



Heated Policy Change

A Framing Analysis of the Swedish and Danish Policy Response to the 2023 Quran Crisis

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Abstract

In 2023, Denmark and Sweden faced negative security and foreign policy consequences when Qurans were publicly burned in each country. Despite similarities in crisis characteristics and that implications appeared worse for Sweden, only Denmark responded with significant policy change by prohibiting improper treatment of religious scriptures. Previous research has identified reasons for why and how crises can facilitate significant policy change, and potential factors that may inhibit it. However, since these factors are not always applicable and the policy response in Denmark and Sweden is previously unresearched, knowledge on why the level of policy change differed is low. Thus, the aim of this thesis was to investigate how policymakers in Denmark and Sweden reacted to the 2023 Quran Crisis, how the policy processes unfolded, and identify factors that can help explain the difference in policy outcome. To accomplish this aim, a framing analysis in accordance with Boin, t'Hart, and McConnell's framework on crisis exploitation was utilized to analyze the framing contests in Denmark and Sweden. The findings suggest that the Danish government perceived it as a significant crisis caused by repeated provocative Quran burnings. In Sweden, consequences were at times played down and blame for them diffused over multiple actors. Findings also indicate a more pragmatic stance on freedom of expression and a stronger willingness to compromise from the Danish government compared to the Swedish parties. The existence of a substantial blame game in Sweden can also have affected the difference in policy change. This thesis thus contributes to a better understanding of how the 2023 Quran Crisis was perceived and handled by policymakers in Sweden and Denmark, and why the policy outcome diverged.

Keywords: Policy change, Quran burnings, Crises, Framing contests, Denmark, Sweden

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Research Problem

Crises and policy change are two interconnected phenomena. Crises are troublesome events that threaten the well-being of societies and thus require an urgent response (Boin et al. 2016: 5-7). These events also expose deficiencies with current policies that either caused or failed to prevent the crisis (Smith & Elliot 2007: 526). Moreover, crises tend to narrow public attention and increase media scrutiny. Therefore, the combined need and political pressure on leaders to enact policy change during or after crises is often substantial (Boin et al. 2016: 134). Many prominent policy change theorists thus hypothesize crises to be a casual driver of significant policy change (for example, Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Kingdon 2013). However, empirical studies have found this correlation to be low (Boin & t'Hart 2022: 13). Most crises result in minor policy changes (Boin et al. 2009: 94-95).

Previous research in Crisis Management has located several potential factors that may inhibit substantial policy change during crises. For example, cognitive limitations that cause policymakers to seldom change their policy beliefs or the existence of politicized debates over accountability that draw attention away from policy (Nohrstedt & Weible 2010: 9-10). These factors are, however, context-dependent and may not be present or relevant in all cases. It is, therefore, not always apparent why two seemingly similar crises result in different levels of policy change. This applies to the cases this thesis explores, the Danish and Swedish policy response to the 2023 Quran Crisis, a previously unresearched topic.

In 2023, both Denmark and Sweden were troubled by public Quran burnings. Burning the Quran, Islam's holy scripture, is seen as a blasphemous act and a grave offense by many Muslims (Kühle 2024: 37). When Islam critics did so in both countries, outside mosques and embassies of Muslim countries, Denmark and Sweden faced considerable consequences. Political and religious leaders all over the Muslim world condemned the actions and threatened diplomatic and economic sanctions. Large protests followed, some of which turned violent. For example, the Swedish embassy in Iraq was stormed twice by violent protesters. Terrorist organizations al-Qaeda and Hezbollah also urged their followers to conduct terrorism against Denmark and Sweden (Larsson et al. 2024: 10-11).

However, despite similarities in time, nature, and consequences, Sweden and Denmark's policy responses differed substantially. The Danish government quickly proposed a criminalization of improper treatment of religious scriptures that was voted through the

same year (Lukiv 2023). The Swedish response was limited to diplomacy, incremental changes to anti-terrorism legislation, and as of December 2024, a still ongoing public inquiry regarding changes to the Public Order Act (SOU 2024:52).

This difference becomes even more puzzling when accounting for national security. Sweden was at the time waiting for Türkiye to ratify their application to join the defense alliance NATO. A drawn-out process Sweden preferred to end quickly since the country's main adversary Russia did not view the application to NATO fondly (Faulconbridge 2022). The Quran burnings caused Türkiye's president Erdogan to publicly state that he would not support Sweden's NATO application as long as Quran burnings were legal (Larsson et al. 2024: 10). Of the two countries, one would, therefore, have assumed Sweden to have been the country most eager to quell the ongoing crisis with substantial policy change. This puzzle brings us to the aim of the thesis.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

This thesis aims to analyze how policymakers in Denmark and Sweden reacted to the 2023 Quran Crisis, investigate what policy solutions they propagated for or against, and identify possible factors that can help explain the difference in policy outcomes between the countries. To accomplish this aim, the thesis adopts Boin, t'Hart, and McConnell's (2009) framework on crisis exploitation. The framework, which is outlined in Chapter 3, is utilized to analyze how policymakers framed the Quran Crisis and acted concerning policy change. In accordance with the aim and the framework, the following three research questions have been developed:

- *How was the 2023 Quran Crisis framed by different political parties in Sweden and Denmark?*
- *What remedies to the crisis were proposed, and what was the consequent policy outcome in each country?*
- *Based on the above-stated questions, how can the difference in policy outcome be explained?*

By answering these questions, the thesis contributes to an in-depth understanding of how policymakers perceived the 2023 Quran Crisis and how the policy process unfolded in Denmark and Sweden. It also helps make the puzzling difference in policy outcomes more intelligible by locating and discussing plausible explanations for it. In doing so, it contributes

to the fields of Public Policy and Crisis Management by highlighting which factors can cause seemingly similar crises to result in different levels of policy change.

1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis is structured as follows; Chapter 2 discusses previous research by focusing on leading theories on policy change, how crises can enable significant policy change, and which factors may inhibit it. Boin, t'Hart, and McConnell's framework on crisis exploitation, which will be used to analyze the cases, is outlined in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the legal, political, and historical context in which the framing contests occurred and describes how the crisis unfolded. Chapter 5 outlines the methods and operationalizations used in the thesis. Chapter 6 presents the analysis of Sweden and Denmark's framing contests. Key similarities and differences between the cases are then discussed in the final chapter, together with possible explanations for the difference in policy outcomes and suggestions for theory development and future research.

2. Previous Research

This section discusses previous research on policy change and crises. It begins by reviewing leading theories on policy change to understand why and how policy change comes about and why crises can be needed to break its normal incremental nature. Next, it examines why crises can trigger significant policy change and the factors that may inhibit such changes.

2.1 Policy Change

Policy change is the core of political activity. It involves the introduction of new laws, procedures, and regulations in the public sphere, or modifying or repealing existing ones (Lester & Stewart, 1996: 136). Policy change is a broad, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon. Understanding policy change thus requires careful consideration of the larger societal and political contexts in which it occurs (Hogan et al. 2022: 41). This complexity makes it arguably challenging to develop comprehensive, universal models that can accurately predict or explain policy change in every instance. Despite this, several influential theories have been developed over the years to explain when and how policy change takes place.

To explain how policy change comes about, Kingdon (2013) developed the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF). MSF posits that the world of politics consists of three streams; 1. The problem stream. For policy change to occur a problem must first be acknowledged and deemed important enough to stand out among the many issues that exist on a policymaker's agenda. 2. The policy stream. The policy stream contains policymakers, experts, and analysts who together form a political community. In the political community events get interpreted, existing policies evaluated, and new solutions crafted and debated. A policy suggestion is more likely to be implemented if it conforms to current values within the policy community and is technically and monetarily feasible. 3. The political stream. The political stream is made up of the national mood, party ideology, and the balance of interest between advocacy groups that influence what policymakers deem salient, possible, and worth pursuing (Jones et al. 2016: 14-16).

According to Kingdon (2013: 178), all three streams must be coupled for significant policy change to materialize. Coupling can take place during *windows of opportunity*, which are often caused by external *focusing events*, such as crises that highlight new problems or change the national mood. However, for coupling to occur, there must be political entrepreneurs willing and capable of exploiting the opportunity for policy change (Jones et al. 2016: 16). A policy entrepreneur is a political actor who seeks to advance their interests. The policy entrepreneur does so by crafting policy proposals and skillfully using rhetoric and media to gain public support for their vision. In addition, through effective persuasion and coalition-building, it must secure a political majority to ensure its proposals are implemented (Kingdon 2013: 180-182).

The key insights of MSF can be further contextualized and elaborated by bringing in the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). ACF recedes from the premise that political actors hold strong beliefs about how society ought to be and the best way to achieve those outcomes. These beliefs motivate actors to engage in the political arena, where they seek to translate their views into policy. To do this, they form advocacy coalitions with like-minded individuals. These coalitions operate within *policy subsystems*, which are settings focused on specific policy issues. Within these subsystems, advocacy coalitions compete with others that hold differing beliefs, each aiming to advance their policy preferences (Sabatier 1988: 138-144).

According to ACF, for policy change to take place, the power balance between advocacy coalitions must shift, or beliefs about current policies in the dominant coalition change (Nohrstedt & Weible 2010: 11-12). The results of Sabatier's (1988: 144-147, 150)

research indicate that the power balance is unlikely to change in any meaningful way except after elections and that core beliefs tend to remain stable unless there is profound pressure or evidence against them. The ACF thus echoes the common perception in Public Policy Research: policy change tends to occur gradually through incremental adjustments rather than through rapid transformative shifts under normal conditions (Benz 2021: 32-33).

Explanations for this incrementalism can be found in the theory of path dependence. Proponents of path dependence have through their research shown that the nature of political systems in democratic nations fosters positive and negative feedback mechanisms that protect existing policies (Hogan et al. 2022: 41-42; Pierson 2000). A key factor is the highly institutionalized structure of modern politics. Institutions are essential for managing the constant influx of complex and ever-changing policy issues that policymakers and civil servants face. These institutions are composed of shared rules, routines, memories, beliefs, norms, and strategies that have developed over time and are shaped by previous policy decisions. Policy actors are socialized into the institutional culture, and this culture influences how they interpret new situations and assess the attractiveness of policy options. Institutions, by their nature, tend to change slowly. Breaking with institutional culture, in turn, often comes at a cost—whether in terms of relationships, social status, or career prospects—that most individuals are unwilling to bear. As a result, institutions constrain the development of new ideas or deviant opinions, and thus the potential for rapid or significant policy change (Benz 2021: 35-36; Pierson 2000: 256-258).

Institutions are, however, not the sole reason for incrementalism. Pierson (2000: 260) also emphasizes that humans are often biased in processing new information and alternative solutions. Cognitive psychology supports this view, indicating that people tend to prefer cognitive stability and interpret information in ways that align with their existing beliefs. This makes individuals reluctant to recognize flaws in current policies unless the evidence is overwhelming (Welch 2005: 36-38). In other words, once political actors commit to an ideology or adopt a policy stance, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to shift to a conflicting position (Pierson 2000: 260). Additionally, Pierson (2000: 257-258) highlights the role of collective action in policy change. Policymakers must persuade other actors to bear the cognitive and political costs of deviating from the status-quo. Furthermore, policy actors operate in a complex environment constrained by short mandate periods, lengthy policy processes, and institutional checks and balances that limit what is politically feasible, making profound change hard (Ibid: 261-262). Together, these factors create what is known as path dependency. Once a significant policy decision is taken – referred to as a *critical juncture* – it

establishes a *path* that becomes increasingly difficult to alter over time (Hogan et al. 2022: 42-43).

While this incrementalism constitutes the normal for policy change, there are exceptions. Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) Punctuated Equilibrium Framework (PEF) highlight that governance is typically characterized by long periods of stability punctuated by occasional episodes of profound policy change. Like MSF and ACF, PEF assumes crises to have the power to disrupt this stability and facilitate significant policy change (True et al. 2006: 10-13, 17). The reasons will be discussed below.

2.2 Crises as an Enabler of Policy Change

A crisis is commonly defined as an event that poses a serious *threat* to security or the current order of things, requires *urgency* in response, and contains a level of *uncertainty* regarding what it entails and the consequences of one's actions toward it (Boin et al. 2016: 5-7). In times of crises, the public looks to their leaders to get them out of the precarious situation (Boin & t'Hart 2022: 17). The significance and urgency of the situation thus tend to facilitate a narrowing of public attention, increased media scrutiny, and heightened political conflict (Birkland 2009: 148; Stern 1997: 73). The attention and pressure from media, the public, and political opponents bring problematic consequences of current policies into focus. Under normal circumstances, these issues might be tolerated, unknown, or ignored, but during a crisis, they become the center of attention and rise to the top of the policy agenda (Boin et al. 2016: 134).

This public and political pressure is hypothesized to contribute to significant policy change in four main ways. Firstly, by opening a window of opportunity wherein skillful policy entrepreneurs can build political and public support for their favorite policy solution by capitalizing on increased media attention or a change in public perception (Kingdon 2013: 180-182). Secondly, crises can cause elected officials to re-assess previously held policy beliefs (Nohrstedt & Weible 2010: 22-25). Because, when it becomes evident that existing policies caused or failed to address a serious crisis, leaders are more likely to reconsider their beliefs and adopt new or alternative approaches (Stern 1997: 73-74). Previous experiences play into this since leaders tend to look back on similar crises, draw analogies, and use those analogies to inform their decision-making in the current crisis. Repeated crises and examples of inadequate crisis management due to inaction can thus spur policy change when similar situations emerge (Brändström et al. 2004: 193-194, 205). Thirdly, incumbent leaders at times

feel obliged to show decisive decision-making out of sheer political survivability (Boin & t'Hart 2022: 15). Lastly, crises tend to relax normal institutional restraints and allow leaders to issue quick and far-reaching policy solutions (Boin et al. 2016: 135). Lengthy processes can be sped up, power is concentrated at the top (Boin & t'Hart 2022: 19), and leaders are given increased mandates to do what is believed to be necessary to reinstate a sense of normality (Boin et al. 2016: 135).

2.3 Barriers to Crisis-induced Policy Change

Despite the enabling factors discussed above, most crises do not result in significant policy change (Boin et al. 2009: 94-95; Nohrstedt et al. 2021). There are several reasons for this. To begin with, as discussed earlier, the human psyche prefers stability in terms of core beliefs. Individuals, therefore, tend to look for evidence that confirms their current beliefs, disregard data that goes against them, and interpret ambiguous information in a way that supports already-held assumptions. A crisis is, therefore, often not sufficient to overthrow strongly held core beliefs regarding policies. Crises are instead most likely to challenge secondary beliefs, which limits policy change to more technical aspects such as budget allocations and administrative regulations (Nohrstedt & Weible 2010: 9; Sabatier 1988: 133-134).

Moreover, the human inclination is to strive for simple explanations and solutions. Likewise, the Threat-Rigidity Hypothesis tells us that the uncertainty, urgency, and threat level associated with crises tend to hamper individuals' ability to process information, draw inferences, and develop novel ideas (Deverell 2010: 685). These tendencies are perceived to lead to incomplete understandings and a focus on already developed and easy-to-implement remedies in times of crises (Birkland 2009: 152; Deverell 2012: 123-124). Therefore, policy changes that emerge from crises are often adaptations of existing ideas rather than entirely new solutions (Birkland 2006: 166-167). In addition, the other side of analogic reasoning is that if an organization has successfully managed a crisis, this will often cause it to rely on the same remedies when faced with a similar crisis. This can be problematic as all crises have unique characteristics (Boin et al. 2016: 131).

Previous research further highlights that public demand for swift action tends to result in quickly generated and symbolic policy change that may look good in the eyes of the public but lacks substance or does little to address the root cause of the crisis (Stern 1997: 75-76). In addition, highly politicized debates over what caused the crisis tend to pull policy actors into lengthy blame games that draw attention away from policy to individual scapegoats (Boin et

al. 2016: 122-123, 131-132; Nohrstedt & Weible 2010: 10). Relating to this is arguably that if incumbent leaders push for policy change in the crisis aftermath, they by default recognize weaknesses with their previous policies. Thus, opening themselves up for blame.

Moreover, it is also important to note that policy change must be developed and negotiated between different departments and politicians. These parties often have conflicting perspectives and goals that generally lead to watered-down compromises (Welch 2005: 34). Policy change is, nevertheless, more likely in collaborative policy subsystems, which contain two or more coalitions that are used to cooperate, by providing preexisting structures for consensus-seeking. In adversarial subsystems with competing coalitions, crises often deepen the disparity over policy beliefs, making policy change less probable (Nohrstedt & Weible 2010: 14-15, 23).

Lastly, some crises have also been found to facilitate a rally-around-the-flag effect. In certain cases, especially when the community is faced with war or an external threat, incumbent leaders enjoy a surge in public support. When this effect kicks in, politicians tend to strive for unity rather than conflict (Boin et al. 2016: 86, 135). In addition, the media have been shown to decrease their scrutiny and criticism of politicians (Olsson et al. 2015: 160). Logically, this means that the rally-around-the-flag effect suppresses the pressure for change and thus makes policy change contingent on incumbents' preference for it.

3. Theoretical Framework

The discussion in the previous chapter highlights that crises do create conditions for significant policy change but that several potential factors can inhibit it from materializing. The thesis will now narrow its focus from this broad discussion to present Boin, t'Hart, and McConnell's (2009) framework on crisis exploitation. This will be used to analyze the policy process in Sweden and Denmark during the 2023 Quran crisis.

3.1 Crisis Exploitation: The Framing Contest

According to Boin, t'Hart, and McConnell (2009: 82), the policy outcome of crises can be understood as the result of a *framing contest* between rival opponents seeking to capitalize on opportunities crises create. The framework recedes from the notion that "it is not the events on the ground, but their public perception and interpretation that determine their potential

impact on political office-holders and public policy” (Ibid: 83). Boin, t’Hart, and McConnell thus depart from the premise that crises are in part a social construct. While crises involve material realities, these gain significance through subjective framing, shaping how they are understood and acted upon. Policy actors, therefore, seek to convey frames that align with their interests, values, and policy preferences concerning the magnitude of the event, its causes, and what lessons can be drawn from it. In doing so, they will compete with actors pushing opposing frames to have their frame accepted as the dominant one in the public and political sphere (Ibid: 82-83). This is divided into two parts in the framework. First, the political exploitation game, which refers to the battle between opposition forces and incumbents over the responsibility the latter has for the crisis. Second, the policy exploitation game: the contestation between proponents of change and defenders of the status-quo over the need for policy reform (Ibid: 88-90). Since this thesis is concerned with policy change, the focus will be on the policy exploitation game.

According to the framework, actors in the framing contest face two initial choices. Firstly, they must decide on the *significance* of the event: Is the crisis substantial and harmful? This decision affects the level of priority the crisis will be met with. Secondly, if a crisis is deemed significant, the framing contest will proceed to establish *causality*: who and what caused the crisis, and why is it still ongoing? This will influence whether policy change is perceived as necessary and if a blame game might follow (Ibid: 85-87). Boin, t’Hart, and McConnell have identified three main pathways for policy actors to take (see Figure A).

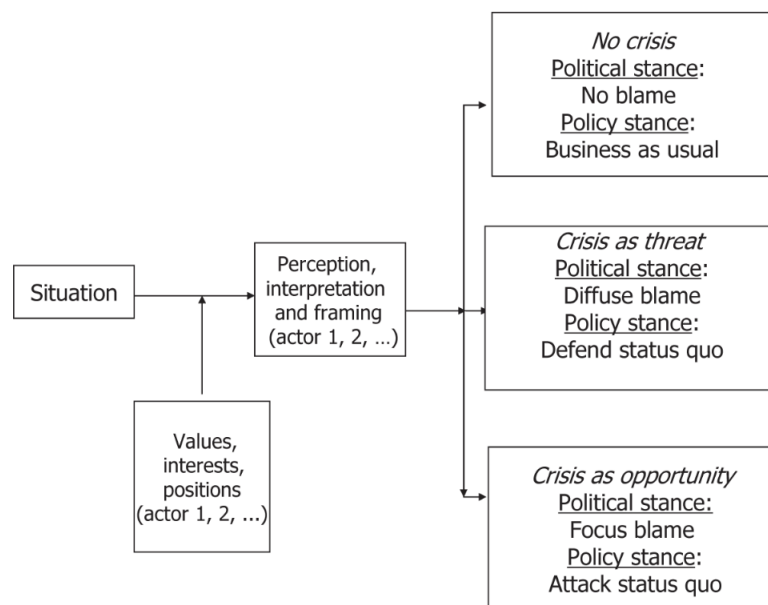


Figure A - Crises as Framing Contests (Boin et al. 2009: 84)

The first pathway is called *No crisis*. Actors taking this stance seek to *minimize* the significance of the crisis. The severity is played down, and the message is conveyed that its consequences can be ignored or dealt with using existing routines. Thus, policymakers who have no interest in policy change often use this stance. While this strategy of denial can be successful, it exposes leaders to the risk of being perceived as neglectful or careless (Ibid: 84-86).

When politicians feel it is wrong or unbeneficial to downplay the crisis but still want to preserve status-quo, they can go down the second route: *Crisis as threat*. The crisis is then labeled as a “critical threat to the collective good embodied in the status-quo that existed before these events came to light” (Ibid: 84). With this strategy, the severity of the crisis is *acknowledged* but not exaggerated. The crisis is often blamed on *exogenous factors* such as outgroups, forces of nature, or factors outside the policymaker’s control. The goal is to protect current policies and to safeguard incumbents and their allies from the risk of being blamed for the crisis (Ibid: 84, 87).

Policymakers seeking to exploit a crisis for political gain or policy change are likely to choose the third pathway, *Crisis as opportunity*. Actors will then try to *maximize* event significance. While this carries the risk of being perceived as alarmist or opportunistic, it can draw significant attention to issues the crisis expose, which can be utilized to push for change. With this strategy, actors will attribute the crisis to *endogenous factors* such as current laws or the actions of incumbent leaders. Proponents taking this pathway will also frame the crisis as a symptom of a larger problem rather than an isolated incident. If opposition politicians choose to blame incumbent leaders and call for their resignation while the accused incumbents try to deny responsibility, the framing contest is likely to evolve into a lengthy and sizeable blame game (Ibid: 84-89).

Boin, t’Hart, and McConnell do not state it outright. Still, it is evident in their article that the framing contest occurs between actors adhering to *Crisis as opportunity* on one side and *No crisis* and/or *Crisis as threat* on the other. Regarding policy change, status-quo players - *No crisis* and *Crisis as threat* - will choose between resisting policy change or adopting a containment strategy, which involves accepting minor or symbolic reforms to maintain broader continuity. The latter is more likely if the status-quo players believe that proponents of change have managed to create distrust regarding current policies. The change advocates - *Crisis as opportunity* - face the choice of pressing for incremental reform or a paradigm shift.

This choice will depend on what they perceive the crisis calls for and the political opportunity they have created for themselves (Ibid: 90-91).

Change advocates	Press for policy paradigm shift	Press for incremental reform
Status-quo players		
Resist policy change	I: policy stalemate <i>or</i> politically imposed paradigm shift	II: policy stalemate <i>or</i> politically imposed incremental adjustment
Contain policy Change	III: major and swift rhetorical/symbolic change; more incremental substantive change	IV: negotiated incremental adjustment

Figure B - Crisis Exploitation: The Policy Game (Boin et al. 2009: 90)

The potential outcomes can be seen in Figure B. If status-quo players resist policy change, the outcome is either a) policy stalemate or b) paradigm shift or incremental adjustment, the latter dependent on what change advocates push for. Whether the framing contest ends in stalemate or change depends on who builds the largest coalition. If status-quo players try to contain while change advocates press for incremental reform, the result will be negotiated incremental policy change. If change advocates press for a paradigm shift and status-quo players adhere to a containment strategy, a mix of incremental substantive changes and what might appear as significant policy change but really are symbolic/rhetorical changes will likely prevail to satisfy both parties (Ibid: 90-91).

4. The Framing Context

This chapter outlines the legal, political, and historical context in which the framing contests took place. Lastly, it describes how the 2023 Quran Crisis unfolded.

4.1 Legal Context

Quran burnings became legal in Sweden when the country abandoned its blasphemy law in 1970. Quran burnings have since been protected under freedom of expression and demonstration, two constitutional rights (Larsson et al. 2024: 6). The removal was motivated

with that a critical debate over religion would be beneficial to society and that hate speech laws would safeguard from invidious attacks on religion. Burning sacred scriptures has, however, been found not to qualify as hate speech since it does not include threats, slander, or ridicule against members of a certain group. Instead, it is regarded as a legal form of religious critique (Sandén 2023). Public Quran burnings, like all manifestations, do, however, require a permit from the Swedish Police. The police can, in accordance with the Public Order Act, only deny permits based on disturbance of traffic or threats to public safety at the location (SFS: 1993:1617).

The Danish blasphemy law was removed first in 2017, although it had not been enacted since 1946 (Sandén 2023), after a Danish man was prosecuted for posting a video online of him burning the Quran. The prosecution caused the left-wing party Red-Green Alliance to propose a law change that all parties except the Social Democrats voted for. The Social Democrats argued that burning holy books would not enrich public debate and referenced the risk of provoking Islamist reactions towards Denmark (Larsson et al. 2024: 7-8). The other parties did nevertheless withstand that freedom of expression, the outdatedness of the law, and that other Western countries recently had removed their blasphemy laws without noteworthy consequences were sufficient arguments to repeal the law (Kühle 2024: 38-39). Going into the Quran Crisis, the legal context was thus the same in both countries.

4.2 Political Context

The Swedish government was in 2023 led by the Moderates and also consisted of the Liberals and Christian Democrats. The center-right coalition was, however, contingent on parliamentary support from the nationalist and Islam critical party, the Sweden Democrats, to form a majority. These four parties had a formalized cooperation through the Tidö Agreement. Through the agreement, the parties agreed to coordinate policy efforts regarding predetermined policy issues. This did, nevertheless, not include foreign policy, freedom of expression, or Quran Burnings (Liberalerna 2022). The opposition consisted of the Center Party, the Left Party, the Environmental Party, and the parliament's largest party, the Social Democrats.

The ongoing Swedish NATO membership was at the time one of the most important political issues and a top priority for the government (Prot. 2022/23:10). However, as referenced in the introduction, Türkiye's ratification stood in the way. The previous Social

Democratic government had, therefore, together with Finland, reached an agreement with Türkiye's government. The so-called Madrid Agreement, which concerned legislation and cooperation on anti-terrorism, stipulated that Türkiye would ratify upon the completion of the agreement (SVT 2022).

In Denmark, the power of government was held by a centrist minority coalition consisting of the Social Democrats, Moderates, and Venstre. To ensure a parliamentary majority, the government required support from one of the eight left or right-wing opposition parties, or the Danish Social Liberal Party (herby DSLP). DSLP's stance was that they were neither a supportive nor an opposition party (Bach Jørgensen 2022). In Denmark, unlike in Sweden, the framing contest was influenced by large protests from the culture sector, which viewed a potential ban on improper treatment of religious scriptures as a limitation to artistic freedoms (Dohlmann Langen 2023).

During the height of the crisis, public support for banning Quran burnings was 50-55% in Denmark compared to 30-40% against it (Kjærgaard 2023). 69% of the government's voters favored a ban (Skovlund Asmussen 2023a). In Sweden, 40-50% wanted a ban (Novus 2023; SVT 2023).

4.3 Historical Context

Before outlining the 2023 Quran Crisis, it is appropriate to briefly discuss how similar events have impacted Denmark and Sweden. Because, the Quran Crisis is not the first instance of its sort. In 2005, the largest Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published a series of derogatory cartoons of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The then Danish Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen took no action and defended the journalists' right to free expression (Larsson & Lindekilde 2009: 371-372). The cartoons, combined with the political handling, sparked large protests and boycotts of Danish products in the Muslim world and increased the terror threat against Denmark. Fogh Rasmussen called it "Denmark's worst international crisis since World War Two (Doebbler 2009: 502-503). In 2007, Sweden had a similar incident when a local newspaper, *Nerikes Allehanda*, published a derogatory drawing from the artist Lars Vilks, depicting prophet Muhammad as a dog. Vilks's drawing also caused significant protests, but the consequences were mitigated due to skillful diplomacy towards the Muslim community from the Swedish government, according to Larsson and Lindekilde (2009: 367-369).

2023 was also not the first instance of public Quran burnings. The phenomenon started in Denmark in 2019 when far-right politician Rasmus Paludan tried making his Islam-critical party Stram Kurs famous through them. In 2022, after gaining Swedish citizenship, Paludan continued the practice in Sweden. Many of these manifestations resulted in counter-protests, violence, and civil unrest (Kühle 2024: 28-29, 33-35; Larsson et al. 2024: 9). It would, however, take until 2023 before Quran burnings started having foreign policy consequences.

4.4 The 2023 Quran Crisis

The 2023 Quran Crisis started on January 21st when Paludan performed a high-profiled Quran burning outside Türkiye's embassy in Stockholm and followed it up with one in front of Türkiye's embassy in Copenhagen six days later. Türkiye called the actions hate crimes and urged the Danish government to ban them (Martorell et al. 2023). The backlash against Sweden was more substantial. The Turkish government canceled ministerial visits from Sweden meant to discuss the NATO application (Armstrong 2023). In addition, it became a prominent issue in the upcoming national election in Türkiye, and its president, Erdogan, withdrew his support for the Swedish application as long as Quran burnings were legal (Larsson et al. 2024: 10). Large protests against Sweden also followed in the Muslim world (Bönke 2023).

In February, the Swedish Secret Service (SÄPO) concluded that the Quran burning had increased the terror threat against Sweden, and the police denied permits for new burnings the following months with that motivation (Stahle & Wicklén 2023). These decisions were, however, overruled in court (Andersson & Uggla 2023). The court rulings sparked a backlash from Türkiye's foreign secretary, who called the burnings a hate crime that must be stopped (Mederyd Hårdh 2023). In May, seven were arrested for planning two separate terrorist attacks against Sweden. The plans were linked to violent Islamism and Quran burnings (Wikén 2023).

The crisis escalated further in the summer. In Sweden, another Islam critic, the Iraqi immigrant Salwan Momika, continued in Paludan's footsteps. Momika burned and desecrated Qurans on several occasions, most notably outside the Iraqi embassy (Andersson et al. 2023) and the Stockholm Mosque during the Muslim holiday Eid al-Adha (Berry 2023). A large number of Quran burnings were also carried out in Denmark over the summer by the Paludan-inspired far-right group Danish Patriots, many outside foreign embassies (Jørgensen 2023a).

The summer burnings gained attention around the world, and both countries experienced significant consequences. Political and religious leaders all over the Muslim world, including Türkiye, condemned the actions as Islamophobic and state-approved. They subsequently pressured the Swedish and Danish governments to take necessary actions against them. This included the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) which encouraged its 57 member states to take economic and diplomatic actions against Sweden and Denmark (Larsson et al. 2024: 10-11). Large protests followed throughout the Muslim world, some of which turned violent. For example, the Swedish embassy in Iraq was stormed twice by violent protesters (Ibid: 11), and a similar attempt against the Danish counterpart was attempted (Deutsche Welle 2023). Calls for boycotts of Swedish and Danish products grew strong (Goksör & Nordenberg 2023). Moreover, terrorist organizations al-Qaeda and Hezbollah called the two countries legitimate targets for terror attacks. Shortly after, on August 17th, SÄPO raised the terror threat level to highly likely in Sweden, citing the increased risk of Islamic terrorism as the main contributing factor (Larsson et al. 2024: 11). Likewise, the Danish equivalent reached the conclusion that the Quran burnings had intensified the terror threat against Denmark (Brandt 2023).

The crisis did, nevertheless, fade after the summer. The anger against Denmark diminished after the government declared its intent to prohibit improper treatment of religious scriptures on August 25th. The same happened in Sweden when Momika, in late September, decided that he would stop his Quran burnings (Janvik Kardell 2023). A month later, President Erdogan also signed Sweden's accession protocol to NATO (Svahn et al. 2023), taking the country one step closer to membership, before joining in March 2024, and subsequently ending the Quran Crisis.

5. Method Chapter

This chapter starts by presenting and discussing the cases, methods, and operationalizations used in the thesis. Next, the material and procedure of analysis are outlined. The chapter ends with a method discussion.

5.1 Comparative Case Study and Case Selection

This thesis employed a comparative case study approach to analyze how the policy process unfolded in Sweden and Denmark during the 2023 Quran Crisis. The comparative case method, one of the most widely used in Social Science, involves comparing two or more cases to locate similarities or differences between the cases that can help explain outcomes (Brancati 2018: 199-200). The strength of this method lies in its structured nature. By asking consistent questions across all cases under study comparable data can be obtained, which can be used to draw inferences (George & Bennett 2005: 71-73). The limited number of cases in this thesis - two - is arguably beneficial since *small-n* studies enable an in-depth exploration of each (Yin 2014: 3, 16).

The cases are chosen for two reasons. Firstly, as argued in the introduction, the policy outcome is puzzling. Considering the negative impact Quran burnings had on Sweden's NATO application, it is surprising that it was Denmark and not Sweden that pursued swift and significant policy change. Secondly, the near-ideal similarities between the cases. The crises occurred simultaneously and shared similarities in scope and consequences. Additionally, Sweden and Denmark are similar countries. They are neighboring west-oriented democracies that both have a liberal and secular culture, strong levels of freedom of expression, export-dependent economies, a multiparty system, and, at the time, minority governments.

5.2 Framing Analysis and Operationalizations

A framing analysis was used to analyze the cases. Framing refers to the act of selectively emphasizing certain aspects of a situation, downplaying others, and presenting coherent and persuasive narratives that explain what has occurred and what actions should be taken (Van Hulst & Yanow 2016: 100-101). Framing analysis is a method used to study this practice and is commonly applied in policy analysis (Björnehed & Erikson 2018: 113). Two analytical tasks are central to framing analysis, both of which are relevant to this thesis. The first task is to diagnose how different actors define a situation and what solutions they propose. The second analytical task is to track how frames evolve and assess the impact they have (Ibid: 110-111). This entails analyzing the framing process, not just the frames, to reveal how frames develop over time due to political struggles and changing circumstances (Van Hulst & Yanow 2014: 103-104).

The unit of analysis for the framing analysis was the political parties present in each country's national legislative assembly. This is appropriate since both countries have multiparty systems and a political culture where parliamentarians follow the party line (Willumsen 2017: 52). The policy outcome is thus contingent on party decisions. Due to the multitude of parties and limitations in space, parties engaging in similar framing and policy actions are grouped in the analysis. This is, for example, the case with the governments of each country. To address the potential problem of individual party members proposing different frames, only statements from ministers, party leaders, and official spokespersons on law and foreign policy have been assessed, as they should represent the party line.

5.2.1 Operationalizations

The framing analysis studied how the political parties framed the Quran burnings and acted regarding policy change. The aim was to divide them according to Boin, t'Hart, and McConnell's (2009) typology; (1) *No crisis*, (2) *Crisis as threat*, and (3) *Crisis as opportunity* (see Figure A). This was firstly done by assessing how *event significance* was framed. Parties that tried to downplay the magnitude, did not mention the negative consequences, or stayed out of the political debate were treated as having *minimized* significance and thus as proponents of *No crisis*. Actors who referenced the negative consequences of the Quran burnings - for example talking about diplomatic tensions or calling the situation a crisis - were deemed to have *acknowledged* the crisis. Parties that repeatedly emphasized the most troublesome facts, used metaphors and strong language to increase the perceived significance of the crisis, warned about potential future consequences, and continuously linked the crisis to national security were labeled as *maximizing* significance. Following Boin, t'Hart, and McConnell's (2009: 85) framework, acknowledgment was treated as signaling *Crisis as threat*, and maximization as *Crisis as opportunity*.

The distinction between *No Crisis*, *Crisis as threat* and *Crisis as opportunity* also factored in how *causality* was framed. To correspond with the framework (Ibid: 87-88), blaming the crises on *exogenous factors* was interpreted as defending status-quo and thus, *No Crisis* or *Crisis as threat*. This included blaming the crisis on outside forces or an illegitimate reaction from actors in the Muslim world. Political parties were, instead, categorized as adhering to *Crisis as opportunity* if they framed Quran burnings as a repeated problem and/or

mainly attributed the crisis to *endogenous factors* such as current policies or actions of incumbent leaders.

To thoroughly analyze if a party was a *status-quo player* - *No crisis* or *Crisis as threat* - or a *change advocate* - *Crisis as opportunity* - regarding policy change, attention was also paid to articulations, proposals, voting patterns, and enactments of policy solutions. Parties that acted and argued against policy change or only propagated for symbolic and rhetorical remedies were treated as *status-quo players*. This pertained particularly to parties that opposed changes that would affect freedom of expression. Trying to diffuse the situation through acts of diplomacy or condemning Quran burnings are examples of symbolic and rhetorical remedies. Merely launching an inquiry was also regarded as symbolic policy change as it shows resolve but has little substantive effect on policy. According to the framework (Ibid: 90), *status-quo players* have two strategies to choose from, resisting or containing policy change. This was distinguished by attributing the latter label to parties that, during the crisis, moved away from their initial policy position to try and reach a compromise that involved a greater degree of policy change.

The label *change advocates* were limited to parties that pushed for incremental policy change or paradigm shifts. According to Boin, t'Hart, and McConnell (2009: 90), a paradigm shift entails “a wholesale overturning of the policy’s ideological and/or intellectual underpinnings”. In this case, this was limited to significant infringements to freedom of expression, as this is a fundamental right in Sweden and Denmark. Minor infringements or other forms of new regulations were treated as incremental policy change.

The final part of analyzing the framing contests was assessing the policy outcomes in accordance with Figure B. The above-mentioned symbolic and rhetorical remedies were regarded as implemented when they were enacted by heads of government. Incremental and paradigm shifts required that proposed solutions were embedded into formal policy. Policy stalemate describes an outcome where no policy change was enacted despite calls for it.

5.3 Material and Procedure of Analysis

To analyze the framing contests in Sweden and Denmark, the author studied how the actors mentioned in section 5.2 publicly framed the Quran Crisis, what policy solutions they proposed, and how those solutions fared. This study was limited to the year 2023.

The first part of this process was to find appropriate empirical material. This was first done by searching for media sources. To make it manageable, the search was limited to three reputable and diverse national news sources per country. For Sweden, this included SVT (public service), Aftonbladet (left-wing), and Svenska Dagbladet (right-wing). Articles were found and accessed through the media database Retriever and the following search words: “Koranbränning/Koranbränningar” (Quran burning/burnings), “Korankris/Korankrisen” (Quran Crisis/Crises), “Paludan”, and “Momika”. For Denmark, DR (public service), Jyllands-Posten (right-wing), and Politiken (center-left) were used. Relevant articles were found using the search bar from each news site and “Koranafrænding/Koranafrændinger” (Quran burning/burnings), Korankris/Korankrisen” (Quran Crisis/Crises), “Koranloven” (the Quran law), “Paludan”, and “Danske Patriotere” (Danish Patriots) constituted the search words. Articles that provided quotes from interviews, televised debates, press conferences, social media, and public speeches were selected, and the quotes analyzed. This amounted to approximately 200 articles. If possible and deemed relevant, the primary material was accessed and analyzed in its entirety. This amounted to five press conferences, six press releases, four debate articles, and one televised debate. Next, empirics were searched for in each country’s parliamentary database using the same search words, riksdagen.se/sok for Sweden and ft.dk/da/search for Denmark. Through these, protocols from all parliamentary debates - five in total - and policy initiatives concerning Quran burnings were accessed.

The empirical material was then thoroughly analyzed. Firstly, all audiovisual content was transcribed. Secondly, all texts were read individually, and sections that discussed *event significance*, *causality*, or potential *remedies* were highlighted. Thirdly, relevant quotes were extracted and coded according to the operationalizations outlined in the previous section. Frames were attributed to the politicians who voiced them and broken down into the categories *event significance*, *causality*, and *remedies*. The time and context of each statement were noted. As a note, all quotes that appear in the analysis section were translated into English by the author. Fourthly, after analyzing all texts, themes were searched for in how a party framed the Quran Crisis and what remedies it argued for or against. This was done by searching for repetition of similar frames and policy actions. While doing so, consideration was paid to whether the frames or the policy actions changed as the Quran Crisis evolved. As the fifth and final step, the categories *event significance*, *causality*, and *remedies* were weighed together, and the parties were divided according to the typology *No crisis*, *Crisis as threat*, and *Crisis as opportunity*.

5.4 Method Discussion

While framing analysis is a valuable approach for understanding how political issues are constructed, debated, and acted upon in various contexts, it is a method with limitations. One limitation regards two important parts of research: validity and reliability. Validity concerns whether theoretical concepts are accurately measured and reliability if the results would be similar if other researchers redid the investigation (Powner 2015: 168-171). As discussed by Linström and Marais (2012: 27), framing analysis relies on subjective interpretation of frames. This can lead to potential biases, as researchers might interpret frames differently, which can damage validity and reliability. To mitigate this problem, the aim was to be as transparent as possible in this chapter when outlining how frames were found, how they were analyzed, and how the theoretical framework was operationalized. In addition, intertextuality has been considered, which is argued as important when conducting interpretative research by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012: 88). Intertextuality refers to the practice of analyzing how texts relate to other texts and the context it was produced in (Ibid: 86-87). When conducting the analysis, all statements and actions from a party have therefore been compared to ensure that everything present in the analysis chapter is representative of the party's action in the framing contest. Moreover, only publicly available information has been used, which makes it possible to verify all the material the analysis is based on.

Another limitation of this study relates to the multitude of political parties, eight in Sweden and twelve in Denmark. While all parties have been analyzed, due to the word limit, it has not been possible to cover each party individually in the analysis chapter. The focus is thus on the largest and most active parties in the framing contest. In addition, parties that pushed similar frames have been grouped. The drawback to this is that it has not been possible to display all nuances between the parties.

A final potential problem relates to language. The author is not fluent in Danish, even if he reads and understands it well. To mitigate this problem, quotes and statements have been verified across multiple translation services when needed to ensure that they have been correctly understood and translated into English.

6. Analysis

In this chapter, the framing contests in Sweden and Denmark over the 2023 Quran Crisis will be analyzed separately, starting with Sweden. Each case starts with an analysis of how event significance was framed, followed by how different parties attributed the causality of the crisis. Next, proposed remedies, how they were motivated, and other parties' actions towards them are analyzed. Each case concludes with a section that weighs these three categories together to analyze if parties acted according to *No crisis*, *Crisis as threat*, or *Crisis as opportunity*.

6.1 The Swedish Framing Contest

The Swedish framing contest will now be analyzed.

6.1.1 Event Significance

The Swedish government mostly *maximized* event significance during the crisis. Already at a press conference on January 24th, three days after the first burning, Foreign Secretary Billström (Moderates) referenced that the Quran burnings had resulted in official condemnations, protests, and calls for boycotts from the Muslim world (Regeringskansliet 2023d). However, focus in the first months was on the security situation, NATO membership, and how Quran burnings constituted an obstacle to it. For example, in the same press conference, Billström stated:

We shall remember that Sweden is currently in the most uncertain security situation since World War II. To then conduct these forms of actions does not really improve the situation. (Regeringskansliet 2023d)

Days later, Billström admitted in an interview that the Quran burnings had caused the processes with Türkiye to come to a standstill (Törnquist 2023b). Despite this, Billström can also be seen to have played down the impact of Quran burnings on NATO membership. On February 8th (Thomsen 2023) and August 23rd (Dagens Nyheter 2023), he stated that he counted on Turkish ratification either way since Sweden had fulfilled the Madrid agreement.

In the summer, maximization attempts continued, but the focus shifted from NATO to the terror threat. Examples of this include when Prime Minister Kristersson (Moderates), at a

press conference on August 17th, referenced that “Sweden has gone from a legitimate to a prioritized target for terror attacks” due to Quran burnings and that “planned terror attacks have been averted.” Kristersson also thoroughly described the attacks against Swedish embassies and highlighted that: “there are multiple examples of terror groups who have encouraged their sympathizers across the world to seek revenge for the Quran burnings in Sweden” (Regeringskansliet 2023a).

Another good example came the day after. In a joint debate article that promoted the government's main policy solution to the crisis - launching an inquiry into the Public Order Act - party leaders for the three government parties argued that “the threat from terrorists and violent Islamists has escalated”. The reason for this was, according to them, “mainly Quran burnings and disinformation about Swedish social services” (Kristersson et al. 2023).

The Sweden Democrats, in contrast, shifted between *minimizing* and *acknowledging* the crisis. Following Türkiye’s condemnation of Paludan’s Quran burning, the Chairman of the Justice Committee, Jomshof (Sweden Democrats), stated in an interview, “if they get upset, then burn 100 more” (Öhrn 2023), indicating a relaxed view of the crisis. After receiving criticism, Jomshof did, however, state that he shared the government’s view on the security situation and that burnings could decrease Sweden’s chances of joining NATO (Hüll 2023). The party leader Åkesson, in turn, replied to the criticism with the following quote that downplayed the effects on the NATO application:

There are considerations of high politics and internal politics in Türkiye. So, in the long term, I have a hard time seeing how the NATO process is affected by things that happen in Sweden. (Thurfjell 2023)

This duality of minimizing and acknowledging is further exemplified by Åkesson’s answer on August 30th to a question on his thoughts on Kristersson’s view on the security situation being the most worrisome since WWII:

There has been a latent terror threat in Sweden for a long time, and this level has varied slightly. But it is clear that we have a serious situation today.
(Socialdemokraterna 2023b)

The Social Democrats, in contrast, *maximized* event significance. On January 24th, party leader Andersson described the Quran burnings as “harmful” for the NATO processes and the

situation as “very serious” (Nilsson 2023d). Her party colleague, Johansson, in turn, said in a parliamentary debate three weeks later that the Quran burnings had caused the NATO process, the most important security process in 200 years, to stall (Prot. 2022/23:63). Maximization attempts continued in the summer. For example, Andersson stated in a televised debate with Åkesson on August 30th:

The current situation for Sweden after this summer of Quran burnings is very serious. SÄPO has increased the terror threat level, and the situation risks becoming even worse when Denmark in a few weeks change their legislation. (Socialdemokraterna 2023b)

Another exemplifying quote came from Andersson in a parliamentary debate two weeks later:

This does not just affect our relations with the world, not just our NATO application, not just Swedish exports, and our jobs, it affects the security of the Swedish people. (Prot. 2023/24:3)

The other three opposition parties played a more passive role in the framing contest. Nevertheless, in early February, Demirok (Center Party) stated that the situation was worrisome for Sweden and that NATO membership was the most important security issue for him at the time (Nilsson 2023b). Likewise, Dadgostar (Left Party) called the situation “a crisis” and Stenevi (Environmental Party) described the circumstances as “incredibly severe” at a press conference on September 13th (Socialdemokraterna 2023a). Despite the passive role, it can thus be argued that the three parties *acknowledged* event significance.

6.1.2 Causality

Initially, the government blamed the crisis on three *exogenous factors*: internal politics in other countries, malignant state actors, and foreign Quran burners running their errands. For example, when asked in February about President Erdogan’s demands of banning Quran burnings, Foreign Secretary Billström answered: “there is an ongoing election campaign in Türkiye... It is in light of this one should see these statements” (Svenska Dagbladet 2023b). Moreover, on January 24th, Prime Minister Kristersson said:

Some forces within and outside Sweden want to prevent Sweden from joining NATO. It is against this background we now see provocateurs who seek to worsen Sweden's relations with other countries to delay Swedish NATO membership. (Regeringskansliet 2023d)

Another good example came at a press conference on August 1st. Kristersson then framed the Quran burners as individuals who came to Sweden to exploit the country's freedom of expression to spread their hateful messages, drawing Sweden into international conflicts in the process. In addition, he emphasized that anti-Swedish sentiment was increased by continuous disinformation from Russia and Islamist actors regarding the Quran burnings (Regeringskansliet 2023c).

On August 18th, when the government opened up to change the Public Order Act, they started including an *endogenous factor* in their causality narrative, a vulnerability within the current legislation. For instance, on August 18th, the three party leaders concluded in their joint debate article that the police are not allowed to "assess Swedish security, for example, a general risk for terrorism" when issuing permits for manifestations, and that this "constituted a security vulnerability" (Kristersson et al. 2023).

The Social Democrats also blamed the crisis on the Quran burners. In party leader Andersson's words: "The Quran burnings are carried out by a very small group. The purpose is not to start a debate, but to incite and create conflict" (Backman 2023).

The main frame the Social Democrats tried to push throughout the crisis was, however, that the Sweden Democrats, and the government's reluctance to stop them, were to blame for the escalation of the crisis. This was evident in a parliamentary debate on February 14th when Johansson (Social Democrats) brought up Jomshof's statement on burning a hundred more Qurans when debating the NATO process:

After the Sweden Democrats' statement concerning the Quran burnings and the government's reluctance to mark against them, the whole process has been put on ice. We have now seen how the government's dependence on a right-wing extremist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic party has had serious negative consequences for Sweden. (Prot. 2022/23:63)

This persisted throughout the crisis as Jomshof continued making provocative statements about Islam on social media (Bosson 2023). Another good example came in a parliamentary debate on September 13th when Andersson said:

There are two individuals who have carried out a majority of the burnings in our country. Both with connections to the Sweden Democrats, the government constellation's largest party. These people have not carried out the burnings in a vacuum. Instead, they have occurred in a long line of hateful campaigns, and they have been encouraged by the Chairman of the Justice Committee, Richard Jomshof, who has used his platform in an unprecedented way in the history of the Swedish parliament. He has explicitly encouraged book burnings. He has issued hate against the Muslim world in the middle of a deep diplomatic crisis. (Prot. 2023/24:3)

The government recognized that Jomshof's tweets were problematic but did not agree that he or the Sweden Democrats played a significant part. For instance, when asked in an interview if Muslim countries viewed the cooperation between the government and Sweden Democrats as unfavorable, Foreign Secretary Billström answered:

No, it's not these questions that are brought up in my discussions with my Foreign Secretary colleagues. No one is interested in the internal political discussion in Sweden. ... What the Muslim world is upset about is that there are Quran burnings in Sweden. (Svahn 2023)

When the critique was brought up in debates, party colleagues defended Jomshof and argued that the critique he levied against Islam was legitimate and appropriate (Prot. 2022/23:63; Prot. 2023/24:3). When confronted with the accusation that the Quran burners had affiliations to the Sweden Democrats by Andersson in a televised debate, party leader Åkesson answered:

She mentions two persons. One is the Danish and he has no affiliation with the party. The other one has alleged he is a member, but we have not had it confirmed. But if he is, then I do not think he should be a member of our party if he acts like this. (Socialdemokraterna 2023b)

The Sweden Democrats instead blamed the negative consequences on illegitimate reactions from Islamists, as manifested by the following quote from Åkesson in a parliamentary debate two weeks later:

It is not the one who burns books - how simple, anti-intellectual, and boorish it may be - who is the problem. The problems are the stone-throwers in Rosengård, Islamist countries that demand changes to Swedish legislation, and terrorists who threaten to brutally murder and mutilate innocent Swedes. (Prot. 2023/24:3)

6.1.3 Remedies

The political process of finding remedies to the crisis in Sweden can be seen as a logical continuation of the framing contest over severity and causality, and a process mediated by strong support for free expression.

The initial phase

Prime Minister Kristersson was quick to condemn the first Quran burning, calling it a “deeply disrespectful” action that was “lawful but awful” (Aftonbladet 2023a). According to Foreign Secretary Billström, this was done to show Türkiye that the Swedish government was against Quran burnings and thereby defuse the situation (Westling 2023). This arguably mild rhetorical remedy sparked heavy criticism from the Sweden Democrats, signaling an unwillingness to compromise on free expression. In party leader Åkesson’s words:

there is an absolute line for when sense and balance in the debate develops into true creeping before dictatorial Islamism and ‘appreciation’ for Islamists who have come to live in Sweden and who do not respect the most fundamental principles of our society. My feeling is that this line has been crossed with this, apparent, panic reaction from the government. (Granlund 2023)

In response, the government made clear at a press conference the day after that they stood up for freedom of expression (Regeringskansliet 2023d). A week later, in light of Erdogan’s demand to ban Quran burnings, when asked in an interview if NATO or free expression was most important, Billström replied:

We do not compromise with freedom of expression. It is very clear what is required for Sweden to become a NATO member, and that is that we fulfill the demands in the trilateral agreement. That will be done within the boundaries of our constitution and legislation. (Svenska Dagbladet 2023b)

The opposition shared this unwillingness to compromise on free expression for NATO membership in the early part of the crisis. For example, Demirok (Center Party) said: “We have a strong level of free expression in Sweden, and we shall not budge an inch for foreign pressure” (Nilsson 2023b). Likewise, Stenevi (Environmental Party) stated in an interview:

it is a significant part of free expression, the possibility to mock, to do satire against power and religion... If we start restricting freedom of expression because we get reactions to what is said, then it is a path that has no good ending. (Nilsson 2023e)

Alternative remedies

In accordance with this reluctance to infringe on free expression, the government can be seen to have pursued several alternative remedies throughout the crisis to mitigate its effect. This included continuous diplomatic attempts. The government continued its dialogue with Türkiye and the implementation of the Madrid Agreement. On July 10th, the two governments reached a new agreement, stipulating that Türkiye would ratify the NATO application if trade increased, anti-terror cooperation continued, and Sweden backed Türkiye’s EU application (Svenska Dagbladet 2023a). Ratification would, however, take several months, and Erdogan continued condemning the Quran burnings (Törnquist 2023a). The diplomatic efforts also extended to the wider Muslim community. Noteworthy examples are that Billström invited the OIC for dialogue on July 14th (Nilsson 2023a) and that he and Kristersson traveled to the UN in September to meet with Muslim leaders (Svahn 2023).

In addition, together with the Sweden Democrats, the government launched a few incremental policy changes during the summer to combat the growing terrorism threat. For example, on July 27th, 15 public agencies were commissioned to improve their cooperation on anti-terrorism (Sjögren & Nordström 2023), and on August 1st, a new law was passed enhancing border security (Regeringskansliet 2023d).

The opposition, in turn, pushed for one main alternative remedy: removing Jomshof from his position as Chairman of the Justice Committee. The combined opposition initiated a

vote for removal at a committee meeting in late August. Shekarabi (Social Democrats) motivated the decision: “He spreads hateful messages, has encouraged book burnings... He is no ordinary parliamentarian. He leads a committee that is seen as representative of the Swedish state” (Nilsson & Ericson 2023).

The proposal was voted down by the government and Sweden Democrats after it was dismissed as a symbolic political maneuver by Justice Minister Strömmer (Moderates):

to remove individual parliamentarians is a sidetrack. It seeks to create internal political division at a time when we must come together to manage the real threat Sweden faces. (Schau et al 2023)

This did not stop Social Democrats from calling for remedies involving the Sweden Democrats. For example, in a televised debate with Åkesson on August 30th, Andersson said:

The easiest way to get this situation under control is if Jimmie Åkesson would tell his sympathizers, members, and elected officials to stop burning the Quran and stop inciting additional Quran burnings. (Socialdemokraterna 2023b)

Moreover, in a parliamentary debate two weeks later, she followed with:

We are many in this chamber who are prepared to take responsibility for Sweden and the security of the Swedish people, and it would be good for our country if Ulf Kristersson talked to us instead of leaning against the forces and individuals he argues aggravates the crisis. (Prot. 2023/24:3)

There is, however, no indication that these calls lead to anything substantial remedy-wise.

A shift towards infringement

On July 6th, all parties answered a survey from SVT stating that they had no intention of restricting Quran burnings through policy change (Wide 2023). However, this would change over the coming months for several parties.

After hinting about it for weeks, the government proposed a public inquiry into possible changes to the Public Order Act on August 18th, the day after SÄPO increased the terror threat level. Justice Minister Strömmer presented the proposal at a press conference. He

described it as a first step in a long-term process to allow the police to consider national security, such as a general risk of terrorism, when issuing permits for public manifestations (Regeringskansliet 2023b). On the same day, the party leaders of the government parties argued in a debate article that this was a minor but necessary infringement of free expression due to the higher risk of terrorism. The party leaders also spent a significant portion of the article emphasizing the continued importance of free expression and religious critique. For instance:

The government wants to protect Swedish freedom of expression, which incorporates the right to express opinions others find provocative and hurtful, including religion. Sweden is and will continue to be a country with freedom of religion, but also with the right to criticize religion. (Kristersson et al. 2023)

Two days later, Busch (Christian Democrats) clarified that the inquiry had not been launched to prepare for a general ban on Quran burning when she, in her summer speech, said: “We as a party will not support anything that would mean a de-facto ban on Quran burnings or other offensive statements” (Kristdemokraterna 2023).

The opposition was not willing to back the idea of changing the Public Order Act. The Social Democrats instead proposed a different inquiry with a shorter time frame together with the Environmental Party and Left Party shortly after. The inquiry would investigate if Quran burnings could qualify as hate speech (Socialdemokraterna 2023a). In an exchange with Åkesson, Andersson summarized the three parties’ main arguments for why they preferred this solution over the governments in a parliamentary debate on September 13th:

The truth is that it’s the inquiry that the government, your government, suggests that would risk becoming a significant infringement of free expression, where we would make us dependent on what other states and foreign Islamists think we are allowed to do and say in Sweden. What I am suggesting would be a smaller infringement, where we take control over what is said and done in Sweden, and that I believe is how the Social Democrats that removed the blasphemy laws anticipated how the legislation should work. (Prot. 2023/24:3)

The government did not have any interest in changing hate speech laws nor launch an inquiry into it. Already a month before it was proposed, Justice Minister Strömmer criticized the potential idea with an argumentation that would persist throughout the crisis:

Others want to change the hate speech law to forbid offensive actions, for example, regarding religious scriptures. I do not see it as a relevant path to take since it would entail very far-reaching and general infringements of free expression. In addition, it would require constitutional amendments.

(Regeringskansliet 2023c)

The Center Party continued to withstand that free expression should not be infringed upon and thus did not support either inquiry. For example, on August 14th, Demirok said: “At this time, the Center Party does not see the need for any type of law change to restrict Quran burnings” (Nilsson 2023c). His party colleague Liljeberg reinstated this on December 7th, the day Denmark banned Quran burnings and added: “Free expression often comes with a price. If you have freedoms that are so narrow that no one gets offended by your freedom, then they have little worth” (Aftonbladet 2023b).

More important for the policy outcome was that the Sweden Democrats refused to support any side. The party instead argued strongly that any infringements to free expression would be to give in to Islamist demands and threats of violence, and thus set a dangerous precedent. A representative quote of this came from Åkesson in a televised debate with Andersson on August 30th, when the Social Democrat’s proposal was discussed:

The Social Democrats appear to want to infringe on free expression. Then, they are on the same slippery slope as the government. I argue that this is a dangerous path to take. We cannot foresee the consequences of accommodating threats from Islamists both within and outside Sweden. There will be no return.

(Socialdemokraterna 2023b)

Despite this, the government could launch its inquiry on August 18th since Swedish governments can do so without a parliamentary majority. However, unless the Sweden Democrats change their policy position or a compromise with the opposition can be found, it will not translate into concrete policy change when it finishes.

6.1.4 Summary

All Swedish parties can be argued to have acted in accordance with *Crisis as threat* on policy, although the government and Social Democrats showed signs of *Crisis as opportunity* and the Sweden Democrats of *No crisis*. This can be said because, firstly, while framing on event significance varied from maximization from the government and Social Democrats to occasional minimization from the Sweden Democrats and acknowledgment from the other parties, all agreed that Quran burnings caused problems. Secondly, no party blamed the crises on policy until late August or focused solely on the Quran burners. Instead, causality was attributed to several other factors - including foreign disinformation (government), the actions of Sweden Democrats (Social Democrats), and an illegitimate reaction from Islamists (Sweden Democrats).

Thirdly, and most importantly, all parties showed reluctance to infringe on the right to burn Qurans because it would entail limitations to free expression. This is evident in the continuous emphasis on the importance of free expression and that no party was willing to compromise on it to join NATO. That the government and parts of the opposition did move from firm status-quo players closer to change advocates by opening up for inquiries late in the crisis can, based on the motivations, be interpreted as a perceived necessity rather than something they wanted. Interestingly, based on timing and motivations, it appears that the risk of terrorism was more important for this shift than NATO membership. The Sweden Democrats and Center Party did, nevertheless, continue as firm status-quo players, unwilling to budge on free expression. Since the parties proposing inquiries were divided into two sides, unable to form a majority, the result was a public inquiry that appears to have a small chance of resulting in concrete policy change. We can thus talk about a policy stalemate in this regard.

The government and the Sweden Democrats could, nevertheless, find common ground concerning enhanced anti-terrorism capabilities. The four parties emerged as change advocates and launched some incremental initiatives. These initiatives, like the government's diplomatic attempts, were, however, more aimed at mitigating the consequences rather than dealing with the root cause of the crisis. This focus on alternative remedies thus further signals *Crisis as threat*.

The four opposition parties did, nevertheless, show signs of *Crisis as opportunity* in one regard. They, especially the Social Democrats, saw a chance to focus blame on the Sweden Democrats and possibly impair their relationship with the government. In addition,

they tried to exploit the crisis to have Jomshof removed as Chairman of the Justice Committee. While it is possible that it created tensions behind closed doors or was beneficial in terms of public perception, Jomshof remained in office, and the government and Sweden Democrats have continued their cooperation.

6.2 The Danish Framing Contest

The text will now proceed to analyze how the Danish framing contest unfolded.

6.2.1 Event Significance

Paludan's Quran burning in January passed through without invoking a framing contest in Denmark. The only example of assessing event significance came from Foreign Secretary Løkke Rasmussen (Moderates), who *minimized* the significance of Turkish condemnations in an interview: "Denmark has good relations with Türkiye, and this does not change it" (Politiken 2023c).

This shared *No crisis* assessment diverged after the Danish Patriots started burning Qurans outside embassies on July 21st and discontent spread across the Muslim world. On July 22nd, Løkke Rasmussen stated that he was "fairly worried" about the reactions (Kirkebæk-Johansson 2023b). Government framing evolved into *maximization* attempts the following week, persisting throughout the crisis. A good example of this is seen in the government's press release from July 30th:

We are now in a situation where Quran burnings in Denmark have reached a point where Denmark in many parts of the world, over several continents, has begun to be seen as a land that facilitates mockery and denigrations of other countries' cultures, religions, and traditions. Governments from 15 countries have condemned Denmark. Our ambassadors have been summoned for talks. 57 Foreign Secretaries from OIC meet on Monday as a reaction to the Quran burnings in Denmark and Sweden. (Udenrigsministeriet 2023)

It continued:

It can have great consequences. Consequences that fundamentally harm Denmark and the interests of our like-minded people in the world. It could also have major security consequences in Denmark. (Udenrigsministeriet 2023)

More maximization attempts followed. For example, Prime Minister Frederiksen (Social Democrats) concluded in an interview in early August that Denmark risked becoming “isolated on the international arena” if Quran burnings continued (Bennike 2023). Likewise, Vice Prime Minister Ellemann-Jensen (Venstre) talked about “significant negative foreign policy and security consequences for Denmark” when the government presented its plan to ban improper treatment of religious objects on August 25th (Eller 2023b).

The security aspect and the number of Quran burnings were central to this maximization narrative and frequently emphasized. This was evident when the proposal was debated in the parliament on November 14th. In the debate, Justice Minister Hummelgaard (Social Democrats), for instance, said: “The Police has stated that 508 demonstrations with book and flag burnings have been reported in Denmark from July 21st 2023 to November 7th” (Folketinget 2023a). Likewise, Bang Henriksen (Venstre) followed up with: “The Quran burnings have put Denmark in the spotlight and thereby fostered fierce anger in many countries and among millions of people” (Ibid).

The emphasis on the terror threat was, however, the strongest and most frequent theme, exemplified by the following quote from Brandenborg (Social Democrats):

The Police’s intelligence service assesses that the threat from militant Islamists has led to an increased threat. The terrorist organization al-Qaeda has designated Denmark and Sweden as targets for terrorist attacks, and on October 17th, two innocent Swedes were killed in Brussels on their way to a football match by a terrorist, who shortly after the attack posted a video on social media, where he, among other things, referenced the Quran burnings as the reason for the attack. (Folketinget 2023a)

Outside the government, it was only DSLP, the only other party that voted for the ban, that tried to push for event significance. Although these attempts came later, were less frequent, and did not contain the same level of detail as the governments’, the same tendencies to stress the number of burnings and the terror threat were present. An example of this was when party leader Lidegaard, on October 27th, referenced that Quran burnings had contributed to an

increased terror threat against Denmark and concluded: “We potentially endanger Danish lives by doing nothing” (Jørgensen 2023c). Another example came from his party colleague Friis Bach in the parliamentary debate on November 14th, where he also emphasized the impact on democratic freedoms:

That hundreds of Qurans are burned in Denmark with the sole purpose of mocking and belittling, creating hatred and insecurity, makes it much more difficult for us to fight for human rights, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion in the world. (Folketinget 2023a)

The eight opposition parties mainly participated in the framing contest to argue against the proposed ban. When doing so, they spent little time referencing the magnitude or consequences of the crisis. The few times they did, they can be seen to have *minimized* them or *acknowledged* the terror threat but dismissed it as new. Examples of this include when Pape Poulsen (Conservative People’s Party) rhetorically asked in an interview on August 3rd: “Do we have three Quran burners? Should that be made a problem?” (Kirkebæk-Johansson 2023a). Or when Larsen (Liberal Alliance) responded to government framing on October 27th with: “The Quran burnings are not the cause of the terrorist threat we see now. It has been the same for over 20 years” (Høj 2023). It can also be seen in the following statement from Lorentzen Dehnhardt (Green Left) in the parliamentary debate on November 14th:

Shady types are speculating about terror against Denmark, and the terror threat is high, and it will continue to be so with the Quran law. It is a risk we have lived with for years. (Folketinget 2023a)

6.2.2 Causality

Regarding causality, the government and DSLP focused their blame on one primary cause: the Quran burners. In their framing, a small group systematically burned Qurans to spread hate and provoke the Muslim World and were thus responsible for the consequences. This can be seen in the following statement from Justice Minister Hummelgaard on August 25th:

These are meaningless insults that have no other purpose than to create discord and hatred. When individuals demonstratively burn the Quran in the way we have

seen recently, it is a fundamentally mocking and unsympathetic act. It damages Denmark and Danish interests and risks the safety of Danes in the world. (Bay Nielsen 2023)

Another exemplifying quote came from Brandenborg (Social Democrats) in the parliamentary debate on November 14th:

For months, a small group of people have been burning Qurans in front of foreign embassies in Copenhagen with the sole aim of provoking and creating discord and conflict between Denmark and the countries in question. We are talking about the fact that the headless provocations of a few people can potentially create incalculable consequences for the rest of Denmark. (Folketinget 2023a)

All opposition parties, except the Alternative, did not agree with the government and DSLP. In so far that the situation was troublesome, it was not the Quran burners but an illegitimate reaction from Islamists and governments in Muslim countries that were to blame, according to them. This can be seen in the statement from Dahl (Liberal Alliance) when the government first drifted the idea of a restriction on July 30th:

Instead of condemning legal actions at home, the Foreign Secretary should concentrate on getting the Islamic states to behave properly. Burning down other countries' embassies and threatening employees of the Red Cross has no place. No other religion in the world reacts like this. (Aaes 2023)

Similar tones can be picked up from Pape Poulsen's answer (Conservative People's Party) when asked about the negative consequences a week later:

We are not the problem. It is the Middle Eastern countries that cannot see that it is three to five people in Denmark who are doing this and that it is not the attitude of an entire nation. (Redder & Bigum 2023)

It is also exemplified through Vermund's speech (New Right) in the last parliamentary debate on December 7th:

OIC demands that freedom of expression and religion be restricted in Denmark... Opponents of freedom do not stop at Quran burnings. They hate our entire culture and everything we stand for. They threatened us before Qurans were burned, they will threaten us after. (Folketinget 2023b)

That the two sides disagreed on causality in this way is further manifested by a response from Friis Bach (DSLPP) when the issue was debated in parliament:

it is not in consideration of foreign countries or OIC-resolutions that made us decide to intervene. It is that there are people, very few people, who stand on the streets and burn hundreds of Qurans to mock and demean others and create hatred and insecurity. (Folketinget 2023a)

While the government and DSLPP, the four parties in favor of a ban, focused the blame on the Quran burners, a critique against current legislation was also present from the start. For instance, Foreign Secretary Løkke Rasmussen (Moderates) said in an interview on July 30th:

Most other European countries – minus Sweden and Denmark – have found ways to prevent what we have seen five times today, where an individual stands up in front of a foreign embassy and burns the Quran. (Kirkebæk-Johansson 2023c)

Likewise, at a press conference the following day, he stated:

We have assessed the situation and are now starting work to correct the drastic expansion of freedom of expression that took place in 2017 when the blasphemy law was abolished. (Eller 2023a).

6.2.3 Remedies

Although the government engaged in diplomacy and temporarily increased border security in August (Justitsministeriet 2023a), the framing contest centered around one remedy to the crisis: a potential ban on Quran burnings and similar actions.

The Initial Proposal

The government acted swiftly. On July 30th, nine days after the Danish Patriots started burning Qurans outside embassies, the government presented the idea of finding a “legal instrument” aimed at prohibiting Quran burnings in front of embassies (Kirkebæk-Johansson 2023c). The terror threat combined with negative consequences for Danish interests abroad and the country’s ability to form partnerships with the Global South during the war in Ukraine were cited as key reasons by Foreign Secretary Løkke Rasmussen (Hørkilde 2023b). To publicly announce the intention so early in the process, and the day before OIC held a meeting, was likely a calculated decision to de-escalate the situation. Because, the day after, Løkke Rasmussen said in an interview: “I note with pleasure that the intention from the Danish government, which we formulated yesterday, has contributed to calming the mood somewhat” (Coogan 2023).

However, at this time, the government stood alone. While DSLP declared themselves skeptical (Eller 2023b), seven of the other eight parties - Red-Green Alliance, Green Left, Liberal Alliance, Conservative People’s Party, Danish People’s Party, Denmark Democrats, and New Right - came together to declare their opposition to the idea. In a joint statement, they wrote: “The violent man’s veto should not set the framework for Danish politics and Danish democracy” and: “The government’s announcement opens a pathway to where immigrant Iranians cannot burn a hijab in sympathy with the brave women of Iran” (Politiken 2023b). New Right and The Danish People’s Party also manifested their discontent by demanding a referendum and motivating it by:

This is not just about Rasmus Paludan and Quran burnings. It is about the entire fundament of the West. Western culture is based on the right to criticize religion.
(Skovlund Asmussen 2023b)

The Proposal Develops

A month later, on August 25th, the government presented a concrete policy proposal. The previous intention of a precise ban had now grown to incorporate the prohibition of all improper treatment of essential religious objects (Bay Nielsen 2023). The seven opposing parties continued to mark their strong dissatisfaction. For example, Thiesen (Danish People’s Party) called the presenting ministers “funeral directors who buried free expression” (Skovlund Asmussen 2023a). However, the Alternative now came out in support of the

proposal, and DSLP declared that the severity of the situation had caused them to re-think (Ibid). In the words of Friis Bach (DSLP):

We had no desire to intervene until quite recently, but there have been over 100 Quran burnings in recent months with the sole purpose of creating unrest, disorder, and uncertainty. We take that into consideration. We support the bill, but we are also involved in the legislative process, and we want to ensure the widest possible freedom of expression. (Jørgenssen 2023b)

A few days later, Friis Bach elaborated in an interview what it would take for DSLP to vote yes: “For us, it is crucial that you can continue to use the Quran for artistic purposes” (Hørkilde 2023a).

On October 27th, the government presented a revised proposal that constituted the final product. The ban would now be limited to religious scriptures belonging to officially recognized religious communities. Artworks where inappropriate treatment of such scriptures constituted a small part of a larger piece also became exempt (Justitsministeriet 2023b).

These changes proved crucial for forming a majority for the proposal. Party leader Lidegaard stated in an interview that the government had met several of DSLP’s demands. Lidegaard was especially happy that the proposal was more precise and less obstructive to artistic freedoms (Jørgenssen 2023c) and concluded: “We have now come a large step closer to voting for this bill” (Høj 2023). Although the government did not accept DSLP’s last demand, a universal exemption for artistic purposes, with the motivation that it would create a loophole for Paludan and his likes to exploit (Ibid), the changes turned out to be sufficient for DSLP to vote for the bill. DSLP’s support would become essential as the Alternative, two weeks later, declared that they had changed their mind and found the proposal too far-reaching and would vote no (Politiken 2023a).

The Final Debates

The final proposal underwent three parliamentary debates before it was voted through by a small majority consisting of the government and DSLP on December 7th. The statements made in these debates shed light on why the parties voted like they did. For the government and DSLP, the increased terror threat caused by repeated Quran burnings was the main argument, followed by the threat to Danish interests abroad and the country’s ability to form global partnerships. This can be seen in Friis Bach’s statement:

we must recognize that when the security of Danes is put in danger due to hundreds of frequent and repeated Quran burnings with the sole purpose of mocking, belittling, and contributing to creating hatred and insecurity, then we must intervene. That is why we support the bill. (Folketinget 2023a)

It is also exemplified in the speech from Grotkjær Elmstrøm (Moderates):

The many senseless burnings, whose sole purpose is to create discord and hatred, have meant the terrorist threat against Denmark has intensified. It has caused enormous anger in the Middle East, and it harms Denmark, it harms Danish interests, and it risks harming the security of Danes abroad and at home... We cannot have a situation where Denmark is seen in large parts of the world as a country that facilitates mockery of other religions and countries. We need to be close with the Global South and USA in a world where there is war in Ukraine and where there are tensions in the world, for example, with a rearming China. (Folketinget 2023a)

All opposing parties except the Alternative argued strongly against the proposal with one main argument: that changing the law would be to succumb to threats of violence and pressure from terrorists and Islamic dictatures, and significantly limit important democratic values such as freedom of expression, religious critique, and artistic freedoms. This would, in turn, show these forces that Denmark was willing to give in to demands and thus invite more violence, causing a slippery slope. Examples of this framing are plentiful. A representative example from the debates is when Støjberg (Denmark Democrats) said the following:

An axe blow to free expression is what the government is guilty of with the Quran law. It is sincerely wrong to restrict freedoms in a modern and enlightened society like the Danish. (Folketinget 2023a)

And followed up with:

freedom-loathing Muslim forces are going to demand more and more, and now they know that they have a government in Denmark that they can influence, now

they know it pays off to threaten. It was not like that during the Muhammad Crisis. Because then we had a Prime Minister in Anders Fogh Rasmussen and a Foreign Secretary in Per Stig Møller, who stood firmly for a free press and was on the side of freedom. (Folketinget 2023a)

Likewise, Larsen (Liberal Alliance) stated: “This is an extremely intrusive legislation that seriously affects civil liberties and artistic freedoms” (Folketinget 2023a). A third illustrative example came from Mercado (Conservative People’s Party) in the last debate:

Foreign policy has been the driving force behind the creation of this bill. The law was created under pressure from foreign states, and it is troubling, to say the least, that the government is ready to sell out one of the most basic and fundamental democratic values we have: freedom of expression. What does the government do the next time a foreign undemocratic state feels offended by statements in Denmark? What does the government do in the face of that pressure once it has bowed? Where does this end? (Folketinget 2023b)

The Government’s Stance on Free Expression

This difference in opinion sparked a debate between the two sides that was present throughout the framing contest. The most interesting part of the government’s defense against the opposition’s criticism was that they seemingly viewed a ban as a minuscule infringement on free expression. For example, on August 3rd, Prime Minister Frederiksen expressed in an interview that: “I do not consider it a limitation of freedom of expression that you cannot burn other people’s books” (Bennike 2023). Similarly, Bang Henriksen (Venstre) argued in the first debate that: “We might limit free expression for four or five people” (Folketinget 2023a). The following quotes from a debate article by Justice Minister Hummelgaard illustrate this stance even better:

Critics of the government’s line argue that the risk to Danish interests home and abroad is a price we must pay to preserve freedom of expression. In response, I would say that the government does not believe that Quran burnings have more value than expressions that are racist, homophobic, or of similar type, which is already punishable today.

In 2019, the Freedom of Expression Commission identified over 400 legislative restrictions on our right to express ourselves... So free speech has never been unlimited... If the purpose is to criticize religion, there are many other ways to do it. (Hummelgaard 2023)

Alternative Remedies

While the other eight parties stood united in their opposition to the government's proposal, they diverged on alternative remedies. Danish Democrats, Danish People's Party, and New Right argued in the debates that the government should follow the, in their view, successful example of the Muhammad Crisis and just wait the storm out (Folketinget 2023a). The Conservative People's Party and Green Left drifted the idea in the debates of changing the Public Order Act similarly to what the Swedish government was investigating (Folketinget 2023a). Red-Green Alliance suggested that hate speech laws could be widened and, together with the Alternative and Liberal Alliance, inquired if the current Public Order Act could be used to stop certain Quran burnings with regard to public order and safety. To the latter, government representatives answered that it would only be possible in a limited number of situations where a concrete threat against the Quran burner existed beforehand and thus dismissed the idea (Folketinget 2023a).

6.2.4 Summary

In Denmark, the government arguably acted according to *Crisis as opportunity* from the summer onwards. From the point when the crisis came into full force in late July, the government continuously tried to maximize event significance and centered blame on the Quran burners. The repeated focus on the number of burnings indicates that the government viewed it as a systematic problem that had to be dealt with rather than isolated incidents. More important for attributing the *Crisis as opportunity* label is, however, that the government was so quick to express an intention to prohibit Quran burnings outside embassies and later increased it to a ban of all improper treatment of religious scriptures, a paradigm shift. In addition, the government also made it clear that it viewed Quran burnings as mere mockery and provocation and that prohibiting it would be a small infringement on free expression. Thus, signaling that a ban was something positive rather than a forced necessity.

While the other change advocate, DSLP, also maximized event significance and focused blame on the Quran burners, the party can be seen to belong more to *Crisis as threat* than the government for three reasons. Firstly, these framing tendencies started first in late August. Secondly, DSLP viewed the law change as a necessity, as evidenced by Friis Bach's statement in the first debate: "We would have liked to avoid this law, but we have been convinced it is necessary to intervene" (Folketinget 2023a). Thirdly, the party tried to limit the scope of the ban. The government's willingness to compromise with DSLP in this regard was, therefore, likely a key reason why significant policy change could be enacted.

For the other parties, Danish Democrats, Danish People's Party, and New Right most firmly manifested a *No crisis* approach. They minimized event significance, blamed the negative consequences on exogenous factors, strongly opposed the government's proposal, and argued that the crisis could be waited out like during the Muhammad Crisis. The Conservative People's Party, Red-Green Alliance, Green Left, and Liberal Alliance also engaged in the first three framing practices, but since they brought forward some remedies to the crisis, they land closer to *Crisis as threat*. However, considering everything else and since these suggestions came late in the crisis and were not very concrete, they should arguably be regarded as a last-minute effort to contain policy change. These seven parties can, therefore, be said to have acted as status-quo players. The same goes for the Alternative who viewed the Quran burnings as problematic and initially supported the government's proposal but eventually concluded that policy change was neither appropriate nor necessary.

7. Concluding Discussion

This thesis aims to analyze how policymakers in Denmark and Sweden reacted to the 2023 Quran Crisis, investigate what policy solutions they propagated for or against, and identify possible factors that can help explain the difference in policy outcomes between the countries. To do this, Boin, t'Hart, and McConnell's (2009) framework on crisis exploitation has been utilized to analyze how the crisis was framed, what remedies were pursued, and the policy outcome in each country. Now, the most important findings from each case will be contrasted, and potential explanations for the difference in policy outcome discussed. Next, some potential improvements to the framework are discussed before the thesis concludes with suggestions for future research.

7.1 Contrasting the Framing Contexts

Based on the analysis, the most important conclusion that can be drawn is that the political parties in Sweden acted according to *Crisis as threat* on policy while the Danish government acted per *Crisis as opportunity*. In Sweden, although the government and the Social Democrats mostly maximized event significance, blame over causality was diffused. Internal politics in foreign countries, malignant state actors, and foreign Quran burners were all to blame for the crisis, according to the government. The Social Democrats, in turn, blamed it mainly on the Sweden Democrats. Moreover, the analysis shows a reluctance to ban Quran burnings, based on an unwillingness to infringe on freedom of expression, across the political spectrum in Sweden. The government's focus on symbolic and incremental alternative remedies that only mitigated the effects of the crisis, such as diplomacy and anti-terrorism legislation, also signals *Crisis as threat*. Furthermore, it took the government and parts of the opposition eight months to propose potential infringements on Quran burnings and then only in the form of inquiries. This further strengthens the claim that the Swedish parties saw the Quran Crisis as a threat to the status-quo and policy change, at best, as a necessary evil.

The Danish government also maximized event significance by focusing on the terrorism threat and potential consequences for Danish interests abroad and global partnerships. Contrary to Sweden, the Danish government focused blame on the Quran burners and framed Quran burning as a significant and repeated problem by continuously emphasizing the number of burnings. In addition, it only took the government nine days after the Danish Patriots started burning Qurans outside of embassies to propose their intent to ban the phenomenon. This intent evolved into a proposed paradigm shift, a ban on improper treatment of religious scriptures, that the government thoroughly supported and voted through. Thus, indicating *Crisis as opportunity*.

Another interesting conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis is that seven of eight opposition parties in Denmark, both left and right, were strongly opposed to significant policy change. This is evident in how they, just like the strongest opponent in Sweden - the Sweden Democrats - engaged in the following framing practices; (1) Downplayed event significance. (2) Blamed the crisis on an overreaction from Islamists and Muslim governments. (3) Strongly argued against proposed infringements to Quran burnings with the motivation that it would be a significant limitation to free expression and create a slippery slope where Islamists and Muslim governments would learn that they could force policy change with threats of violence and sanctions. This conclusion is important to

recognize now that possible explanations for the difference in policy response will be discussed. Whatever factors led to the strong Danish policy response did not make large parts of the parliament support it.

7.2 Difference in Policy Outcome

A noteworthy difference between the Danish and Swedish framing contests that arguably shaped the policy outcome was the willingness to compromise. In both countries, the government relied on other parties' support to pass legislation. When the Danish government presented its policy proposal on August 25th, DSLP was leaning towards voting for it but had demands regarding limitations to free expression and artistic freedoms. The government met most of those demands with its revised proposal, and DSLP concluded that it took them a large step closer to voting for it. DSLP also accepted that the government could not fully accommodate them and became the only party outside the government to vote for a ban. This apparent willingness to compromise was thus arguably crucial for Danish policy change.

The analysis shows that the same willingness to compromise did not exist in Sweden. In early September, both the government and parts of the opposition had concluded that policy change could be called for and proposed inquiries. Both inquiries sought to investigate possible restrictions to Quran burnings, thus infringing on free expression. The government's inquiry entailed a potential change to the Public Order Act to enable the police to acknowledge national security when issuing permits for public manifestations. The Social Democrats, Left Party, and Environmental Party instead wanted to investigate if Quran burnings could be restricted under hate speech laws. Both sides did, however, oppose the other with the argument it was a too substantial infringement on free expression. Although the government could launch an inquiry, its proposed intention is unlikely to gain a parliamentary majority when the inquiry concludes. This is because the government's supportive party, the Sweden Democrats, was firmly opposed to it. Had the Swedish government and the three left-wing parties been willing to compromise like in Denmark, perhaps an inquiry based on common ground with better chances of materializing into policy change could have been found. That DSLP did not see itself as an opposition party, while the two Swedish groups constituted opposing poles in Swedish politics, likely affected this willingness to compromise. This would be consistent with previous research that highlights how policy change is more likely if coalitions are used to collaborate compared to if they usually compete (Nohrstedt & Weible 2010: 14-15, 23).

A plausible reason for why the Danish government pushed for a paradigm shift while no Swedish party did so is arguably a more pragmatic stance on free expression. This can be seen in the analysis. While all Swedish parties framed limitations on Quran burnings as a notable infringement on free expression they preferred to avoid, the Danish government framed it differently. The Danish government presented its proposed ban as a minor infringement, only affecting 4-5 people. It also argued that free expression had never been absolute as Denmark already had over 400 restrictions, and there would still be many ways to criticize religion legally.

From the context chapter, we also know that the Danish Social Democrats, the largest government party, was against removing the blasphemy law in 2017 with the motivation that burning holy books would not enrich public debate and that blasphemous acts could spark violent reactions from Islamists (Larsson et al. 2024: 7-8). Seeing how the latter happened during the Quran Crisis, the party likely saw an opportunity to reinstate a similar law. Moreover, previous research points out that crises can cause politicians to revise their policy preferences (Nohrstedt & Weible 2010: 22-25), which might have been the case for parts of the Danish government. For example, Foreign Secretary Løkke Rasmussen voted to remove the blasphemy law in 2017. Yet, during the Quran Crisis, he called removing the blasphemy law a “drastic expansion of freedom of expression” (Eller 2023), indicating a revised policy belief. In addition, opportunism could have contributed, as 69% of the government’s voters favored prohibiting Quran burnings in August (Skovlund Asmussen 2023).

Previous experience from similar crises can also have played in. Sweden successfully managed to contain the Lars Vilks’ controversy through diplomacy. As discussed in previous research, past successes tend to make actors rely on the same strategies when faced with similar situations (Boin et al. 2016: 131). Perhaps that is why the Swedish government relied partly on diplomacy to diffuse the situation and did not feel the need to swiftly infringe on Quran burnings through policy. In contrast, Denmark suffered a significant crisis when its government did nothing during the Muhammad Crisis. In alignment with theory on analogic reasoning (Brändström et al. 2004: 205), this can be hypothesized to have motivated the Danish government to push for a swift and strong policy response to avoid a similar situation.

Another potential reason for the difference in outcome relates to the puzzle that this thesis started with, Swedish NATO membership. Three things in the analysis indicate that the Swedish government might not have viewed Quran burnings as a key barrier to joining the Alliance despite the statements from Türkiye’s President Erdogan. Firstly, Foreign Secretary Billström stated on two occasions that he counted on Turkish ratification despite Quran

burnings since Sweden had fulfilled the Madrid agreement. Secondly, Billström emphasized that Erdogan's statements should be seen in the light of the ongoing election campaign. Thus, arguably signaling a belief that Erdogan would soften his stance after the election. Thirdly, when the government opened up for potential limitations to Quran burnings with the inquiry, they did so due to the terror threat, not NATO. This is evident in how the proposal came the day after the increased terror threat assessment and how it was motivated by the increased terror threat. Considering the importance of NATO membership for the government, they should have been open to the same solution earlier in the crisis if they thought Quran burnings constituted a key barrier to NATO.

Lastly, as discussed in previous research, blame games over the responsibility incumbents have for the crisis tend to draw attention away from policy solutions (Boin et al. 2016: 122-123). In Denmark, no such blame game existed, and the focus was on legislation. In Sweden however, the opposition, most notably the Social Democrats, spent a significant part of the crisis blaming the Sweden Democrats for escalating it. In addition, they tried to impair the relationship between the government and the Sweden Democrats and have the Chairman of the Justice Committee, Jomshof, relieved of his duties. As evident in the analysis, this forced the government and Sweden Democrats to respond, causing the blame game to evolve further. Had the opposition devoted more of their limited time in parliamentary debates and media to promoting their policy solution - classifying Quran burnings as hate speech - they might have garnered greater public support. Thus, improving their chances of having the proposal enacted. A less confrontational approach could possibly also made a compromise with the government more likely.

7.3 Theory Development

The results of this study can be used to suggest improvements to Boin, t'Hart, and McConnell's framework. While the framework has been useful for analyzing the cases, two limitations have been detected. Firstly, as seen in Figure B, the framework assumes that policy proposals will be fought or negotiated between change advocates and status-quo players, shaping its outcome (Boin et al. 2009: 90). These cases show that reality is more complex. As the discussion on compromises in the previous section highlights, the policy outcome can be dependent on whether two groups advocating for change can find a compromise when pushing for different policy solutions. It would, therefore, be appropriate to

develop the framework by incorporating this dimension to make it more accurate for explaining how policy conflicts shape policy outcomes.

Secondly, as seen in Figure A, the framework hypothesizes that opposition forces that decide to focus blame on incumbent leaders also will attack the policy status-quo (Ibid: 84). Again, the analysis highlights that reality is more complex. In Sweden, the opposition did the former, when they focused blame on the Sweden Democrats, but not the latter. To further improve the accuracy of the framework, it can be argued that the political stance - which concerns blame games - and the policy stance - which concerns policy change - should be divided instead of grouped in the typology *No crisis*, *Crisis as threat*, and *Crisis as opportunity*. With this suggestion, it would be possible for a policy actor to be described as, for example, *Crisis as opportunity* on one and *Crisis as threat* on the other.

7.4 Future Research

This thesis has thoroughly studied how the 2023 Quran Crisis was framed, and which remedies were pursued in Denmark and Sweden. It thus contributes unique knowledge about how policymakers reacted to the crises and how the policy process unfolded. In doing so, important differences between the countries and several potential reasons for why the policy outcome diverged has been identified. The thesis thus helps explain the puzzle of why two seemingly similar crises resulted in different levels of policy change.

Future research could, nevertheless, be useful for digging deeper into some of these potential explanations and going beyond publicly available information, which this thesis has been limited to. Interviews with those directly involved in the decision-making process to learn more about policymakers' true motivations and rationale for certain decisions would be suitable for this. Inquiring if the Swedish government believed that Erdogan's threats were sincere or if they thought Türkiye would ratify Sweden's NATO application despite continuous Quran burnings would arguably be of particular interest. Investigating if and how previous crises of the sort, the Muhammad Crisis and the Lars Vilks controversy, influenced policymakers could also be worth pursuing.

Another suggestion for future research is to follow up on the inquiry the Swedish government launched. Will they try to enact it into policy now after Sweden has become a NATO member and the problem with public Quran burnings appears to have faded? If they do, it could be interesting to study how they motivate the decision.

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