



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Limits of Swedish tolerance being tested – belated diplomacy towards the Islamic world



Sweden gave humanity the first law that protects the public's right to know 257 years ago. Its contribution to civilisation with the first Freedom of Information Act (1766), and its culture of respect for freedom of expression that emerged from it, are being put to the test, and the threat is – terrorism.

Following recent incidents of the Koran being desecrated at public gatherings, Sweden's conservative government has ordered all state security agencies and the army to bolster security measures as the nation faces the threat of terrorist acts.

“It’s a serious situation that we’re in. It’s a heightened threat, and an attack can occur within the framework of a heightened threat,” said Susanna Trehörning from SAPO, the Swedish Security service.

Only one individual, Salwan Momika, a 37-year-old Christian who emigrated from Iraq, was responsible for the road of escalation, which lasted just one month.

His life in the last two years has also been a paradigm of a highly liberal Swedish society and a culture of profound respect for freedom of expression.

Mr Momika emigrated to Sweden in 2018, and two years ago, he received refugee status and a residency permit valid until April 2024. He is just one of thousands of migrants from the Middle East who have experienced the benefit of Sweden's liberal immigration policies.

Mr Momika prepared and even reported to the police a performance in which he declared the desecration of the Muslim holy book because he was allegedly outraged that his application for Swedish citizenship had been denied only a few months before.

The police did not allow him to hold such a protest, but the court overruled that decision and allowed him to exercise his freedom of expression.

Swedish society in a gap

Exhibitionist and extreme behaviour by a man who does not understand, but abuses the centuries-old culture of tolerance and respect for freedom of expression, was sufficient to start a fire and put the state that showed him hospitality in trouble and make them fear retaliation.

“Sooner or later, the vengeful hand of the 'mujahids' will reach politicians and stage managers behind these sorts of crimes, and we will render the highest punishment to the perpetrator,” said General Hossein Salami, commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Swedish society has been torn between the tradition of broad freedoms, which it passionately values, and the examination of its limits, which expose it to the risk of endangering the lives of its citizens.

Inevitably, reminiscences of similar cases in Europe where the defenders of freedom sought an escape from self-censorship, but in an extreme way, arise in Sweden.

They remember the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten exposed to enormous protests in the Islamic world because it published a series of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005.

They also recall their cartoonist Lars Vilks because Al Qaeda put a \$100,000 price on his head for drawing the Prophet Muhammad with the body of a dog.

They particularly remember the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo's 12 editorial staff members who were killed in a terrorist attack in 2015 because of offensive caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad published three years earlier.

A problem for the policies of the ruling conservatives

The conservative Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson's government is aware of the risk

the country is facing and the outrage that the public burning of the Koran has caused throughout the Islamic world.

Hence the decision to strengthen preventive security measures due to the risk of terrorist actions, because as PM Kristersson said, Sweden „has gone from being what is called a legitimate target for terror attacks, to being a prioritised target.”

But the government is also faced with powerful internal voices protecting civil liberties, even the extreme ones it faced during the so-called Quran crisis.

One survey (public broadcaster SVT) showed that more than half of Swedes (53%) condemn the burning of holy books, but also showed that more than a third (34%) think that such actions should be allowed.

The minority government of PM Kristersson, which depends on the support of the extreme right and its strong anti-immigration policy, enters a gap with this crisis between the policies it proclaims and the widespread tolerance towards diversity, reflected in the overwhelming opposition to the anti-Islamic action of the Iraqi refugee Momika.

Delayed diplomacy

The Government is currently engaging in diplomatic action, but it is unlikely to produce many results.

Stockholm contacted several countries from the Islamic world and attempted to explain the complexity of its laws and traditions on respecting freedom of expression, but such an initiative came too late.

Because of the anti-Islam protests, Sweden has been struggling with its bid to join NATO due to Turkey's opposition. Following the burning of the Koran, Iran forbade Sweden from sending a new ambassador and its embassy in Baghdad was destroyed.

Increasing the vigilance of Sweden's security

services is a logical and rational move, but it will not be sufficient to resolve the situation.

One extreme and eccentric gesture has forced Sweden to re-evaluate its tolerance limits, raising the question: do such standards even exist?

They must also deal with issues of their loyal Islamic Federation because the government has never responded to their requests to establish a dialogue if they worry that by prohibiting "performances" like this one by Salwan Momika, they will enter a state of self-censorship and appease Islamic extremists.

“Swedes who are devout Muslims have the right to feel support from the rest of us when their faith is mocked and they are disregarded as a group,” announced a group of Swedish authors, demanding that a distinction be made between liberal laws and mocking and insulting believers.