



## Global Reactions to the Desecration of Copies of the Holy Quran in Sweden

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Image from [Arab News](#)

In recent weeks, a Danish far-right politician and Iraqi exile in Sweden have burned copies of the Holy Quran in both Denmark and Sweden at numerous events and locations, including outside Turkish embassies. Law enforcement in the two countries allowed the events to be carried out, issuing a protest permit and stating that such a protest did not violate any laws. However, the actions have sparked global outrage both in the Arab region and beyond. While the Swedish government did condemn the acts, they must take more decisive action to stop events that directly contradict international efforts to spread the values of moderation and tolerance.

Already, numerous Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait have summoned the Swedish ambassadors of their respective countries to file complaints. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has extended an invitation to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to convene an emergency open meeting for the Executive Committee to discuss the events and their implications. Outside of the Gulf, other Arab states such as Jordan, Iran, and Iraq have summoned ambassadors to act. Iraqi students have stormed the Swedish embassy in



Baghdad, [calling](#) Sweden “hostile to Islam.” Other countries have gone beyond a statement of condemnation. Morocco, for instance, recalled its ambassador to Sweden for an indefinite period.

Beyond the region, the United States condemned the act but added that issuing the permit supported freedom of expression. The United Kingdom barred the Danish far-right politician from entering the country. Foreign ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) issued their condemnation and Pope Francis [stated](#) that he felt “angry and disgusted” to see copies of the Muslim holy book desecrated. “Any book considered holy should be respected to respect those who believe in it,” he added. Norway banned a planned protest that included burning copies of the holy book after Turkey’s foreign ministry summoned Norway’s Ambassador over the planned event. Finally, Russian President Putin stated that the desecration of copies the holy book is a crime and will be penalized in Russia.

Out of all the countries, Turkey seems to have taken the toughest stance. Turkey, which is a strategically important NATO member due to its geographical location in the Middle East and Europe, as well as NATO’s second-largest military power, slammed Sweden over the incidents. The issuing of permits for these protests may further jeopardize Sweden’s bid to join NATO before the bloc’s key summit in July, as it needs Turkey’s backing. Turkish President Erdogan criticized Sweden over the incident, [stating](#) that Turkey “would never bow down to a policy of provocation or threat” and “teach the arrogant Western people that it is not freedom of expression to insult the sacred values of Muslims.” In addition, he [warned](#) Sweden that “if you do not show respect to the religious beliefs of the Republic of Turkey or Muslims, you will not receive any support for NATO from us.”

The Turkish government’s Director of Communications, Fahrettin Altun, [stated](#) that Turkey is “sick and tired of [the] enabling of Islamophobia and continued instances of hatred for our religion on the part of European authorities especially in Sweden.” He [added](#), “Those who seek to become our allies in NATO, cannot tolerate or enable destructive behaviors of Islamophobic and xenophobic terrorists.” Additionally, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan [called](#) the desecration of copies of the Holy Quran “despicable.” Turkey even canceled a visit by Sweden’s defense chief that aimed at overcoming Turkey’s objections to Sweden’s bid to join the NATO military alliance, with Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar [stating](#) that the visit “has lost its significance and meaning.”

The timing here is crucial for Sweden. While Finland and Sweden both applied to join NATO last May, Turkey has approved Finland’s application, [praising](#) the country’s “authentic and concrete steps” on Turkish security. Police authorities in Finland stressed that burning copies of the Quran is a punishable offense, as it violates religious peace. On the other hand, Turkey is delaying Sweden’s bid as President Erdogan accuses the country of embracing Kurdish militants. President Erdogan also [signaled](#) on July 3, 2023, that Turkey is not ready to ratify Sweden’s membership in NATO. However, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg remained optimistic and [expressed](#) that Sweden could still become a NATO member by summer.

The events highlight the fine line between freedom of speech and Islamophobia. While freedom of speech is important, burning copies of the Quran crosses a certain line that endangers the overall societal balance. While both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sweden and the EU released [statements](#) rejecting the “Islamophobic act” calling it “offensive, disrespectful and a clear act of provocation,” and “manifestations of racism, xenophobia, and related tolerance,”

the overall implications of certain actions need to be considered with more attention. Already, there have been efforts from the Swedish side to regulate such events. Sweden's justice minister [asserted](#) that the government is looking into amending its protest laws, stating "It is clear that we must analyze the legal situation in the light of the spring events and those judgments. The analyses are ongoing, and we will come back with any conclusions." This is especially important at a time when the GCC states are keen on expanding their relationships with countries such as Denmark and Sweden. It is thus beneficial to exercise freedom of speech more responsibly to prevent mounting further tensions with Muslim countries.

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