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## 'The perfect storm' – an analysis of Sweden's experience with foreign fighter radicalisation

**When disparate challenges collide to create fertile soil for extremism and terror: A field-based analysis**

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The Nordic countries are internationally acclaimed for their welfare societies, social stability, democratic governance and high standard of living, to mention a few things. Yet in spite of this, they produced a disproportionate high level of travelers, men and women, to the so-called Islamic state in Syria and Iraq, with countries like Sweden on the top 5-list in Europe for the number of foreign fighters joining the group. The question is, how could a country like Sweden in spite of all its advantages have such a challenge with in this case, violent and political Islamism? And the most important point, what can we learn from the successes and failures of Sweden in handling this challenge?

With the demise and territorial defeat of the so-called Islamic state, the issue of FTFs and women traveling to conflict zones are currently not as urgent as a couple of years ago. What is urgent, however, is the pull and threat that extremist groups, now operating within European and Western societies, currently pose. A previously more visible phenomena has moved to become even more clandestine and the threat now much closer to home. Because of this, factors that caused the phenomena to develop and thrive needs to be properly examined and lessons drawn from them.

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## General push-factors

### ***Socio-economic vulnerabilities, alienation, segregation***

Over 71 %, of the men and women who either left for the Islamic state or were attracted to its message (or that of similar groups, usually came from socio- economically vulnerable areas, designated by the authorities as "especially vulnerable", the most severe on a three-level scale ranging from "risk" area to the aforementioned term<sup>1</sup>. Most sympathizers of such movements and ideologies today can also be found in these areas<sup>2-3</sup>. These areas are also where the majority of the Muslim population in Sweden has come to be highly concentrated, resembling the situation in France's *banlieues*. The 2017 Swedish national operative police force report describes these areas as "...vulnerable areas differ from other areas in Sweden in that the socio-economic status is low, overcrowding is widespread and an alternative social order has been created"<sup>4</sup>. They are characterized by social inequity that is higher than the average in Sweden, neglected municipal services, high unemployment, low incomes, more people in long-term benefit support and fewer people with upper secondary school qualifications<sup>5</sup>. Alternative social orders, strong family groups, clans, religious communities or criminal actors, are able to exert informal influence over the areas - sometimes to the detriment of the municipal, legal or other official authorities<sup>6</sup>.

Sweden stands out in international studies as one of the countries with the highest levels of practical ethnic housing segregation in the world<sup>7</sup>. Local schools and youth centers in these areas are often neglected and underfunded, as well as the cultural or sporting venues. Statistics for these areas show that as much as 40 % of pupils leave elementary school without approved grades and are thus unable to enter higher education, and a staggering amount of around 50 % of unemployment<sup>8</sup>. Many living in these areas who work also tend to be employed within the service sector or other types of 'blue collar' working class jobs, sometimes even in spite of higher education (from countries of origin or Sweden). The housing is typically of poorer quality and maintenance often neglected. According to an earlier report and personal interviews conducted by the author with a number of residents, there is a sense that the authorities have either abandoned these areas or are trying to administer them without due consideration to democratic norms, disregarding inhabitants' suggestions or protests, which results in feelings of being second class citizens<sup>9-10</sup>.

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- 1 Ranstorp, M., Ahlin, F., Hyllengren, P., och Normark, M. (2018). Mellan salafism och salafistisk jihadism – Påverkan mot och utmaningar för det svenska samhället. Stockholm: Försvarshögskolan. <https://diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1231645/FULLTEXT02.pdf>
  - 2 Ibid.
  - 3 Sjöblom-Fodor, Gabriel & Speckhard, Anne. "Exceptionalism at the Extremes – a brief historical overview of Sweden's ISIS foreign terrorist fighter problem." ICSVE report, 2021
  - 4 Nationella operativa avdelningen (NOA). Utsatta områden - Social ordning, kriminell struktur och utmaningar för polisen. Polisen, june 2017.
  - 5 Ibid.
  - 6 Ibid.
  - 7 Thörn, Katarina & Håkan, Swedish cities now belong to the most segregated in Europe - Sociologisk Forskning, årgång 54, nr 4, pages 293–296. ISSN 0038-0342, 2002-066X (electronic). [www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1168307/FULLTEXT01.pdf](http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1168307/FULLTEXT01.pdf)
  - 8 Nationella operativa avdelningen (NOA). Utsatta områden - Social ordning, kriminell struktur och utmaningar för polisen. Polisen, june 2017.
  - 9 De los Reyes et al - Report on the causes and effects of the violent riots in Husby 2013 [https://stockholmia.stockholm.se/globalassets/bocker/bilen\\_brinner\\_husby\\_rapport.pdf](https://stockholmia.stockholm.se/globalassets/bocker/bilen_brinner_husby_rapport.pdf)
  - 10 Three interviews with informants to this paper living and working in those areas

The perceived harder attitudes reportedly displayed by police or social services against inhabitants in these areas than elsewhere have been raised as concerns as well <sup>11 12</sup>.

Also, much like in France, second- and third generation immigrants growing up under such circumstances have often suffered identity issues and cognitive dissonances, not fully grounded in either their parent's cultures or in the Swedish, falling victim to a sense of rootlessness. Knowledge of Swedish society, culture and language tends to be on the lower end, due to both physical, cultural and social barriers between immigrants and native Swedes. This inability to fully understand, feel accepted or relate to the society in which they find themselves has been a source of frustration and alienation with impact on almost all aspects of life; this is an impediment across the board - from education, language learning, understanding cultural and social codes to social mobility and work opportunities. Some Muslims, as the next section demonstrates, may also not be willing to compromise or renegotiate religious beliefs that act as restraints when it comes to appropriating the sociocultural norms necessary to gain access to gainful opportunities and resources.

### ***Cramped living conditions, absent fathers, traumatized older generations and high child density***

Cramped living conditions are a factor that has contributed to extremism ( and related issues) as well as to other antisocial behaviours. Cramped living conditions are widespread in areas classified as "especially vulnerable", and most houses in these areas, typically high-rise flat complexes, were constructed during the 1960s for different family structures. Sometimes several families or one family with a large number of children (parents, not uncommonly grandparents and often between 4 to 8 children) residing in flats originally built to accommodate one smaller family (parents and maybe 3-4 children) maximum. This has several implications. In the areas of Rinkeby-Tensta, one of the country's hotspots of Takfiri presence, almost 50 % of the families are cramped in this manner <sup>13</sup>. In some cases the fathers live roving lives, traveling between the family and the home country or sometimes having other families elsewhere. Another factor raised by informants for this paper is that many from older generations who fled war or persecution either suffer from PTSD or other psychological traumas, hampering their abilities to give a safe and healthy upbringing to their children. In his 2020 book, "Gangsterparadiset" (The Gangster paradise) journalist Lasse Weirup explored the effects of large numbers of children in socioeconomic vulnerable environments and the interrelation to crime and also extremism<sup>14</sup>. A special study commissioned for his book, by the cultural geographer and adviser to the national police Niklas Guldåker at Lund university, examined levels of education, employment, segregation, levels of income and marriage per square hundred meter in the areas classified as "especially vulnerable". They found that the high density of children combined with the difficult living conditions mentioned above in these areas create a "critical mass", and a severely heightened potential for antisocial behaviour and pathways into either crime or extremism, while in areas (even neighbouring) with less children per square hundred meter the risk was dramatically lower<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Sjöblom-Fodor, Gabriel & Speckhard, Anne. "Exceptionalism at the Extremes – a brief historical overview of Sweden's ISIS foreign terrorist fighter problem." ICSVE report, 2021

<sup>13</sup> Nationella operativa avdelningen (NOA). Utsatta områden - Social ordning, kriminell struktur och utmaningar för polisen. Polisen, june 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Wierup, L. (2020). Gangsterparadiset: Så blev Sverige arena för gängkriminalitet, skjutningar och sprängdåd. Stockholm. Forum.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Tensions within families and compel older youth to go elsewhere for privacy or social activities, not seldom outside or to other public places<sup>16</sup>. These places are also where recruiters to both extremism as well as criminal gangs have been known to be active, trying with various success to offer a sense of belonging, worth or purpose in life in contrast to their surrounding environments<sup>17 18</sup>.

## Social, religious and cultural challenges

Political Islamism, the understanding of Islam foremost as a social and political ideology, or ideas originating from this interpretation circulate in particular communities. This way, they have influence and impact on how some Muslims view their relations with their host society. Islamism, as a political ideology prevalent in Sweden owes a lot of its influence to the fact that its early followers were the first to successfully organize the disorganized Muslim communities in Sweden during the 1980-ies and 90-ies. They ran mosques, planned Islamic activities and founded Islamic centers and won a great deal of influence on shaping the narrative around Islam both among Muslims and in Swedish society. In addition later individuals influenced by this interpretation arrived from the MENA region and the horn of Africa during the 1990ies and 2000s who in addition sometimes also carried with them Takfirism, also called Salafi-Jihadism, the interpretation that violence is legitimate and even desirable in achieving goals and which excommunicates all Muslims outside their interpretation. Coming from the tradition of political interpretation of Islam, the 'mainstream politically orientated' teachings among the Muslim communities also largely reflected their understanding of Islam as a inherently political ideology in conflict with Western political and cultural ideals. In their work, spanning across decades, they popularized political Islamist thoughts and ideas among laymen through sermons, lectures and community activism. Their teachings among the Muslim population can be described as having prioritized political issues and activism in accordance with their interpretation of the faith and forming a type of contentious relationship with wider society. Unfortunately due to the generalist nature and popularization of those teachings and their seeping out among laymen, the Takfiris and the other violent Islamist were able to appropriate them and efficiently utilize them for their own causes<sup>19</sup>. The other issue is related to literalist movements, such as self-identified Salafi trends and the Takfiris, who often draw their knowledge from traditions that are very foreign and incongruous with the environments around them and believe they are prohibited to reinterpret, resulting in occasional frictions with their surroundings. Common amongst all these traditions however is that they often misinterpret phenomena in Swedish society owing to their interpreting surroundings through the prisms of their ideologies and overall a general lack of knowledge of, or active disinterest in, national historical development processes, culture and customs<sup>20 21</sup>.

Muslim communities often struggle to contextualize their faith in the new secular surroundings as well as to navigate between the religious beliefs, practices, ideologies and customs of their countries of origin and how to understand them in relation to realities around them.

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**16** Report on cramped living in major urban Swedish cities by the Savings and Construction Association of the Tenants (HSB). Stockholm 2016 [https://mynewsdesk.com/se/hsb\\_riksforbund/documents/traangboddhet-i-sverige-beskrivning-av-nulaeget-och-diskussion-om-effekter-64435](https://mynewsdesk.com/se/hsb_riksforbund/documents/traangboddhet-i-sverige-beskrivning-av-nulaeget-och-diskussion-om-effekter-64435)

**17** Ranstorp, M., Ahlin, F., Hyllengren, P., och Normark, M. (2018). Mellan salafism och salafistisk jihadism – Påverkan mot och utmaningar för det svenska samhället. Stockholm: Försvarshögskolan. <https://diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1231645/FULLTEXT02.pdf>

**18** Sjöblom-Fodor, Gabriel & Speckhard, Anne. "Exceptionalism at the Extremes – a brief historical overview of Sweden's ISIS foreign terrorist fighter problem." ICSVE report, 2021

**19** Ibid.

**20** Ibid.

**21** <https://jp.se/artikel/alen-musaefendic-islam-ses-som-en-politisk-belastning>

This has been a cause of confusion, tension and frustration for many Muslims as well as many in mainstream Swedish society. Especially among the younger generation of Muslims this has triggered cognitive dissonance in some in the sense of rootlessness and detachment. Many are uncertain how Islam should be understood and practiced, squeezed between the understandings of their parents, the norms and demands of society and as of late, violent, or literalist, or political interpretations of the faith gaining ground. For example, things that the older generations might have been taught were forbidden in Islam by religious authorities in their homelands may in fact be permitted according to other mainstream interpretations, schools of law or due to the changing nature of Islamic jurisprudence relating to time and place, yet the old teachings are passed down to the generation born in Sweden. Many religious leaders also do not have the knowledge necessary to properly make so called *ijtihad*, reinterpreting religious rulings in light of new circumstances, or are influenced by various interpretations of Islamism or those mentioned above, or still teach the interpretations of the old homelands while living in the new homeland, becoming sources of confusion and tensions. The influences of such movements also tend to impede people from learning to navigate their sociocultural surroundings. It should be pointed out that living a Takfiri or an Islamist lifestyle in Western societies is very difficult and psychologically demanding on individuals, as there are many things they must implement or avoid as matters of belief, which is also why the dream of an Islamic utopia may be extra appealing to individuals influenced by these beliefs.

Open religiosity, sometimes just an affiliation with a religious community, or even the private religious beliefs of an individual, if known, have proven to be an obstacle to fair and equal treatment in Swedish society<sup>22 23</sup>. Discrimination against Muslims has been on the rise in the country during the last decade<sup>24 25</sup>, with complex causes. Sweden stands out in surveys and indexes as one of the world's most secular and individualistic countries<sup>26 27</sup>, as well as displaying greater levels of skepticism towards religious beliefs and practices than average elsewhere in Europe<sup>28 29</sup>. This naturally informs attitudes in society towards religion. It can be argued that Swedish society favours what is called negative religious freedom (freedom from exposure to religion in the public sphere). In this they follow a similar line to countries like France<sup>30</sup>. As such, Islamic faith practices will often stand out disproportionately - due to their optic difference and visibility (veil, prayer, gender roles and interactions etc), their perceived foreignness to the Christian cultural heritage as well as pressure from influential secular norms<sup>31 32</sup>. Skepticism against Muslims and their beliefs manifest in various ways, from general apathy, to suspicion, prejudices and discrimination, to verbal and physical attacks on individuals or places of worship.

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- 22 Johansson Heinö, Andreas - Notes from the 'culture war' (2021), a study of contemporary political discourse in Sweden ISBN 9789177032281
- 23 Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention - 2021 report on Islamophobia in Sweden [https://bra.se/download/18.1f8c9903175f8b2aa70762d/1622553459528/2021\\_3\\_Islamofobiska\\_hatbrott.pdf](https://bra.se/download/18.1f8c9903175f8b2aa70762d/1622553459528/2021_3_Islamofobiska_hatbrott.pdf)
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 [https://hig.se/download/18.62385c32157b0d73e1d6b56f/1478018617100/H%C3%B6gskolan+i+G%C3%A4lle\\_M%C3%A5ngfaldsbarometern+2016\\_2.pdf](https://hig.se/download/18.62385c32157b0d73e1d6b56f/1478018617100/H%C3%B6gskolan+i+G%C3%A4lle_M%C3%A5ngfaldsbarometern+2016_2.pdf)
- 26 TheLocal.se - Sweden 'least religious' in Western world <https://thelocal.se/20150413/swedes-least-religious-in-western-world>
- 27 Negative and Positive Freedom of Religion: The Ambiguous Relation of Religion and Human Rights in Sweden | SpringerLink [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-09731-2\\_14](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-09731-2_14)
- 28 Dagen.se - Swedes negative towards religious customs <https://dagen.se/nyheter/svenskar-negativa-till-religiosa-sedvanor-1.1637366>
- 29 <https://timbro.se/smedjan/valkommen-till-vardegrundslandet/>
- 30 Negative and Positive Freedom of Religion: The Ambiguous Relation of Religion and Human Rights in Sweden | SpringerLink [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-09731-2\\_14](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-09731-2_14)
- 31 Drömmen om en islamisk ordning (timbro.se) <https://timbro.se/integration/drommen-om-en-islamisk-ordning/>
- 32 Negative and Positive Freedom of Religion: The Ambiguous Relation of Religion and Human Rights in Sweden | SpringerLink [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-09731-2\\_14](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-09731-2_14)

The 2021 Islamophobia report by the national Equality Ombudsman states that “...a large part of the events captured in the study may appear relatively mild but recurring events [of this nature] lead to a kind wear and tear mechanism that in the long run affects the victims’ own perception and everyday life”<sup>33</sup>.

Over the past decade, there has been a shift in opinion as well as an increased focus in Swedish politics and public discourse on the issue of religious minorities, Muslims in particular, their beliefs and their role within wider society<sup>34 35</sup>, a trend also more widely observed in western Europe as a whole. In Sweden this has had several implications. One in particular can be observed to be connected to contemporary political ideals to not merely protect and uphold the values of democracy, liberalism, gender equality and secular humanism, but also to impose them as norms in society<sup>36</sup>. As a result, very unfortunate trends has emerged among politicians and journalists where beliefs, values and norms of the dominant society are publicly compared to those of religious minorities, Muslims in particular, to highlight the differences between the two<sup>37</sup>. This effectively creates a clear “us” versus “them”<sup>38</sup>. This resulted in genuinely extreme as well as mainstream interpretations of Sunni Islam to equally be criticized, condemned or branded as extremist and potential threats<sup>39</sup> - not just to national security but to the liberal order of society. This has caused concern, fear, frustration and in some cases a siege mentality even among ordinary practising Muslim citizens, not to mention Islamists or Takfiris. Unfortunately this harder tone and increased political pressure to conform to dominant political narratives and the stigmatization of conservative beliefs make violent Islamist narratives about a supposed global (and Swedish) conspiracy and “war” against Islam resonate even more, with ample perceived ‘evidence’ in favour of this narrative picked up in the Swedish public domain on a regular basis. Already often feeling marginalised and unjustly treated in a general way, exacerbated by frequent difficulties to interpret social and political trends in society, the negative developments have serious impacts on Muslim communities. Additionally, conservative Christian and Jewish communities face somewhat similar challenges, but are more adept in handling them; this due to being firmly established in Swedish culture and society and having the relevant historic experience to constructively engage with such challenges. For Muslim communities on the other hand, the opposition to their beliefs has been more one of shock and distress. This sometimes due to many Muslims in Sweden coming from groups that make up the religious majority in their countries of origin and lacking practical historical experience in living as minorities and having their beliefs openly questioned or challenged<sup>40</sup>.

## Pull-factors

### *A brief note on situational logic*

Following the previously examined factors, the attraction to extremism should be seen in the light of situational logic. The term originally comes from the intelligence analysis of state actors<sup>41</sup>, but is

33 Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention - 2021 report on Islamophobia in Sweden [https://bra.se/download/18.1f8c9903175f8b2aa70762d/1622553459528/2021\\_3\\_Islamofobiska\\_hatbrott.pdf](https://bra.se/download/18.1f8c9903175f8b2aa70762d/1622553459528/2021_3_Islamofobiska_hatbrott.pdf)

34 Representations, stereotypes and news value - report on the portrayal of Muslims in Swedish media by the office of the Equality Ombudsman <https://www.do.se/globalassets/publikationer/rapport-representationer-stereotyper-nyhetsvardering2.pdf>

35 [https://myndighetenst.se/download/18.74c15c6d173d8c1d0b2511ca/1601230028264/Arsbok\\_2020\\_hela.pdf](https://myndighetenst.se/download/18.74c15c6d173d8c1d0b2511ca/1601230028264/Arsbok_2020_hela.pdf)

36 <https://timbro.se/smedjan/valkommen-till-vardegrundslandet/>

37 <https://svd.se/hardfor-religionspolitik-leder-sverige-pa-fel-vag>

38 <https://dn.se/debatt/ryktet-om-svenskens-tolerans-ar-overdrivet/>

39 <https://svd.se/hardfor-religionspolitik-leder-sverige-pa-fel-vag>

40 Göndör, Eli, “Religionskollision: majoritet, minoritet och toleransens gränser”, Timbro förlag, 2017, ISBN: 9789177030638

41 Psychology of Intelligence Analysis, Paperback by Heuer, Richard J., Jr., ISBN 1594546797, ISBN-13 9781594546792

applicable to individuals as well. A person will make decisions informed by their own beliefs, what shaped those, frames of reference, as well as factors, evidence and opportunities around him or her. Thus decision making can differ from person to person given their individual understanding of their surroundings and available options, which is important to have in mind when analyzing why an individual may choose extremism even if other options are theoretically available. An individual may join an extremist group out of ideological reasons or individual vulnerabilities, where there are matches between what the group offers in terms of meeting these vulnerabilities, whether they be belonging, purpose, dignity, revenge, adventure or similar<sup>42</sup>. Even if the individual may not have had a strong ideological conviction, as the individual vulnerabilities are met by the group, he or she becomes attached to and often eventually embraces the ideology as well. When an individual joins out of ideological reasons, it is mainly because they feel the group best represents or can articulate their beliefs or grievances.

### ***Meaning, purpose, opportunities***

As the Islamic State grew in strength and influence, it did so through a very sophisticated propaganda system to create a general 'hype' around itself<sup>43</sup>. It used its professional PR to attract individuals from all over the world and all walks of life to join, build, and fight for their cause. It drew in many who wanted to fight Assad and protect Syrians, as well as those looking for adventure, romance or wanting to escape difficulties in their Western homelands<sup>44 45</sup>. The Islamic state offered the idea of an adventure with a higher meaning; from sneaking out of Sweden, to going through Turkey and passing the border to Syria, to training and fighting for their group for the sake of justice and the faith, with the rewards of bonding experiences and a brotherhood forged in battle and blood, to a state building project in accordance with "true" Islam (according to Takfiri worldview) supposedly independent from the international community's wishes or conditions. Recruiters also emphasized the supposed justice of their group and promised to help and protect those in need. This stands in stark contrast to the living conditions of both real and imagined hopelessness, alienation and limited opportunities available in Sweden.

Following the factors discussed above, in Sweden, many Muslim youths have indeed become vulnerable to exploitation by extremist actors. Seeking refuge in religion is a strategy employed by some conservative Muslims to cope with these circumstances<sup>46</sup>. Sadly, as the message of the Islamic State began to spread, it drew in many of the youth, leading to Sweden being among the countries most affected by travelers, male and female, to their territories in Syria and Iraq<sup>47</sup>.

The recruiters used tactical empathy and emotional rhetoric, pointing to the real and perceived grievances facing their audiences, from political to social to economical.

At the same time they offered an escape and held up what seemed like real tangible opportunities to supposedly start over and build a better life with purpose and dignity - this seemed too good to

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42 The Lethal Cocktail of Terrorism – ICSVE <https://icsve.org/the-lethal-cocktail-of-terrorism/>

43 Sjöblom-Fodor, Gabriel & Speckhard, Anne. "Exceptionalism at the Extremes – a brief historical overview of Sweden's ISIS foreign terrorist fighter problem." ICSVE report, 2021

44 Ibid.

45 Ranstorp, M., Ahlin, F., Hyllengren, P., och Normark, M. (2018). Mellan salafism och salafistisk jihadism – Påverkan mot och utmaningar för det svenska samhället. Stockholm: Försvarshögskolan. <https://diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1231645/FULLTEXT02.pdf>

46 Sjöblom-Fodor, Gabriel & Speckhard, Anne. "Exceptionalism at the Extremes – a brief historical overview of Sweden's ISIS foreign terrorist fighter problem." ICSVE report, 2021

47 Barrett, R. "Beyond the caliphate: Foreign fighters and the threat of returnees. The Soufan Group." The Soufan Group. Extraida el 29, no. 12 (2017): 2017.

resist for too many<sup>48 49</sup>. In order to understand the complexity underpinning these phenomena it is therefore important to point out that it was not only individuals with underlying Takfiri persuasions or psychological issues who were attracted, but also a number of ordinary Muslims frustrated at their overall existence. An argument expressed by many Westerners and Swedes who joined the so-called Islamic state was that they wanted to practice their faith without facing discrimination<sup>50 51</sup>. This is however a very sensitive topic as some of those interviewed had Takfiri beliefs that are both dangerous and impossible to practice in a Western society in any case. However, like touched upon, many struggle to contextualize their faith and navigate its instructions and prohibitions in their surroundings, and likewise may not be prepared to renegotiate those due to either lack of knowledge of the changing of rules in religious jurisprudence or due to a certain phenomena being strictly prohibited. This has led some to self-segregate and create ingroups and environments where they feel safe<sup>52 53</sup>. An ICSVE report formulated it as *"...for some conservative Muslims, the many choices of liberal society, the advertising, television, movies, public behavior, and attire are an assault to their values and can cause anxiety and a desire to seek out more rigid, gender-conforming societies where life is more clearly defined in binary terms"*<sup>54</sup>. The role of politicized teachings mentioned previously also played their part in legitimizing the overarching narrative so-called Islamic state argued (establishment of a global caliphate, a "real" Islamic government with 'genuine' Islamic laws, deposing of regional "apostate" rulers, opposition to Western political and social culture etc).

### **Group pressure, "religious shaming", love, fear, revenge and prestige**

In Sweden, the message articulated by the Islamic state often spread among friendship groups. In certain neighborhoods such as those discussed above, an individual's whole life and existence could be tied to local social networks built since childhood among peers, countrymen, families and neighbours, creating ingroups, or "bands of brothers" or "sisters". These are bonds that have developed under the adverse circumstances discussed above and often create a strong in-group with a sense of shared challenges and destiny. This is enforced by beliefs (which should be interpreted in the light of the factors mentioned above, including the situational logic and that Swedish society can be (perceived as) hostile, discriminatory and with limited chances of success. Such in-groups typically help and rely on each other for life's various needs - be it financial, emotional, or spiritual. When popular individuals others looked up to by their peers become radicalised, their friends could follow them into the ideology as well. Also, when this 'hype' around the ideology began spreading in such environments, not supporting it could lead to 'social death', being expelled from the in-group, becoming ostracized and losing access to sometimes life-long networks and social support. Some thus joined for the sake of not breaking up heavily invested-in social structures and bonds; for fear of losing safety nets or losing face as others around them 'bravely' set off to join the group.

There were also instances of both women and men falling in love with radicalised individuals who exerted influence over them, joining them as they left for the Islamic State A sense of revenge towards the society that in their estimation mistreated them and their families is also present as a motivator.

48 Sandelin, M. "Svenska IS-krigare – från al-Qaida till jihadi cool". Fri Tanke, 2015

49 Sjöblom-Fodor, Gabriel & Speckhard, Anne. "Exceptionalism at the Extremes – a brief historical overview of Sweden's ISIS foreign terrorist fighter problem." ICSVE report, 2021

50 <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1791&context=jss>

51 <https://icsve.org/isis-and-the-allure-of-traditional-gender-roles/>

52 Ibid.

53 Olsson, Susanne. "Swedish Puritan Salafism – a hijrah within." Comparative Islamic Studies, 8(1-2), 71-92. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cis.v8i1-2.71>

54 ISIS and the Allure of Traditional Gender Roles – ICSVE <https://icsve.org/isis-and-the-allure-of-traditional-gender-roles/>



Also frequently raised by informants is the issue of so-called “religious shaming”, where an individual is threatened with Divine punishment or retribution if not joining. Such threats can be that the particular ideological version of Islam espoused by IS (Takfirism) is claimed to be the only path acceptable to God and to salvation in the afterlife (in this they usually misquote Quranic verses and Prophetic narrations, applying them to their group to give an aura of legitimacy)<sup>55</sup>, or that the subject/s of rebuke are sinners and even apostates for not supporting the group. This has strong psychological effects on those who may be sincere in their beliefs, who have religious zeal, and/or are under the influence of charismatic preachers, but with little religious knowledge and access to credible alternative- or counter-narratives.

### ***Gaming, youth culture and ‘gangsta’ culture***

Informants speak of the destructive influence of gaming and that of gangsta rap, once it started to be produced in Swedish by artists who themselves often hailed from these troubled neighbourhoods. Just like entering a career in crime might seem to be a way to status, success and income<sup>56</sup>, so did joining an armed extremist group such as so-called Islamic state during this time, offering, like crime, ‘alternative successful lifestyles’. The “jihadi cool”-trend, as a subcultural allure also had an impact<sup>57</sup> - as a type of attractive rebellious counter-culture, but based on faith; this makes it easier to reconcile with a “good conscience” than criminal lifestyles. For someone of Muslim background and who in the end values their faith, a very dangerous attraction.

## **Conclusion**

In Sweden several factors have interacted in very unfortunate ways to create a condition in which the vulnerability to exploitation to extremism and other types of antisocial behaviours is heightened. Factors of alienation, historical and contemporary, discrimination, skepticism towards even harmless faith practices and attempts to marginalise Muslim believers from mainstream society, sociocultural issues among Muslim communities, the presence of Takfirism and problematic youth subcultures all have an influence, in interaction with each other in various ways. None of these issues emerged suddenly, but evolved overtime. When the Islamic State, with its focus on Takfiri terrorism emerged, it could be seen as pouring fuel over an already kindled fire. Policy decisions characterized by idealism rather than reality, underinformed analysis as well as hesitation and aloofness in dealing with relevant issues all play a part.

Approaches need to be based on practical experience and a holistic understanding on what works on a grassroot level with insight into local conditions. Solutions grounded in political idealism, so called ‘signal politics’, frustration or are rushed in responses to public opinion are not really viable for our time and tend to miss the mark both practically and democratically. Policy makers need access to full information and a comprehensive understanding on the issues described and are required to inform themselves through studies and dialogues with local actors and statutory bodies. Especially a positive, open and proactive approach in dealing with challenges is necessary to secure a more stable, prosperous future.

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55 Al-Mutairi, dr. Abdul Rahman ibn Mualaa.. *Religious Extremism in the lives of Contemporary Muslims*. Translated by Jamal al-Din Zaraboso. Al-Basheer Company for Publications and Translations, 2001.

56 Noa har genom Encrochat fått fram hur unga används i brott | SvD <https://svd.se/springpojkar-blir-aldre-kriminellas-torpeder>

57 Sandelin, M. "Svenska IS-krigare – från al-Qaida till jihadi cool". Fri Tanke, 2015

## About the Author

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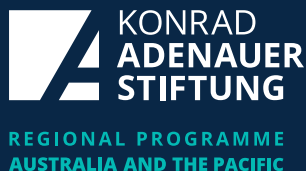
### **Gabriel Sjöblom-Fodor**

A researcher who specializes in the study of religious community work in the countering of violent extremism and extremist narratives, and how this work impacts national security. His focus is on deradicalization and prevention of violence using theological and psychological counseling, as well as the specific politico-religious and social roots of modern violent extremism. He has a background in journalism and in politics. In 2015 he embarked on a independent research project that aimed to investigate how Muslim religious communities on thr frontlines countered extremist narratives and recruitment to violent extremism. The focus lay in how theological and counseling debates and methods, where the extremist narrative is challenged and deconstructed, have been used, and continue to be used, in the Nordic context. This has been done primarily through field work interviewing religious leaders, community actors and others who witnessed close-up the call to violent extremism during the rise and peak of the ISIS "Caliphate" and were able to witness first-hand these processes and engage with radicalized individuals, recruiters and FTFs.



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