



**| Flash |**

# Middle East-Sweden Quran Protests

F-2023-07-21a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: HIGH

Intelligence Requirements: Social Unrest

**July 21, 2023**

**Scope Note**

ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 2:00 PM (EDT) on July 21, 2023**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

# Flash | Middle East–Sweden Quran Protests

**> Key Findings**

On July 20 and 21, 2023, ZeroFox’s Geopolitical Working Group observed protests breaking out in multiple Middle Eastern countries against Sweden’s decision to allow a Stockholm protester to desecrate the Quran. A July 20 protest in Baghdad resulted in hundreds of protesters storming and setting fire to the Swedish embassy before being dispersed by police using water cannons. July 21 protests in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon attracted thousands of participants but passed largely peacefully. Tensions remain high, with multiple Middle Eastern countries registering diplomatic protests and Iraq expelling Sweden’s ambassador altogether. Sweden’s government has condemned the desecration of the Quran but has allowed it on free speech grounds.<sup>1</sup>

**Analyst Commentary**

Twice in the past several weeks, police in Sweden have allowed an Iraqi refugee residing in Stockholm, Salwan Momika, to desecrate the Quran in front of the Iraqi embassy. Momika is a former militia leader who fled to Sweden in 2018 and now considers himself an atheist. His demonstrations have involved stepping on and lighting fire to the Quran to

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<sup>1</sup>

[hXXps://www.theguardian\[.\]com/world/2023/jul/02/swedish-government-condemns-islamophobic-burning-of-a-quran](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/02/swedish-government-condemns-islamophobic-burning-of-a-quran)

protest Islam and promote freedom of speech. He has also covered the Quran in strips of bacon, the consumption of which is forbidden for Muslims. Though controversial, his demonstrations are protected by Sweden's freedom of speech laws, and he has carried out his actions under police protection.<sup>2</sup>

Sweden's protection for those who desecrate the Quran was already a controversial topic before Momika's displays. In January 2023, Rasmus Paludan, a far-right Danish politician who also holds Swedish citizenship, burned a copy of the Quran in front of Turkey's embassy in Stockholm.<sup>3</sup> That incident caused Turkey to summon Sweden's ambassador in protest and contributed to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision to hold up Sweden's bid for NATO membership. Paludan had previously burned the Quran in several locations across Sweden from 2019 to 2022 to protest Sweden's admission of refugees from Muslim-majority countries.<sup>4</sup> His actions sparked protests<sup>5</sup> and diplomatic rebukes<sup>6</sup> from multiple other Muslim-majority countries at the time of their occurrence.

## Looking Forward

Protests in Muslim-majority countries and elsewhere will likely continue in the short term. Though most will probably pass peacefully, smaller groups of more extreme demonstrators may take more disruptive action. Protests and associated unrest will likely worsen if Sweden allows additional Quran-related actions. Swedish police may deny

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[hXXps://timesofindia.indiatimes\[.\]com/world/rest-of-world/who-is-salwan-momika-the-quran-burner-sparking-international-tensions-between-sweden-and-muslim-nations/articleshow/102001126.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/who-is-salwan-momika-the-quran-burner-sparking-international-tensions-between-sweden-and-muslim-nations/articleshow/102001126.cms)

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[hXXps://www.theguardian\[.\]com/world/2023/jan/21/turkey-condemns-burning-of-quran-during-far-right-protest-in-sweden](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/21/turkey-condemns-burning-of-quran-during-far-right-protest-in-sweden)

4

[hXXps://www.dailysabah\[.\]com/world/europe/quran-burning-tour-points-to-rising-swedish-far-right](https://www.dailysabah.com/world/europe/quran-burning-tour-points-to-rising-swedish-far-right)

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[hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/world/asia-pacific/thousands-afghanistan-protest-koran-burning-incident-sweden-2023-01-27/](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thousands-afghanistan-protest-koran-burning-incident-sweden-2023-01-27/)

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[hXXps://www.aljazeera\[.\]com/news/2023/1/27/malaysia-condemns-quran-desecration-in-netherlands-sweden](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/27/malaysia-condemns-quran-desecration-in-netherlands-sweden)

future requests to hold Quran protests if they deem there to be a legitimate public safety risk or if holding such a protest would increase the risk of an attack on Sweden.<sup>7</sup>

Respected Islamic authorities may play a role in sustaining a longer-term backlash. Public figures, including Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Lebanon’s Hizballah, and Moqtada al-Sadr, a prominent Iraqi cleric with a large following, have condemned Sweden and encouraged protests. Egypt’s Al-Azhar Mosque, considered one of the foremost authorities in Sunni Islam, called for a global boycott of Swedish products.<sup>8</sup> Authorities such as these have a history of mobilizing large groups of followers.

Swedish citizens and organizations, including diplomatic ones, will likely face an increased security risk in countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Extremist groups may also attempt to attack targets within Sweden itself. The Swedish Security Service, or SÄPO, has reportedly detected elevated levels of violent threats against Sweden and Swedish interests abroad since Momika’s first Quran burning in late June. SÄPO predicts that Swedish assets will likely remain targets of Islamic extremist groups through the end of 2023.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the previous similar occurrences in Sweden were followed by cyber attacks, particularly by the hacking collective Anonymous Sudan. The threat actor group had targeted several organizations in Sweden with Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, which disrupted the website functionalities of healthcare, educational, and banking institutions, among other targets.<sup>10</sup> Thus, similar actions against organizations in Sweden will likely occur in response to the most recent event in Stockholm.

The episode has harmed Sweden’s diplomatic standing with multiple Muslim-majority countries. Iraq, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, and Malaysia, among others,

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<sup>7</sup> [hXXps://www.dw\[.\]com/en/sweden-issues-rare-ban-over-quran-burning-rally/a-64648255](https://www.dw.com/en/sweden-issues-rare-ban-over-quran-burning-rally/a-64648255)

<sup>8</sup> [hXXps://www.newarab\[.\]com/news/arab-states-call-action-over-sweden-quran-burning](https://www.newarab.com/news/arab-states-call-action-over-sweden-quran-burning)

<sup>9</sup>

[hXXps://www.counterthreatcenter\[.\]com/post/threats-against-sweden-swedish-interests-and-minority-groups-after-quran-burnings](https://www.counterthreatcenter.com/post/threats-against-sweden-swedish-interests-and-minority-groups-after-quran-burnings)

<sup>10</sup>

[hXXps://www.bloomberg\[.\]com/news/features/2023-05-14/posing-as-islamists-russian-hackers-take-aim-at-sweden](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2023-05-14/posing-as-islamists-russian-hackers-take-aim-at-sweden)

<sup>11</sup> [hXXps://thecyberexpress\[.\]com/anonymous-sudan-cyberattacks-swedish-hospitals/](https://thecyberexpress.com/anonymous-sudan-cyberattacks-swedish-hospitals/)

have condemned the actions either through public statements or diplomatic channels.<sup>12</sup> Although Iraq condemned the storming of the Swedish embassy on July 20, it expelled the Swedish ambassador and withdrew its charge d'affaires from Stockholm, effectively ending diplomatic relations. Morocco, Kuwait, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates recalled their ambassadors to Stockholm following Momika's first Quran burning. Turkey's parliament has not yet given its final approval for Sweden to join NATO, and it is possible that President Erdogan or others within the Turkish government may use the opportunity to delay the process once more.

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<sup>12</sup>

[hXXps://www.aljazeera\[.\]com/news/2023/7/21/countries-summon-swedens-ambassadors-to-protest-quran-burning](https://www.aljazeera[.]com/news/2023/7/21/countries-summon-swedens-ambassadors-to-protest-quran-burning)

## Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	<b>Red</b>	<b>Amber</b>
<b>WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?</b>	<b>Sources may use</b> <b>TLP:RED</b> when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	<b>Sources may use</b> <b>TLP:AMBER</b> when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
<b>HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?</b>	<b>Recipients may NOT share</b> <b>TLP:RED</b> with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	<b>Recipients may ONLY share</b> <b>TLP:AMBER</b> information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. <b>Note that</b> <b>TLP:AMBER+STRICT</b> restricts sharing to the organization only.
	<b>Green</b>	<b>Clear</b>
<b>WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?</b>	<b>Sources may use</b> <b>TLP:GREEN</b> when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	<b>Sources may use</b> <b>TLP:CLEAR</b> when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
<b>HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?</b>	<b>Recipients may share</b> <b>TLP:GREEN</b> information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	<b>Recipients may share</b> <b>TLP:CLEAR</b> information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

## **| Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale**

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%