

The Danes, Islam and Muslims

By professor, dr Peter Nannestad, Department of Political Science, Aarhus Universitet, Denmark

Since the terrorist attack on 9/11 2001 and the Cartoon Crisis in 2005, the question of the Danes' attitude to immigration and integration has become increasingly overlaid by the question of the Danes' attitude to Islam and Muslims. While the first issue has been examined quite thoroughly, we know much less about the latter. Most opinion polls by far in this area focus on the attitude to immigrants without taking into account the question of religious affiliation. A new opinion poll carried out by Voxmeter for the Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR) at the Department of Political Science, Aarhus Universitet in December 2010, does, however, offer an idea of the Danes' position to specific questions relating to Islam and Muslims.

The opinion poll, which is based on a representative random sample of 1007 interviewees, sheds light on three groups of questions:

- The personal attitude of the interviewee to Islam and Muslims
- The impression of the interviewee of the attitude to Islam and Muslims in Danish society and among Danish authorities
- The perception of the interviewee of the meaning of "Islamophobia" as a concept and of its extension in Danish society.

Overall, the answers show some uncertainty concerning the issue of Islam and Muslims on the part of the respondents. The "don't know" percentages are relatively high in connection with several questions – as high as 28 percent in connection with the question about what "Islamophobia" really means. This may, of course, also be a reflection of the respondents not wanting to answer the question. In most cases, the "don't know" percentage is higher among the female than among the male respondents, just as it is increasing – strongly in part – with age. Furthermore, a certain social bias can be observed since the "don't know" percentage tends to decrease with increasing income

Personal attitude to Islam and Muslims

The personal attitudes on the part of the respondents to Islam and Muslims have been sought identified through the following questions:

- "Islam as a religion is a threat to Denmark"
- "I wouldn't like if my son or daughter married a Muslim"
- "What is your attitude to having a Muslim neighbour?"

67.5 percent of all respondents, who have expressed an opinion (i.e. answered anything but "don't know"), disagree or totally disagree that Islam as a religion is a threat to Denmark. The share that disagrees or totally disagrees is a bit higher among men (70 percent) than among women (65 percent). Age also seems to play a part: among the 18-29 year-olds, only 18 percent of the respondents agree or fully agree that Islam is a threat

to Denmark; among the respondents aged 70 or more, the corresponding share is 58 percent.

A (small) majority of all the respondents who expressed an opinion, state that they would not react negatively if their son or daughter married a Muslim. So, the share that wouldn't like their daughter or son to marry a Muslim is with 42 percent relatively high among Danes. To what extent this can contribute to an explanation of the relatively low frequency of mixed marriages in Denmark depends of the extent to which young Danes are influenced by their parents' preferences in their choice of marriage partner. This is presumably insignificant. Among women, the unwillingness to perhaps get a Muslim son or daughter-in-law is more common than among men (47 against 36 percent), just like the unwillingness to a son's or daughter's possible marriage to a Muslim tends to increase with age. In the high-income group (household incomes of DDK 800,000 or more a year), the willingness to accept a possible Muslim son or daughter-in-law is higher than in the low-income group (household incomes below DDK 200,000 a year). The share that declare themselves willing to accept a Muslim son or daughter-in-law is 67 percent in the high-income group against 56 percent in the low-income group. In that context, one should not forget, however, that the likeliness of actually getting a Muslim son or daughter-in-law is probably significantly smaller for respondents in the high-income than in the low-income group, so to a certain extent, this expression of tolerance towards this eventuality among the respondents in the high-income group is "for free".

On the face of it, it looks as if their neighbour's religion is of minor importance to most Danes. 90 percent of the respondents who have expressed an opinion state that they don't care whether their neighbour is Muslim or for instance Christian. 1 percent prefers a Muslim as neighbour and 9 percent prefer that the neighbour is not a Muslim. Related to the strong trend towards residential segregation between immigrants and Danes, this result indicates that residential segregation does not primarily exist because Danes don't want to live together with Muslims on account of them being Muslims. The reason is more likely that many Muslim immigrants come from less developed countries, have little or no education and consequently no or low-paid jobs, and that their social status therefore is low. In this interpretation, the segregation is founded socially rather than religiously and can therefore not be taken as a direct expression of discrimination against Muslims. The attitude to having a Muslim as a neighbour is not different among women and men, and there is no clear connection with age. On the other hand, there is a connection with income: in the low-income group (where there is reason to suppose that the probability of having/getting a Muslim neighbour is highest), "only" 80 percent don't care if their neighbour is Muslim; in the high-income group (where this probability is presumably rather low), the corresponding share is 94 percent.

The view of the attitude to Islam and Muslims in Danish society and with Danish authorities

The respondents' views of the attitude to Islam and Muslims in Danish society and with the Danish authorities are examined by way of the following questions:

- "In your opinion, how are the Danes' relationship in general to Islam as a religion in Denmark?"
- "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: "Muslims in Denmark are the section of the population that is treated worst by the Danes in general"?"
- "In your opinion, how are the authorities' relationship in general to Islam as a religion in Denmark?"
- "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: "Muslims in Denmark are the section of the population that is treated worst by the authorities"?"
- "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: "Islam as a religion is the most criticized religion in Denmark"?"
- "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: "Muslims themselves are to be blamed if they are criticized in Denmark"?"

A majority (61 percent) among the respondents, who have expressed an opinion, consider the Danes' relationship in general to Islam as a religion as bad or very bad. There is no big difference between the view among men (60 percent "bad" or "very bad") and women (62 percent "bad" or "very bad"). Younger people tend to view the Danes' relationship to Islam as a religion more positively than older people, and there is a tendency towards respondents in the low-income group considering the Danes' relationship to Islam as worse than respondents in the high-income group.

Even though 61 percent of the respondents view the Danes' relationship to Islam as a religion as bad or very bad, only a little over half (52 percent) of those who have expressed an opinion, agree with the statement that Muslims in Denmark are the section of the population that is treated worst by the Danes in general. This difference may indicate that the respondents to a certain extent distinguish between the attitude to Islam as a religion and the attitude to Muslims. Once again, there is only a slight difference between the opinion among men and women (51 percent and 53 percent "fully agree" or "agree" respectively). The 18-29 year-olds are more inclined to agree that Muslims are the section of the population that is treated worst by the Danes than respondents aged 70 or more, but apart from this, the connection between this view and age is unclear. There is only a slight connection between household income and the opinion that Muslims are the group in Denmark that is treated worst by the Danes in general.

While a majority of the respondents consider the Danes' relationship to Islam as a religion as bad or very bad, this is not the case with the view of the Danish authorities' relationship to Islam. Here, only a minority (45 percent) among those who have expressed an opinion, consider this relationship as "bad" or "very bad". The difference between men (40 percent "bad" or "very bad") and women (50 percent "bad" or "very bad") is, however, somewhat more pronounced in this case whereas there is no clear relation to age. Respondents in the high-income group consider the authorities' relationship to Islam as a religion as more positive (37 percent "bad" or "very bad") than respondents in the low-income group (44 percent "bad" or "very bad"). But in both groups, there is also a majority that considers this relationship as good.

There is even less support of the view that Muslims in Denmark are the section of the population that is treated worst by the authorities. This opinion is shared by only 34 percent of the respondents who have expressed an opinion. Here, we see the same pattern as in connection with the questions about the Danes' attitude to Islam and the Danes' treatment of Muslims: the relationship to Islam as a religion is considered as negative to a larger extent than the treatment of Muslims. The share that agrees that Muslims in Denmark are the section of the population that is treated worst by the authorities is slightly bigger among women (35 percent) than among men (33 percent). A bigger share among the 18-29 year-olds (41 percent) than among respondents aged 70 or more (28 percent) agree that Muslims in Denmark are the section of the population that is treated worst by the authorities, but there is no majority in favour of this attitude in the youngest age group either. The connection between the view that Muslims in Denmark are the section of the population that is treated worst by the authorities and household income is not clear.

There is a large majority (87 percent) among the respondents who have expressed an opinion of this question, in favour of the view that Islam is the most criticized religion in Denmark. However, at the same time, a – somewhat smaller – majority (53 percent) also holds the view that Muslims themselves are to be blamed if they are criticized in Denmark.

Based on these results, the majority view of the attitude to Islam and Muslims in Denmark may be roughly summed up in the following manner: Islam is the most criticized religion in Denmark. The Danes have a bad relationship to Islam as a religion, and Muslims are the section of the population that is treated worst by the Danes in general. The Muslims are, however, themselves to be blamed if they are criticized. The Danish authorities' relationship to Islam as a religion is good and Muslims are not the section of the population that is treated worst by the Danish authorities.

Islamophobia

The respondents were also asked what they understand by Islamophobia and whether they think that the Danes are generally islamophobic.

Not surprisingly, there is much uncertainty about what the concept of Islamophobia covers. As much as 28 percent of the respondents answered "don't know", and the share is almost the same among women and men. The most striking feature of the given answers may be that 65 percent of the respondents consider Islamophobia as something that is directed against Islam, while only 35 percent consider Islamophobia as something directed against Muslims. Only 37 percent of the respondents define scepticism about Islam or criticism of Islam as Islamophobia, and only 16 percent define scepticism about Muslims or criticism of Muslims in this way. With some caution, the view of Islamophobia among a majority of the respondents who did not answer "don't know", may be reconstructed in the following manner: Islamophobia is a (negative) attitude to do with Islam, not Muslims, and scepticism about or criticism of Islam is not identical with Islamophobia.

The respondents are split in their view whether the Danes are generally islamophobic. A slight majority (52 percent) returns a negative reply. It is notable that the share that answered "don't know" to this question (16 percent) is significantly smaller than the share that stated that they didn't know what Islamophobia was. This necessarily implies that at least some respondents have answered the question whether Danes are generally islamophobic without knowing what the concept covers. In overall terms, this implies that the understanding of what is meant by Islamophobia differs so much among the respondents that the answers to whether the Danes are generally islamophobic are difficult to compare and consequently difficult to interpret as an overall expression of a certain view.