

# SWEDEN DEMOCRATS (SVERIGEDEMOKRATERNA)

**IMPACT:** The most electorally successful far-right party in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats (SD, *Sverigedemokraterna*), have been represented in the national legislature since 2010 and the European Parliament since 2014. Rooted in Nazism and founded by white supremacists in the 1980s, the Sweden Democrats have attempted to rebrand by shifting to rhetoric and policies that stigmatize Islam, Muslims, and Muslim immigration in Sweden. SD members have a history of promoting anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, and racist statements and conspiracy theories.

- **Established in 1988, founding members of Sweden Democrats (SD) have roots in Nazism and Swedish fascist and white nationalist groups**, including *Bevara Sverige Svenskt* (Keep Sweden Swedish). This includes the party's first treasurer, **Gustaf Ekström (d. 1995)**, who in 1941 left Sweden to join the Nazis and worked for the notorious **Waffen-SS as a translator and propagandist**. Anders Klarström, the first elected SD party chairman in 1989, has connections to the neo-Nazi Nordic Realm Party (*Nordiska rikspartiet*).
- **After photos came to light of SD members wearing Nazi uniforms in the mid-1990s, the party instituted a ban on uniforms and adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**. The Brookings Institute argues that these decisions were an **“attempt to present a more respectable image.”** Reporting in *The Telegraph* describes the shift of SD and other parties across Europe, in which white nationalists traded in skinheads and jackboots for “sharp suits and ties,” as the “new far Right.” **The Telegraph argues, “Claiming to have left racism and anti-Semitism behind, these parties now concentrate on immigration and ‘the Islamisation of Europe’, disillusionment with the European Union, and undermining the political elite.”**
- In 2006, then party leader Jimmie Åkesson, Åkesson changed the SD's logo from “a National Front-style torch to a baby-blue daisy,” furthering the party's “programme of modernisation.” **SD policies have also been “sanitised,” including a shift from “a preoccupation with Nordic ethnicity” to a concept of “open Swedishness”** which *The Telegraph* argues “implies that immigrants are welcome so long as they renounce their other identities and take on ‘Swedish ways’.”
- According to a former party member and whistleblower, the softening of SD's image and policies is “largely PR-driven and meretricious,” and the party “has different ways of talking in public and backstage.” **While the party has a record of expelling party members for white nationalism, expelled members have stated that party leadership were aware of their past fascist affiliations.**
- Reporting in August 2018 in *The Local* states that **two SD members who were running for election were asked to leave the party after it surfaced that they had purchased Nazi and white nationalist memorabilia online and for posting racist and anti-Semitic statements on Facebook**. This included a tribute to Adolf Hitler, posts that described Arabs as rapists and pedophiles, and a photo that described Anne Frank as “the coolest Jew in the shower room.” Such revelations stemmed from a report published by *Dagens ETC*, which uncovered a total of **11 SD members who “could be linked to purchases in online stores that sell Nazi memorabilia and racist goods.”** Reporting in August 2018 by *Expo* and *Expressen* revealed that **several politicians running for office as Sweden Democrats are former members of the neo-Nazi National Socialist Front (Nationalsocialistisk front, NSF)**. NSF was the largest neo-Nazi party in Sweden before it disbanded in 2008.
- In terms of its electoral performance, SD first crossed the 4% threshold necessary for parliamentary representation in the 2010 general election. **In the 2018 Swedish general election, it increased its support from 5.7% (20 seats) in 2010 to 17.5% (62 seats), becoming the third largest party in Sweden.** According to reporting in *Politico*, the electoral success of the Sweden Democrats paralleled that of far-right parties in Germany and Italy, all of which had **“champion[ed] tighter border controls...since the height of the refugee crisis in 2015.”** In March 2019, the leader of the center-right Christian Democrats for the first time indicated the party's willingness to negotiate with the Sweden Democrats in order to form a government. This decision was met with opposition from other parties in the *Riksdag*. **The SD entered the European Parliament for the first time in 2014 and received 9.67% of the vote (2 seats). In the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, SD received 15.34% (3 seats).**
- **The Sweden Democrats are informally connected with other far-right European parties.** In December 2010, SD co-signed the ‘Jerusalem Declaration’ along with the Austrian Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ), Belgium's Flemish Interest (*Vlaams Belang*, VB), and Germany's Freedom Party (*Die Freiheit*), as part of a pan-European, far-right delegation to Israel. An example of far-

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**right parties in Europe attempting to rebrand their Nazi and anti-Semitic origins while adopting anti-Muslim and anti-immigration rhetoric and policies, the delegation met with other far-right Israeli politicians to defend “Western civilization” and “Judeo-Christian cultural values” from “a new global totalitarian threat: fundamentalist Islam.”** SD was represented by MP Kent Ekeröth, who said during the trip, “We are here to cooperate. ... Part of the problem is that we have a problem with Jewish organizations in Europe. They work against us. They call us racists, antisemites, blah blah blah all that. And I think pressure from Israel can help us in the long-term. ... Legitimize our parties in Europe!” The delegation was organized by a leading international anti-Muslim figure from Austria, Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff.

- Following the 2014 European Parliament elections, **SD initially joined the anti-Muslim political group Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (today known as Identity and Democracy), which was headed by UK’s Nigel Farage. SD later joined the Tory-founded and center-right European Conservatives and Reformists Group—a move that has been described as an attempt by SD to “clean up its image to become more mainstream.”** According to an article published in August 2018 in Newsweek, Steve Bannon at some point reportedly met with members of the Sweden Democrats in relation to his project to launch a foundation that would unite Europe’s far right. In July, however, an SD spokesperson stated, “We aren’t following Steve Bannon’s political work. He as a person he [sic] is of no interest to us.”
- According to analysis published in November 2011 by Barzoo Eliassi, at the time a researcher at the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University, the discourse that SD utilizes in discussions of Islam and Muslims includes “a variety of negative collective attributes” such as “gender oppression, forced marriage, animal abuse, social welfare abuse, criminality, rape, anti-democracy, intolerance, terrorism, and fundamentalism.” Eliassi also argues that **SD views the birthrates of Muslims in Sweden to be a “great threat,” and when coupled with Muslim immigration to Sweden, that “Swedes will be a minority in their own country outnumbered by fertile Muslims.”** Eliassi maintains that such “distorted and ill-informed provocations” are used to justify anti-Muslim policies and bolster discrimination against Muslims.
- Many leading SD members have promoted anti-Muslim views throughout their careers. SD party chairman Jimmie Åkesson, who has headed the party since 2005, published an op-ed in the tabloid press Aftonbladet in October 2009, in which he claimed, “Islam differs from Christianity on several crucial points, such as the distinction between spiritual and worldly power and the view of the use of force. Islam has no equivalent to the New Testament and no universal love message. **These differences have also made Islam and the Muslim world actively reject enlightenment and humanism.”** In the same op-ed, Åkesson stated that Islam was the “greatest threat against Sweden since WWII.” Jan Hjärpe, Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Lund, argued that Åkesson’s rhetoric was racist, stating, “This is the same kind of propaganda that was used by Nazi anti-Semites.”
- **Despite the party’s Nazi roots, SD members have attempted to link Islam to Nazism.** In a video uploaded to YouTube in October 2013, SD lawmaker Richard Jomshof likened Islam to Nazism and argued during a parliamentary debate that Muslims would spread anti-Semitism in mosques, and that the last prophet of Islam, Muhammad, was an anti-Semite. He further claimed, **“Islam is not compatible with freedom, it is not compatible with equality, it is not compatible with democracy. If we are to compare Islam with anything, it should be with other totalitarian ideologies, like Communism and Nazism.”** In January 2015, on the anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz, SD party whip Mattias Karlsson claimed that **“the threat of Islamism is perhaps greater than it is from Nazism.”**
- **The SD wants to stop immigration to Sweden and, with a particular focus on Muslims.** In November 2015, following a large increase in the number of refugees fleeing war-torn Syria, **SD party leader Jimmie Åkesson called for the monitoring and mapping of Muslim opinions to detect ‘radicalization.’** During the autumn of 2015, fliers were handed out on the Greek island of Lesbos discouraging refugees to make their way to Sweden. The SD officially confirmed that they produced the fliers. As reported in Aftonbladet, in September 2015, **SD MP Gunilla Schmidt posted on her Facebook page in reference to refugees, “Won’t someone get on the Öresund Bridge with a machine gun!”** In March 2020, Åkesson traveled to Greece and reportedly distributed fliers that stated, “Sweden is full.”
- **SD members have also maintained that Islam is not compatible with Swedish culture.** During an SD political rally in August 2018, MP Richard Jomshof stated, “Why should we change into a Middle Eastern country? [...] Why should we care about Islam? **Sweden is not an Islamic country. Why should we be**

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**influenced by one of the worst ideologies in the world?** I don't understand it." In a 2012 interview with *Sveriges Television* (SVT), SD leader Pär Norling advocated, **"Ban Islam in Sweden and deport those who persist in believing in the religion."** He also argued that while he did not support the neo-Nazi movement in Sweden, he sided with them on the basis that Muslims do not belong in Swedish society.

- **SD party members have often linked immigrant Muslim men to sexual predation, despite the absence of data to back such claims.** According to the anti-racist British NGO Hope Not Hate, **SD MP Jomshof stated in January 2014 that "rape is an expression of Islamic culture."** Hope Not Hate also details that Markus Palmheim, former municipal board representative of the SD in Danderyd, wrote in 2016, **"Let the Arabs get paid to rape feminists, then at least they'll contribute a little bit."** In the 2018 national elections, the Sweden Democrats blamed the immigration of Muslims for an alleged rise of violence and criminality in Sweden. MP Jomshof argued that prior to such immigration patterns, Swedes "have never had problems with gang rapes" nor with "men from the Middle East raping Swedish women." SD party members have also **bolstered conspiracy theories about so-called 'no-go zones' in Sweden, which law enforcement have refuted.** Such conspiracy theories have erroneously been cited by U.S. President Donald Trump.
- **Ahead of the national elections in September 2010, Swedish television channel TV4 refused to air an SD advertisement, citing hate speech laws.** The ad featured an elderly white woman attempting to claim her welfare payments as Muslim women in niqab rush past her. The ad stated, "On September 19, you can choose to cut money from immigration budgets, or from pensions. The choice is yours."
- In June 2017, activists from the white nationalist Nordic Resistance Movement and Nordic Youth protested a municipal council meeting in opposition to the construction of a mosque in Karlstad. In the municipal council, **SD along with two other centrist-right parties, the Christian Democrats and the Moderates, voted against the measure.** When the motion passed, **SD solicited signatures to demand a referendum, which was also ultimately turned down.**
- In November 2017, SD politician Martin Strid quit the party after being criticized by the national leadership for racist remarks. He had stated, **"If you are an ex-Muslim you have come quite far towards being fully human."** He also said that he wanted to "free Muslims from Islam, the goal is for them to join SD instead." In February 2018, SD politician Elisabeth Peterson posted a song on Facebook that contained the lyrics, **"Swedes are white and the country is ours."** As documented by *Expressen*, from 2012 to 2016, SD member Mikael Bystedt posted approximately 500 anonymous comments on Swedish far-right websites *Avpixlat* and *Fria tider* and U.S. white nationalist website *Breitbart*. His comments included, **"Expel all Muslims" and "Islam is pure evil!" and he described Arabs as the "scum of the earth" and "lazy parasites."** Following reports of Somali mosques in London that were burned down, Bystedt commented, "Damn, it was well done! Now we hope this spreads to Sweden like a wildfire." Bystedt also praised racial segregation in the U.S., stating, **"Do you want to make your homeland safe ... Easy: out with Africans and Muslims."**
- In October 2016, **SD MP Anna Hagwall bolstered anti-Semitic tropes when she criticized what she incorrectly perceived as a majority ownership of Swedish press by a family with Jewish ancestry, stating,** "No family, ethnic group or company should be allowed to directly/indirectly control more than five percent of the media." In June 2018, then-Second Deputy Speaker of the Riksdag, **SD MP Björn Söder, claimed on Facebook that Jews as well as the Indigenous Sámi people are not Swedish.** In October 2017, senior SD leader Mattias Karlsson called on Facebook for the deportation of two Afghan teenage activists.