

# Islam in Iceland



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He was born in 1979 in Syria. Since 2003, he has been a staff member at the Department of English language and translation of Islamic texts at the renowned university Al-Azhar in Egypt. In 2010, he earned an MA degree in Islamic studies in English at the very same university. He has long been involved in the translation of religious texts and Islamic coursebooks into English. In 2010, he went to Iceland as a visiting imam and gave speeches at many institutions that deal with intercultural understanding, e.g. Universal Peace Federation (UPF). Since 2011, he has been a religious leader of the Islamic cultural centre in Iceland.

Iceland is a Nordic island country of 333.000 inhabitants among whom almost 2000 are Muslims. The majority of the Muslim population lives in the capital. Only two Islamic associations are registered in Iceland and both located in the capital. There are no private schools run by Muslims in Iceland. Different forms of communication and cooperation exist between religious bodies and Icelandic authorities in an effort to achieve coexistence in the society. Iceland provides a model example of peaceful and respectable coexistence among diverse religions and nationalities. However, utopia is a state of mind and challenges remain the salt and flavour of life.

## **Muslim populations and official Muslim organisations**

Muslim population in Iceland could approximate, according to some estimates, almost 2000. For many years informal statistics talked about 1500 Muslims in Iceland. However, as of now the number of Muslims is increasing. Recently, many Muslims have arrived in Iceland as wars, unrests and chaos flared up in their home countries. This makes the Muslim population approximately 2000. Amongst them, only one thousand are formally registered with Muslim associations in Iceland. Up to now, two Muslim associations are formally registered by the government as the country's religious bodies. Muslims have the right to register with either of the two organisations: Muslim Association of Iceland and Islamic Cultural Centre of Iceland. These two Muslim associations follow the system applied to all religious associations with regard to the governmental financial support. Iceland has 44 religious organisations representing many different faiths and religions. These organisations get financial support from the taxpayers who have signed up as members in one of those organisations. Members over 16 pay small part of their taxes to their religious organisation, which is then processed through the government tax office.<sup>2</sup> The activities of Muslims

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<sup>2</sup> There is no formal separation between the church and the state in Iceland. Icelanders are required to register their religious affiliation with the state, with almost three-quarters of the population affiliated to the established Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland. There are more than 40 other registered religious bodies that qualify for "parish fees" paid through the taxation system. The state church is supported by the government, but all registered religions receive support through a church tax paid by taxpayers over the age of 16 years. If they are not registered the money goes into the general revenue. (Ed. note)

include daily prayers and the main weekly gathering on Friday and celebrating two main annual festivals which attract fairly big numbers of Muslim families with kids who enjoy these feasts and wait for every new year.

## **History of Islam in Iceland**

Foreign Muslims living in Iceland have different ethnic backgrounds including Albanians, Bosnians, Kosovars, Turkish, Pakistani, Middle Eastern and Africans. The number of Icelandic converts is around 50, with a female majority, and some of them live abroad. According to the Icelandic researcher, Kristján Sigurðsson, Icelandic-Muslim communication started during the 9<sup>th</sup> century through Arab traders who were first to establish contact with Nordic people. According to the Icelandic written history, in 1627, it was the first time that Muslims had reached Iceland: so-called Turkish pirates raided the south-west coast of Iceland. On the invaders' return, they had in company with them some Icelanders heading for Algeria where those Icelanders stayed and some of them converted to Islam. Some Icelanders were later brought back to Iceland. Among them was Guðrun Símonardóttir who later married one of the most prominent Christian leaders in Icelandic history – Hallgrímur Pétursson. The largest church building in Iceland is named after him – Hallgrímskirkja.

Muslims living in Iceland today have no ancestors in the country as the first Muslims known to have settled there arrived in the 1950s. Before this date, one can hardly find any information about Muslims except for the year of 1627 mentioned above. In the modern history, Sverrir Agnarsson is known to be the first Icelandic person who converted to Islam,

namely in 1972. First Muslims who settled in Iceland sometime around 1960s originated in Syria. Many Muslims came in the 1970s, but the Muslim population has boomed since the conflicts in the Middle East. They come from various cultural backgrounds: the Middle East, North and West Africa, Turkey, Asia, or Europe, not to mention Icelandic people who have converted to Islam.

### **Cooperation with the Metropolitan Police**

The Muslim community in Iceland is still small compared to other Scandinavian countries in the region. Yet, recently many people have arrived in Iceland in the wake of troubles and wars in their homelands. Other non-Muslims from Eastern Europe and other parts of the world join them, which gives rise to new challenges. In reaction to this demographic change and new situations, the government has launched some projects aimed to improve communication and understanding between newcomers and the local people.

In this connection, in January 2016, the Reykjavik metropolitan police started a project to monitor and prevent hate crimes (Barylo, 2016). This project was piloted by a chief police inspector who, among other steps, met with the religious leaders and representatives of Muslim associations in their locations and listened to them attentively. These meetings have had positive impact on the Muslim community and on the Icelandic society as they assisted in ensuring cooperation between people and authorities as well as in building bridges and channels of communication, which helped to remove any phobia and to clear up any misconception or misunderstanding.

In October 2016, another big project entitled “The Police in a Diverse Society” was initiated by the metropolitan police with the aim to build bridges and channels of communication and promote better understanding between the police and local immigrants. The project lasts till next summer with the aim to grant cooperation between the two parties, help the society to move forward and create a safer and favourable environment. The project urges all participants to understand that by holding these meetings everyone contributes to forming the conceptions and making the decisions; all act as one team and one body.

### **A plot for mosque-building**

The Icelandic government approved of the grant for financing a plot so that a mosque for the Muslims of Iceland can be built – a gesture highly appreciated by local Muslims. The plot intended for building a mosque was allocated to the Muslim Association and since then the Muslim Association’s representatives have taken effort to find the financial support required to achieve this grand project. Until now the mosque has not been built. Since the delivery of the plot, there has been controversy in the Icelandic society; some have challenged the government to retract the decision and withdraw the plot. The government, however, have faced the challenge and kept their word. Icelanders who were unhappy with the decision created a group on Facebook against building a mosque in Iceland, and in quick reaction another group was created challenging and opposing the earlier group and confirming the right for Muslims to have their own place of worship as part of the society.

The opposition to build a mosque did not stop at expressing opinion on social media as later on, a pig head was found in the plot where the mosque was supposed to be built. The Icelandic society split into three groups on the issue of building a mosque: the first opposing, the second supporting, the third and biggest had a neutral reaction and did not care much about whether or not it was build.

### **Multiculturalism and Interfaith Cooperation**

Icelandic media frequently cover Muslim feast celebrations as they did in September this year (Þorbjörnsson, 2016). The news coverage of Muslims' activities helps to make the society more attentive to diversity as far as religions are concerned. Different Icelandic religious associations regularly hold interfaith meetings during which means of cooperation and mutual understanding are discussed. Among the goals of these meetings is to point out problems and find solutions to them. The representatives of the religious associations participating in these regular meetings celebrated an anniversary on 24<sup>th</sup> November. The new president was invited to take part and give a speech on this occasion.

Every year Iceland organises multicultural events in which Muslims participate by bringing books, traditional food and desserts. Universities organise lectures in cooperation with Muslim organisations, while Muslim speakers have a chance to share Islamic views with the society, clear up misconceptions, and answer nagging questions. Symposia and seminars are also organised by human rights organisation and Red Cross in order to promote peaceful coexistence and tolerance. All these efforts are urgently needed in the European societies in order to achieve harmony, coexistence,

and integration in these societies. Schools, universities and media should have a main role in bringing harmony to the society, in building stronger ties between diverse cultures in the same society. Being conscious of the new challenges will definitely help to achieve our dreams.

### *References*

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