

Shooting in Belgian capital leaves two Swedish citizens dead, one in critical condition

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Two Swedish nationals, one in his 70s and one in his 60s, were killed in a mass shooting in the Belgian capital of Brussels on Monday. A third man in his 70s remains in hospital in critical condition. The gunman, a 45-year-old asylum-seeker from Tunisia, cited the reactionary government-backed Quran burnings in Sweden throughout the summer as the motivation for his attack, which deliberately targeted Swedish nationals.

Abdesalem Al Guilani was living without a permit in Belgium after his asylum application was rejected. After fleeing to Europe in 2011, he arrived in Italy before travelling to Sweden. He served a prison sentence in Sweden between 2012 and 2014. In a post following the shootings, which took place as the Belgium vs. Sweden football match was starting, he cited the Islamic State terrorist group as his inspiration. He was shot and killed by Belgian police early Tuesday. Chief prosecutor Frederic Van Leeuw stated that initial indications suggest that the gunman acted alone.

In a video, Al Guilani declared he had “killed three Swedes” as “revenge for all Muslims.” A statement published later Tuesday by Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack. Over recent months, media outlets associated with Islamic State and al-Qaida have urged revenge attacks against Sweden for Quran burnings by far-right provocateurs Salwan Momika and Rasmus Paludan.

Al Guilani’s attack is deeply disoriented and reactionary, but it cannot be explained outside of the vicious Islamophobia systematically incited by the ruling elites in Sweden and the major imperialist powers. Swedish media cited a social media post from the gunman Monday, indicating that the trigger for his shooting was the brutal stabbing of a 6-year-old Palestinian boy in Chicago by his mother’s landlord. Al Guilani reportedly wrote that the stabbing would have been described as a terrorist act if it had been carried out by a Muslim against a Christian.

As the World Socialist Web Site explained, the stabbing of the boy and threats of violence against Muslims and their organisations “are not just random incidents, but rather the product of a deliberate campaign directed from the highest

levels of the national-security apparatus to whip up anti-Muslim bigotry and mobilize it in support of a US military intervention in the Middle East that has no popular support.” The anti-Muslim campaign has reached fever pitch with the unanimous support in ruling circles for the Israeli regime’s genocidal onslaught on the Palestinians in Gaza.

The Swedish ruling elite has made its own contribution to fomenting anti-Muslim hysteria. The current right-wing government led by the conservative Moderate Party relies on the support of the fascistic Sweden Democrats to secure a majority in parliament. Throughout 2023, the government has tacitly backed the Quran-burning provocations, beginning with Paludan’s burning of a Quran outside the Turkish embassy in January.

Throughout the summer, Momika, an Iraqi Christian previously associated with the Sweden Democrats, carried out a series of Quran burnings and desecrations in various locations in Stockholm and Malmö. All of these intentionally provocative acts were made possible with the approval of the police, which gave the go-ahead for small demonstrations by right-wing extremists at which Qurans were burned and provided security protection.

In one case where the police tried to ban a burning, the courts stepped in to overturn the prohibition, citing “freedom of speech.” Similar provocations were organised by far-right groups in neighbouring Denmark.

Underscoring the close connection between figures like Momika and the government, Momika declared in an interview with German public broadcaster ARD that the only party capable of “protecting Sweden” was the Sweden Democrats. He then announced in early August a suspension of his Quran burnings for fear that they could play into the hands of Russia and Turkish efforts to delay Sweden’s NATO membership.

For their part, the government and media defended these provocations with bogus and hypocritical statements about the need to uphold “freedom of speech.” After mass protests swept Muslim-majority countries, including one in Iraq where demonstrators stormed the Swedish embassy, the

Foreign Ministry in Stockholm released a statement describing the Quran burnings as “Islamophobic.”

But the right-wing government refused to take any action to prevent the burnings, with Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson declaring, “We stand up for the Swedish freedom of speech.”

The government seized on the heightened anger towards Sweden produced by the Quran burnings to strengthen police powers. In August, the Swedish security agency SAPO increased the country’s terror threat to “high,” the fourth level on a five-level scale. The government strengthened border controls, giving police greater authority to stop and search people. In September, Kristersson met with the head of the military to discuss using the army to deal with a spike in gang-related shootings, which often occur in impoverished immigrant communities.

The campaign for more police state measures was intensified following Monday’s attack. Kristersson told a press conference in Stockholm, “This is a time for more security, we can’t be naive.”

At the same time, the whipping up of Islamophobia has been exploited by the political establishment to strengthen the case for Sweden’s NATO membership, which a significant portion of the population continues to view with skepticism. The government denounced a “Russian disinformation” campaign for spreading the claim that it facilitated the Quran burnings.

“Russia is using this deeply disrespectful action with the Quran for its own agenda in media outlets and channels controlled by Russia,” Justice Minister Gunnar Strömmer alleged. “The goals of these messages are to split and polarise the West, spread conspiracy theories, hinder decision-making processes, and create disunity in countries that they want to influence.”

The truth is that the political climate in which state-backed Islamophobia can flourish in Sweden has been created by the entire political establishment. During two parliamentary terms in government from 2014 to 2022, the Social Democrats, supported by the Greens and Left Party, implemented stringent immigration controls demanded by the right, oversaw a disastrous “herd immunity” pandemic policy that saw death rates in heavily immigrant-populated communities significantly exceed those in the general population, and continued to enforce austerity measures that have gutted Sweden’s once relatively generous social welfare system.

Systematic privatisations and cost-cutting have turned many immigrant communities on the outskirts of large Swedish cities into areas of mass unemployment and social misery.

The refusal of any political party to decisively oppose

these policies has helped create the conditions within which reactionary Islamist terrorism and gang violence can gain footholds.

The Social Democrat-led government also helped legitimise the far-right Sweden Democrats. During its last year in government, the Social Democrats implemented a budget drafted by the right-wing opposition parties in parliament, including the Sweden Democrats. Since Kristersson came to power, his Sweden Democrat-backed government has announced a “paradigm shift” in immigration policy, including a clampdown on family reunifications and more stringent rules for obtaining residency permits.

Within this context, the series of Quran burnings that appear to have provoked Monday’s shooting has much in common with the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed published by a Danish newspaper in 2006. At the time, supporters of the conservative daily’s right to print offensive depictions of Mohammed as a terrorist, including the right-wing Danish government and much of the domestic and international media, justified their position with references to “freedom of speech.”

In reality, the provocation emerged from an appeal by Denmark’s then Cultural Affairs Minister Brian Mikkelsen to create a “Danish cannon” of art to combat the emergence of a “parallel society” in the country where “minorities” practiced “their own medieval values and undemocratic views.” The publication occurred as the Danish government enforced an unprecedented crackdown on immigration in alliance with the far-right Danish People’s Party and triggered angry protests around the world.



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