam is and how it should be exercised—they are the ones in power to speak on the behalf of the Muslim population (Carlbom: 130). Further, by the same token, Åkesson does have a point when he says that some prominent Islamic “leaders” are for Sharia law and he is the only one who acknowledges it—making him the only established political counter-force against Islamist movements. Adding these elements

⁵ Original language: ”Slaget om muslimerna”

⁶ Original language: ”Om någon frågar mig: ’ska jag lyssna på pop och rock?’ då säger jag nej: ’lyssna helst på koranen.’”

⁷ Original language: ”Slutordet är mannens efter diskussion och dialog och det är för att mannen använder förstånd och kvinnan använder känslor.”

together, that Swedes are increasingly alarmed by a growing segment of society (however artificial) that does not listen to music and has a view of women foreign to any modern human being that they cannot publicly talk about, and are voting accordingly, is not too surprising.

Ed Husain, founder of the Quilliam foundation, a secularist think tank, is also being interviewed and gives the following statement: “There is no need for Muslim Council of Sweden or a Muslim Council of Britain. ... We too often have this colonial mindset. ‘Oh native give us your leader.’ And then expect Islamists to represent Muslims, but Islamists don’t represent Muslims.” Another example of how this mindset appears in practice comes from France where in 2005 following the suburb riots the French state primarily relied on imams and other religious authorities to restore order even if in reality many rioters were not considerably religious or attending mosques (Giry: 95). Sarkozy even claimed the rioters had bonds to Al Qaeda (Kaya: 83), again reverberating how Muslims apparently are one people. In the long run, what such ostracization—that the actual population remains ignored—can lead to is the formation of parallel societies caused by disenchantment and feelings of exclusion. Although these parallel societies can take conservative forms, widespread conservatism is not the reason for their creation (85).

This is reflected in the scholarly literature as well. Edward Said alleges that political thought often reflects in a way in which “Orientals” are not able to fully represent, or even understand, themselves but that only through the lens of a Westerner can they be understood. Moreover, they are viewed, again, as a coherent group with identical thoughts, wants, needs and religion (Said: 97f). If one has a mindset like this, it does make sense to approach religious organizations when trying to understand Muslims, because if they truly are a homogenous group, then their “leaders” should provide a valid and reliable sample. However, in reality this is not true. Indeed, while there are no figures for Sweden, when French Muslims were asked what they were very worried about, the most common answers were unemployment (52%)

and Islamic extremism (30%) while loss of religion (21%) and influence of pop-culture (17%) were considerably lower (“Muslims in Europe: 1”). Muslims are a diverse, dynamic and changing group that cannot be understood through the lens of only one organization or person, and when Islamists leader, like has happened in Sweden, do get to speak on behalf of Muslims, many of the Muslims feel compelled to follow a stricter and more political religion as a result.

Many Muslims are pressured by this: they want to believe in god, buy a nice car, live in a decent apartment and find a good occupation. They are not at interested in the political bit that the Islamists advocate. (Carlbom qtd. in: “Slaget om Muslimerna”)⁸

To conclude this essay, what I have tried to show is that by discouraging serious debate about Islam and multiculturalism and denying any related problems, it leads to two things. First of all, it can give room for populist, right wing parties and opinions to grow and gain foothold, since such parties are only ones to openly discuss and acknowledge problems and issues—giving them almost monopoly on criticism against, oftentimes real, problems. Secondly, without proper investigation and walking into pitfalls of classic orientalism, Islamists and more radical groups can come to represent all Muslims and reinforce the view that Muslims are one coherent group, which isolated from the rest of society and with special needs. These things have, as I have tried to demonstrate, occurred in Sweden in the last decades. In a simplified sense, the Sweden Democrats have come to represent the disgruntled “common Swede,” while the Islamic Association has come to represent the “common Muslim.” To cure these ills, I hope for a more sincere, open debate involving a diversity of people and not reducing either side of the issue.

⁸ Original language: Många känner sig pressade av det här. Det är många muslimer som bara vill tro gud, köpa en bra bil, bo i en hygglig lägenhet och ha ett bra arbete. Som inte alls är intresserad av det här politiska inslaget som islamisterna vill implementera.

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