

The Situation of Muslims in Denmark

About 200.000 Muslims live today in Denmark, 3,7% of the total population.

Islam constitutes therefore the largest minority religion in the country.



1. History and structure of the Muslim population in Denmark

Muslim immigration to Denmark started in the early 1970s, mostly from Turkey, Morocco, Lebanon, Pakistan and Bosnia.

Free immigration was halted in 1973 but another law in 1974 opened the way for family reunification.

During the 1980s and 1990s many asylum seekers went to Denmark from Iran, Iraq, Gaza, Somalia, Afghanistan and Bosnia. These refugees also had the rights to family reunification. At present, asylum seekers constitute about 40% of the Muslims population in Denmark.

In 2002 the parliament approved a law making family reunification much harder as the resident spouse of the new immigrant must show the ability to support the couple. In addition in order to avoid forced marriages, the law imposes a 24 year age limit on marriages for immigrants.

Today the Danish Muslim population consists of several generations of emigrants. The largest groups of Muslims are related to Turkey (28%), Iraq (13%), Pakistan (10%), Somalia (9%), Bosnia and Macedonia (8%), Iran (8%), Lebanon (7%), Afghanistan (6%), Morocco (4,8%). There are some 2.500 Danish converts in the country.

2. State and Church

In 1536 the Roman-Catholic religion, introduced in Denmark five centuries before, was forbidden and the Lutheran-Evangelical Church became the official church of the country.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformed Church and a Jewish congregation were given some rights equal to the Lutheran-Evangelical Church such as the right to celebrate marriages, have buildings and burial places, register births and deaths.

Today, religious communities in Denmark may be divided into three groups, each governed by specific legal rules:

- . The Evangelical-Lutheran Church (The National Church of Denmark)
- . Recognized and approved religious communities
- . Other religious communities and societies of a religious character

Recognized and approved religious communities enjoy a number of rights. Above all, the right to perform marriage ceremonies with legal effect under the Danish Marriage Act, but also the right to residence permits for foreign preachers under the Aliens Act. Religious communities have also the right to establish their own cemeteries under the Danish Cemeteries Act.

Since 1969 some 100 officially recognized and approved religious communities have been given the rights to perform marriages. Out of these 100 recognized religious groups, 19 are Muslim congregations including the Islamic Centre, the Muslim Cultural Institute, the Islamiske Trossamfund, the Pakistan Islamic Welfare Society and the Shiamuslimsk Trossamfund i Danmark.

Religious communities other than the Evangelical-Lutheran Church can also have a

substantial indirect subsidy from the State as taxpayers can deduct contributions to religious communities in their tax returns and obtain tax savings of about 33% of these contributions. Religious community must apply to the tax authorities in order to obtain the authorization for tax deduction purposes. While Christian religious communities make greater use of this possibility, relatively few Islamic communities make use of tax deductions, most likely because they are unaware of it.

3. Employment

The data on labour market participation show that the unemployment rate is higher among Muslims residents in comparison to the majority of the population. These minorities have also lower income.

Employment rates for the economically active age group from selected predominantly Muslim countries (January 1, 2005)

Country of Origin	Employment Rate (%)	
	Male	Female
Turkey	62	42
Iraq	37	14
Lebanon	37	13
Bosnia-Herzegovia	54	44
Pakistan	63	32
Former Yugoslavia	60	46
Somalia	27	11
Iran	54	40
Afghanistan	24	13
Immigrants and descendants total	55	41
Native Danes - Total	81	75
Vietnamese	67	53

From these data the Open Society's Report of 2007 concludes that ethnic minorities, including Muslim immigrants, are still marginalized in the labour market. Muslim immigrants are typically self-employed (such as grocery shops, newspaper kiosks, taxi-driving) or are employed in the least attractive and low-paid jobs (such as cleaning business, hotels, restaurants, catering).

The 1996 Act on "Prohibition of Differential Treatment in the Labour Market" contains a general prohibition against direct and indirect discrimination in the labour market with reference to race, colour, religion, political conviction, sexual orientation or national, social or ethnic origin. A prohibition of discrimination based on faith was newly introduced.

In its first decision concerning the wearing of a headscarf, the Supreme Court allowed a company to dismiss an employee which decided for religious reasons to wear a headscarf in opposition to the company's dress code. The Supreme Court considered that the dress code is an objective policy which does not constitute a violation of the Act on "Prohibition of Differential Treatment in the Labour Market" nor the European Convention of Human Rights.

On the other hand, the High Court considered on August 2000 in a similar case that the dismissal was an indirect discrimination as it affects only a group of individuals with a religious background and in that case the plaintiff received 10.000 DKK for compensation.

4. Public and private schools

The first Muslim school was founded in 1978 and in the 1980s other several schools for Turkish, Pakistanis and Arabic speakers were founded. Today, there are about 20 Muslim schools in the most important cities including Somali, Palestinian and Iraqi schools. Die Privatskole is the biggest one with about 410 students.

As Danish law prohibits collecting data on the basis of religion and ethnicity, there are no figures concerning Muslim pupils in Danish schools.

In 1999 a survey by Moller & Togeby indicated that 8% of Bosnians, 12% of Lebanese, 17% of Turks and 26% of Somalis felt discriminated at school.

According to the OECD International Standard Classification of Education, the following data were published on the basis of the census data from the year 2000:

Educational Achievement using the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)

	High	Medium	Low
Muslim	13%	28%	59%
Non-Muslim	19%	40%	41%
Indeterminate	12%	28%	60%

In the Danish elementary school the religion education is called “Christian Knowledge“, foreign religions are taught only in the upper level school programs and this notwithstanding the fact that in several schools in some cities Muslim pupils are about 20-30%. However, some schools have decided to include Islam in the “Christian Knowledge“ already in the elementary schools and special arrangements are not unusual with regard to food, sports practice and holidays. In private schools the programs must respect the Danish standards of the public schools and the teaching language must be Danish.

5. Prisons, hospitals and universities

In many Danish prisons halal-food is available and it is possible to attend the Friday prayer in mosques outside the prisons. Some prisons have an imam.

Many hospitals have a chaplain attached to the National church. In 2007, the Danish biggest hospital located in Copenhagen, hired a Muslim to serve Muslim patients.

In some universities a multi-religious room is organised for prayer and meditation.

6. Housing

Most of the Muslim immigrants in Denmark live in socially-deprived areas around the major cities. Many suburban municipalities have implemented a series of programs to redistribute ethnic minorities to different localities but “ghettoisation“ is still a major problem due to social-economic factors and socio-structural circumstances.

7. Mosques

In 2006, there were about 115 mosques in Denmark, 105 were Sunni, some 10 Shi’ite. The mosques are located mainly around the biggest cities where most of the Muslim population lives. Apart from three mosques, all the other buildings were originally built for other purposes. In most mosques the Friday prayer is not in Danish, but sometimes it is translated simultaneously.

With regard to imams it must be noticed that their knowledge of local culture and society varies and not all speak Danish. Many politicians have expressed the idea to organize a formal education for imams, some Muslims agree with this project in order to familiarize the imams with Danish culture and make them better advisors to the integration of Muslim immigrants.

In 2007 the first chair of Islamic theology was created at the University of Copenhagen.

8. Muslim organizations

There are several Muslim organizations in Denmark but none of them represents all of the various Muslim communities, at present there is no elected national council recognized by the government as in other European countries, which could represent the Muslim residents in the political life.

Among the most representative Muslim organizations are the following:

- *Foreningen af Demokratiske Muslimer (Organization of Democratic Muslims)*, founded by [Naser Khader](#) in 2006. The organizations mission is to facilitate the debate within the Danish Muslim community about the compatibility of Islam and democracy as well as Islam and freedom of speech.
- *Islamisk Trossamfund, [Sunni Muslim](#)*, with [Salafi](#) tendencies, played a prominent role in the internationalisation of the “cartoon controversy”.
- *Muslimer i Dialog (Muslims in Dialogue)*.
- *Muslimernes Faellesrad (Muslim Council of Denmark)* is an umbrella organization created in 2006.
- *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, mainly [Sunni](#), but have a Shia minority.
- *Foreningen Salam (Salam Association)* is run by Shia women.
- *The Danish Association of CyberMuslims (DFC)* which is an internet forum created in 1998 for Muslims to discuss contemporary issues.
- *Unge Muslimer Gruppen, (Young Muslims Group)*, Shia, based in Copenhagen.

9. Burials

Several Danish cemeteries have separate sections for Muslims and in September 2006, a Muslim cemetery was opened in the Brøndby municipality near Copenhagen. This cemetery is owned and managed by Dansk Islamisk Begravelsesfond (Danish Islamic Funeral Foundation). Members of this foundation are about 25 Muslim communities and organisations. All Muslims in Denmark have the right to be buried at this cemetery.

10. Discrimination of Muslims

In Danish legislation there is no general prohibition against religious and racial discrimination. The 1996 Act on “Prohibition of Differential Treatment in the Labour Market“ contains a general prohibition against direct and indirect discrimination but the complaints have to do with the labour market. However, two articles in the Danish Penal Code prohibit blasphemy and the dissemination of expression of racial prejudice.

Article 140 prohibiting blasphemy reads:

Any person who publicly ridicules or insults the religious teaching or worship of any religious community legitimately existing in this country, shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 4 months.

Article 266b about racist statements and racist propaganda reads:

- (1) Any person who publicly or with the intention of dissemination to a wide circle of people makes a statement or imparts other information threatening, insulting or degrading to a group of persons on account of their race, colour, national or ethnic origin, belief or sexual orientation, shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years.
- (2) When handing down punishment, it is to be considered as an aggravating circumstance that the statement is in the nature of propaganda.

When in 2005 the Jyllands-Posten’s published 12 cartoons, one of which portrayed the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist, some Muslim organizations filed complaints against the newspaper claiming that it had committed an offence under articles 140 and 266b. The public authorities decided in favour of Jyllands-Posten’s right to editorial freedom of expression. However the legal resolutions highlighted the need for a respectful dialogue about Danish Muslim values stating that the Jyllands-Posten defence was “not a correct description of existing law“ when it was claimed that “it is incompatible with the right of freedom of expression to demand special consideration for religious feelings and that one has to be ready to put up with scorn, mockery and ridicule“.

The rise in these recent years of the Danish People's Party with its nationalistic and anti-immigration program is a clear evidence of the negative perception of Islam in Denmark. The party supports the ruling centre-right Liberal-Conservative coalition which has implemented a stricter immigration policy.

The presence of an anti-Muslim sentiment in Denmark has been documented and condemned by some international organizations. In Spring 2001, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) published its second periodic report recommending to eliminate the existing discriminations against minorities. The following is an excerpt from the report:

“Problems of xenophobia and discrimination persist, however, and concern particularly non-EU citizens – notably immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees – but also Danish nationals of foreign backgrounds. People perceived to be Muslims, and especially Somalis, appear to be particularly vulnerable to these phenomena. Most of the existing legal provisions aimed at combating racism and discrimination do not appear to provide effective protection against these phenomena. Of deep concern is the prevailing climate of opinion concerning individuals of foreign backgrounds and the impact and use of xenophobic propaganda in politics. Discrimination, particularly in the labour market, but also in other areas, such as the housing market and in access to public places, is also of particular concern.”

In its third report about Denmark published in 2006, the ECRI noted that the situation concerning Muslims in Denmark had worsened since its second report:

“The ECRI has been informed that, apart from the discrimination that Muslims face together with other minority groups in areas such as employment, education and housing, politicians from some political parties such as the Danish People's Party and some media continue to make incendiary remarks about Muslims. Although, in 2003, a number of cases of incitement to racial hatred in general, and against Muslims in particular were successfully prosecuted, the ECRI notes that the police are generally reluctant to investigate complaints made by Muslims concerning hate speech directed against them. The ECRI regrets in this regard that the lack of a strong message that would be sent by consistently prosecuting those who breach Article 266 b) of the Criminal Code has given some politicians free reign to create an atmosphere of suspicion and hatred towards Muslims. This problem is compounded by the fact that the

media mostly interview those imams who express the most extreme views, thus confirming the image that is being given of Muslims as a threat to Danish society. In September 2005, with the stated intention of verifying whether freedom of speech is respected in Denmark, a widely-read Danish newspaper called on cartoonists to send in caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad; such drawings are considered to be offensive by many Muslims. This newspaper thus published 12 such cartoons, one of which portrayed the Prophet as a terrorist. The issue has caused widespread condemnation and a protest march was organised in Copenhagen as a result. The fact that, according to a survey carried out regarding the publication of these drawings, 56% of the respondents felt that it was acceptable is a testimony of the current climate in Denmark. The ECRI considers that the goal of opening a democratic debate on freedom of speech should be met without resorting to provocative acts that can only predictably elicit an emotional reaction. The ECRI wishes to bring to the Danish Government's attention in this regard, that in its General Policy Recommendation No. 5 on combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, it calls on Member States to encourage debate within the media on the image which they convey of Islam and Muslim communities and on their responsibility in this respect in avoiding the perpetuation of prejudice and biased information.

In its second report, the ECRI recommended that the Danish Government engage in discussions with representatives of the Muslim communities and consistently involve them in measures directed at improving the situation of Muslims.

The ECRI welcomes the fact that the Danish Minister for Integration has begun to engage in a dialogue with members of the Muslim communities and that in April and September 2005, the Minister met with a group of Imams in order to involve them in ensuring that Muslim youth get an education and enter the job market. The ECRI has also been informed that the Danish Prime Minister has met with representatives from the Muslim communities.”

Other international organizations have expressed critiques about the negative perception of ethnic minorities in Denmark, including the United Nations Standing Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDW), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

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