
04/07/2024

Sweden's image in the wake of Quran burnings and the LVU campaign

A survey of nine countries in the MENA region, Asia and Türkiye

File number: 00930/2023



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Appendices are not included in the English version.

Introduction

Since 1945, the Swedish Institute (SI) has worked to increase the world's interest and trust in Sweden. We do this because trust between countries, organisations and individuals is a necessity for cooperation, trade, development and, not least of all, our security.

In recent years, there has been considerable attention paid to certain events in Sweden by international media. It's mainly focused on the public destruction of Muslim religious text, which we refer to in this report as 'Quran burnings,' in 2020, 2022 and 2023. However, the so-called 'LVU campaign' has also received wide attention, both domestically and internationally. This information influence campaign alleged, among other things, that Muslim children were kidnapped by Swedish social services.

As a result, 'Sweden's image' is now high on many political agendas. The impact of these events must be viewed in the context of Sweden's path towards NATO membership and increased geopolitical tensions due to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. There are malicious actors who want to harm Sweden and Swedish interests.

The image of Sweden (or rather *images* of Sweden) is made up of many different things that people around the world associate with our country. These perceptions are linked to feelings and opinions, interest in Sweden, and the willingness or unwillingness to engage. People's views can be based on experiences of the wider world through friends, family, or trips to other countries, but also on ideas and impressions gleaned from other sources, such as film, literature, news, and social media. The global images of countries are built up over a long period of time and usually change slowly.

In light of the strong reactions in the Muslim world to the Quran burnings in 2023, there is reason to examine how the populations of certain countries in the Middle East and Asia, as well as Turkey, view Sweden. Not least of all, because the events had serious security consequences for Swedish citizens and embassies abroad. We also assess possible consequences for Swedish companies doing business in the region. The study does not include the impact on Swedish exports, consequences for Sweden's diplomatic relations, or attacks and threats against Swedish embassies or companies in the surveyed countries.

The countries selected for the study – Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – are home to almost a third of the world's population and a very large proportion of the world's Muslims. Attitudes towards Islam vary greatly between them, but all lean more towards traditional religious values rather than secular ones. This should be contrasted with Sweden, which, according to the World Values Survey, belongs to one of the world's most secular countries.

The selected countries also have somewhat strained foreign policy relations with the Western world. The conflict between Israel and Hamas has created yet another polarised situation that's increased tension. Despite that, there are clear ambitions in several of the countries to increase contact with the rest of the world through areas such as trade.

The findings of this report highlight opportunities and challenges ahead. The insights can serve as a basis for developing further work to promote Sweden and its interests abroad.

Summary

SI has examined how Sweden is perceived by the public in nine specific countries in the Middle East, North Africa, Asia and Türkiye. We also analysed the media coverage of Sweden and to what degree it has influenced the public's perception, as well as the experiences of those representing Swedish companies in these countries over the past year.

The study shows that:

- **Media coverage of Sweden has been critical and very extensive.** One in three of the survey respondents had taken note of reporting on the Quran burnings, and one in five were aware of the LVU campaign's message.
- **The Quran burnings and the LVU campaign have had some negative effects on Sweden's image.** The negative impact is mainly found in Saudi Arabia and Morocco. One in ten of those surveyed in all countries state that their view of Sweden has deteriorated and become more negative. However, it is important to remember that a majority of the respondents remain positive or neutral towards Sweden.
- **The events have had a limited impact on Swedish companies operating abroad.** More than half of the Swedish corporate representatives interviewed said that their companies were worried about a negative impact as a result of the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign. However, the media coverage has not affected the ability to do business in the long term. The study shows that the Swedish brand is strong, and Swedish companies operating in the surveyed countries serve an important role as embodiments of Swedish innovation and values, yet the troubling developments in the regions pose major challenges for such Swedish organisations.
- **A Swedish experience fosters resistance against developing a negative perception of Sweden.** If a person has their own positive experiences associated with Sweden, they are less likely to change their minds in the face of misleading or negative claims about the country. A Swedish experience can include, for example, studying in Sweden, being exposed to Swedish culture or buying Swedish products.
- **It is important to continue to promote and spread knowledge about Sweden to the public in the surveyed countries.** In order to develop such efforts, this report includes a number of personas (or types of people) that are based on (among other things) attitudes toward Sweden, levels of education, values, and experiences associated with Sweden. These personas can be used to illustrate how different variables affect the perceptions of Sweden, as well as a basis for strategies to increase awareness of and trust in Sweden in the regions.

Overview of the study and countries surveyed

This report aims to answer the following questions:

1. How has Sweden been portrayed in different types of media?
2. What consequences did that media portrayal have on the public's perception of Sweden and for Swedish companies abroad?
3. What possible ways forward are there for the promotion of Sweden?

Data has been collected in three ways. Firstly, an analysis was conducted of how Sweden is portrayed in news media and social media content, as well as on blogs and forums, in the major languages of Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. Secondly, a survey was taken of roughly 9,000 respondents from the general public in the same countries as the media study.¹ Finally, SI performed an interview study with representatives of Swedish companies in Egypt, India, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. More information about the implementation and the methods can be found in [the Methodology appendix](#).

A range of democracies, economies and attitudes toward Islam

There are both commonalities and differences between the countries covered in the study. Islam is prominent in all countries but attitudes to the religion vary, as do levels of democracy and economic development.

While India and Indonesia have a high degree of democracy, the countries in MENA, as well as Pakistan and Türkiye, are significantly lower. Saudi Arabia has the lowest level of democracy, and Indonesia has the highest.² The media landscape varies, but all the countries face challenges linked to press and media freedom. In the MENA countries, along with Pakistan and Türkiye, opportunities to conduct free and independent journalism are limited.³ There are even challenges for journalists in India and Indonesia, despite climates relatively open to debate and constitutional guarantees of press freedom and freedom of expression.⁴

Access to the internet is limited in India, Pakistan and Indonesia, where large numbers of people lack connectivity. In Iran, internet access has been recently tightened.⁵ The ability to use social media differs but has been limited to varying degrees in a majority of the countries.⁶

In economic terms, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye are at the top. India has by far the largest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and is expected to become the world's third-largest economy within the next few years.⁷ After India comes Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, which have

¹The results of this survey were presented briefly in "Sweden's image in MENA-Asia interim report 1".

²In EIU's Democracy Index 2023 as well as V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index 2023, India and Indonesia rank highest among the countries in the survey, while Iran and Saudi Arabia rank lowest.

³[Middle East - North Africa | RSF](#)

⁴According to Reporter without Borders Press Freedom Index 2023. [Index | RSF](#)

⁵Digital 2024: Global Overview Report – DataReportal, [Internet Freedom in the Middle East Remains Restricted in 2023 | Freedom House](#)

⁶According to Freedom House *Freedom on the Net 2023*: <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores>.

⁷[Why everyone should be talking about India – "Something completely improbable has happened" | Tidningen Näringslivet](#)

almost equal GDPs. Türkiye is not far behind, but then there's a large gap between it and countries such as Morocco, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan.

Islam has a strong presence in the politics and social life of countries in the Middle East and North Africa. India differs from the other countries surveyed in that only a small percentage of the population is Muslim. The country is also not part of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).⁸

⁸ [Organization of Islamic Cooperation \(oic-oci.org\)](http://oic-oci.org)

Media coverage of the Quran burnings and LVU campaign

In recent years, the media image of Sweden abroad has been shaped by issues related to major religious, cultural and geopolitical divisions. Sweden's path towards NATO membership has received a lot of attention, and the conflict between Israel and Hamas has begun to affect how Sweden is depicted towards the end of 2023.

The depiction of Sweden that appears in the media and the public's perception of Sweden are not always the same. However, images that are highly impactful and repeated in media can greatly influence people's views. In the countries covered in this study, the Quran burnings in Sweden, together with the LVU campaign, have attracted a lot of attention.

Sweden is portrayed as Islamophobic

Both the Quran burnings and allegations of child abuse have been met with strong reactions abroad, ranging from condemnation to support. They have reflected complex debates about freedom of expression, respect for religion and international relations. Even though the Quran burnings and child welfare relate to two different issues, much of the reaction in both cases portrays Sweden as Islamophobic and racist. This is expressed in arguments that Swedish institutions, policies and laws structurally discriminate against people of the Muslim faith and that there is inherent Islamophobia in Sweden.

Accusations of discrimination against Muslims often include claims of double standards. For example, it's typically stated that Swedish freedom of speech allows the burning of the Quran but not the Torah, Bible or LGBTQI flag. Another claim is that Muslim families in Sweden are singled out for government intervention in cases of child welfare and that Muslim children are stripped of their heritage by, for example, being forced to eat pork and remove headscarves.

Calls to action

The dominant theme in the reactions to both the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign is outrage and calls to act and show disapproval of Sweden. This includes calls to the public to participate in demonstrations, burn the Swedish flag and target Swedish interests in the region, like diplomatic offices. Muslims are also repeatedly advised against travelling to Sweden, and those Muslims who are already in Sweden are encouraged to emigrate and return to their countries of origin. There are repeated calls to break off diplomatic relations and to introduce sanctions on Sweden. There is a heavy emphasis on a strong and united response from Muslim countries.

Some also emphasise economic pressure as a key form of protest. There are repeated calls to boycott Swedish companies and brands, especially in Arabic-language posts on social media.

Sweden and Swedish authorities are the focus of criticism

Criticism in response to both the Quran burnings and allegations of separating children from Muslim families was primarily directed at Sweden as a country. In connection with the LVU campaign, Sweden's national social services agency (*Socialtjänsten*) was criticised and portrayed

as kidnapping Muslim children. The police were mainly criticised in connection with the Quran burnings, both for allowing organisers to carry them out and preventing demonstrations in response.

Characterisations of Islamophobia and racism in the media are not unique to Sweden. They're also found in depictions of other European countries and appear in a more general criticism of the 'West' and Europe. It is not uncommon for examples from areas of free speech and human rights to be used as the basis for various claims of discrimination in legislation and double standards against Muslims. The LVU campaign and the Quran burnings are used as examples or symbols of Western values and morals.

A wide distribution in all nine countries

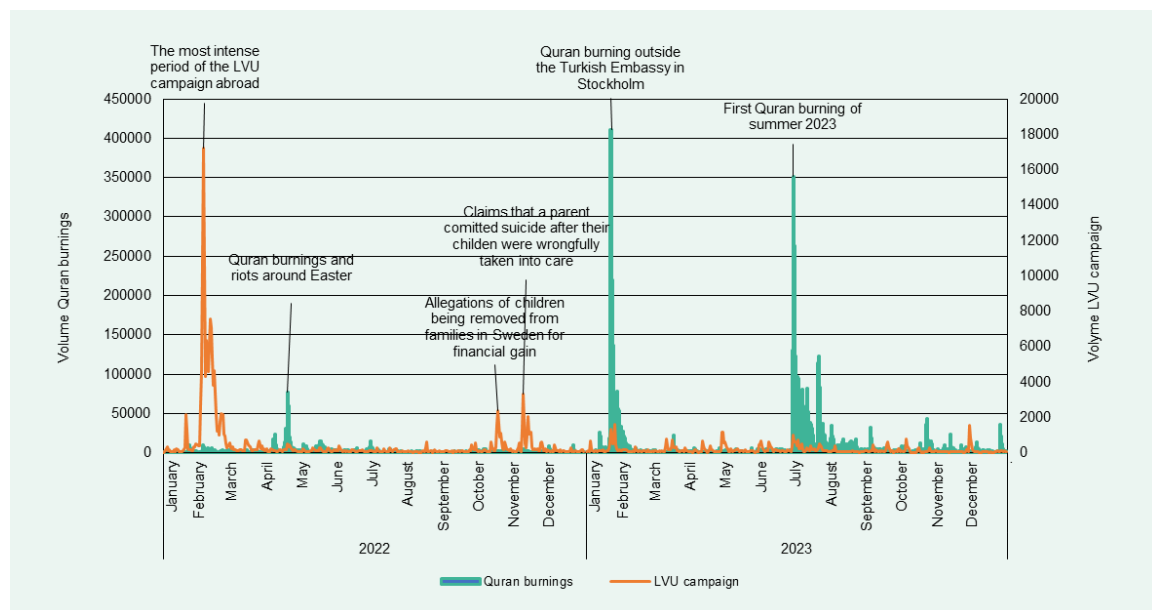


Figure 1: This graph shows the number of news articles and posts on social media, blogs and forums mentioning Sweden along with the Quran burnings and the LUVU campaign, respectively. The volume is shown per day from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2023 in English, Arabic, Turkish, Hindi, Indonesian, Urdu and Persian.

The Quran burnings and the LUVU campaign have together generated a large amount of news articles and posts on social media. The portrayal of Sweden as Islamophobic has, therefore, been widely prevalent.

Coverage of the Quran burnings was particularly widespread in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iraq and Türkiye. Between 40 and 70 per cent of all social media content in those countries that mention Sweden in 2023 was about the issue, while news media covered it to a more varied degree, between 12 and 42 per cent. The Quran burnings did not receive as much attention in Indonesia, Morocco and Egypt but still made up 25–35 per cent of the content about Sweden on social media and 6–28 per cent in news media during the same year. In Iran, the Quran burnings were hardly covered at all on social media but were prominent in news media, with 32 per cent of all Sweden-related articles discussing the issue.

The LUVU campaign generated significantly less media coverage than the Quran burnings. It wasn't covered equally across all the countries surveyed, mostly Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Türkiye and

Egypt. However, the allegations of Swedish authorities unjustly removing children from Muslim families drew significant engagement, with many sharing articles about the issue on social media.

To some extent, the two issues have reinforced each other. The LVU campaign increased in scope during the highly publicised 2023 Quran burning incidents, which suggests that the Quran burnings were used to spread the LVU campaign.

Both the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign have long been recurring elements in how Sweden is depicted in other countries. The LVU campaign began to spread abroad in August 2021, and although still ongoing, it received the most attention in January–February 2022. The 2020 Quran burning incidents in Sweden gained some attention at the time, but it was only in connection with the Quran burnings in January and June–July 2023 that they had a truly widespread impact, especially in terms of the number of social media posts.

A convergence of multiple agendas and interests

The fact that many different public figures have reacted and spoken out in response to both the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign has contributed to the extensive coverage. Several political and religious leaders quickly came out and condemned the Quran burnings, mostly on social media. This happened in all of the countries in the study, with the exception of India, where only the leaders of Muslim groups made public statements. Leaders of major international groups like the ICO, the Arab League, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also spoke out – as did those from non-Muslim organisations such as the UN Human Rights Council, the EU, the Vatican and the World Jewish Congress.

The fact that the issue was addressed at the highest political levels in a number of countries and international communities led to constant headlines, not least among established global news media, which contributed to it spreading even further.

The issue of freedom of expression and its limits was central to coverage of the Quran burnings in the press and social media. Here, there is a clear division between those arguing that freedom of expression cannot be a pretext for intolerance and hindering religious freedom and those who advocate freedom of expression in the broadest sense. Among the latter group are those who believe that Quran burnings are reprehensible but legally permitted, as well as those openly praising the burning of the Quran. The tension between these differing opinions generates strong reactions.

In the LVU campaign, the messaging centres on framing certain events in Sweden as “child abduction”, playing on emotions and mistrust of the Swedish authorities. The LVU campaign continues overseas, with a few active accounts producing new content that is being shared. Those behind the accounts are intentionally spreading the perception of Sweden as Islamophobic with the aim of damaging the country’s reputation. These same malicious actors also used the Quran burnings to spread their messages, which gave further attention to both issues.

Those who spread messaging related to the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign have different agendas that have coincided in these instances, which has contributed to the extensive coverage. According to the Swedish Psychological Defense Agency (*Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar*), malign information influence has occurred both in the LVU campaign and in connection with the

Quran burnings. In parallel, the issues have generated extensive organic engagement based on different vested interests.

Whether people engage with a characterisation that's part of an information influence campaign or legitimate discourse of an issue, it can lead to a more negative image of Sweden.

Effects on Sweden's global image and Swedish companies doing business abroad

Media coverage of the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign has been considerable, especially in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iraq and Türkiye. We know that widespread and repeated depiction of a certain narrative, like that Sweden is Islamophobic, increases the risk of it influencing people's perceptions. This is especially true in countries where knowledge of Sweden is low. However, the way people acquire, sort and absorb information is a complex process. Any portrayal in media, therefore, needs to be supplemented with studies of how people have responded to it.

For perception to be affected, people must choose to receive the message and remember it. The content also needs to engage, for example, by relating to key issues or fundamental values for the audience. It's a question of a person's previous knowledge of Sweden and how interested they are in the new information.

Media coverage and the public's reactions can also affect Swedish companies' opportunities to operate in various countries. The consequences for companies, however, result from more than just the perceptions of the population at large. A number of different factors have an impact, such as whether the companies' end users are mainly individuals or other companies and if their brands are seen as Swedish.

Shifts in public views vary

The survey shows that the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign have led to some damage to the image of Sweden among people in all nine countries. The decline is greatest in the countries where media coverage of the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign has been greatest. But it is clear that Quran burnings and the LVU campaign are the main causes of the negative shift we see in all countries.⁹ Respondents confirm that their exposure to the issues through media has been high. Overall, 33 per cent have read or heard about the Quran burnings in Sweden, and 19 per cent are aware of the LVU campaign's message.

In this study, there are four degrees of change the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign had on the respondents' view of Sweden. These degrees of change are found to varying extents in the different countries surveyed. The exact distribution of the degrees of change reported can be found in the appendix for each country.

1. Don't remember – the respondent has not read/heard of the issues, has read/heard about them but forgotten or does not associate them with Sweden.
2. Remember, but no negative impact – even if the respondents remember reading/hearing of the issues, it has not damaged their views of Sweden or willingness to interact with Sweden.
3. Some negative impact – here, media coverage affected respondents, but not so much that it has led to a strongly negative view of the country or reluctance to interact with Sweden.

⁹In Türkiye, Sweden's path towards NATO membership is equally cited as a reason for the shift.

4. Clear negative impact – for these respondents, the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign are strongly associated with Sweden. They also have a negative view of Sweden and are unwilling to interact with the country.

Don't remember

A large proportion of respondents do not readily recall the Quran burnings or the LVU campaign, which may be due to several reasons. They may simply not have interacted with media coverage about the issues, or they may not have found the issues relevant or interesting enough to remember. They may also have judged the reporting as not credible and, therefore, did not retain the memory.

The proportion of respondents who don't remember the Quran burnings or the LVU campaign varies greatly throughout the surveyed countries, between 43–74 per cent. Survey respondents in this degree of change are most prevalent in India, Iran, Indonesia and Egypt.

Remember, but no negative impact

Most of the survey respondents who remember the Quran burnings or the LVU campaign without negative effects say that their perception of Sweden is unchanged. A smaller portion says that their perception has changed but for the better. This is especially noticeable among respondents in India, where certain groups have responded positively to the Quran burnings because of domestic political circumstances.

The group has very different initial perceptions of Sweden, but there's a commonality that the country isn't associated with the Quran burnings or the LVU campaign. Other associations are stronger. This group is also usually positive, alternatively neutral, towards Sweden and has a clear interest in interacting with Sweden.

Although this group has not yet shifted in its views of Sweden, the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign are established as being associated with Sweden. It's possible that these new associations may influence their perception of Sweden in the long term, but it is difficult to say whether and how this will happen.

In total, those who remember but have not been negatively affected make up 31 per cent of respondents in all countries in the survey. This means that an unchanged view of Sweden is the most common reaction among respondents who remember the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign. This applies to all nine countries surveyed.

Some negative impact

The Quran burnings and the LVU campaign have negatively affected the perception of Sweden among this group of respondents. But it's a minor negative effect. Respondents still have a positive or neutral view of Sweden. As the reason for their shift in opinion, they cite intolerance or attitude towards religion, which can be indirectly linked to the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign. Yet, the issues do not characterise respondents' opinion of Sweden. They strongly associate Sweden with other things and also still firmly desire to interact with Sweden.

Even if this group doesn't have a negative view or reduced interest, there's clear indication of damage to their perception of Sweden. It can be interpreted as a minor disappointment, the impression that one does not see Sweden as matching up to expectations.

The proportion of respondents who say their opinion of Sweden has deteriorated but not become negative is very small. A total of 3 per cent of respondents in all countries. There are small differences between the countries, but respondents with this degree of change are more common in Pakistan, Iraq and Morocco than in other countries.

Clear negative impact

Finally, we have those most affected. These respondents say that their perception of Sweden has deteriorated over the past year and that their view of Sweden is negative. Just like those affected to a lesser degree, they cite reasons linked to the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign as causes for the shift. When asked what is the first thing that comes to their mind when they think of Sweden, they mention the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign, as well as concepts such as racism, Islamophobia and intolerance. This group has also lost interest in Sweden, and their interest in interacting with Sweden is clearly lower than that of other groups.

The respondents most affected by the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign are a relatively small portion, 9 per cent in total, but vary greatly between the different countries surveyed. They are most common in Saudi Arabia and Morocco, where the proportion is clearly higher than the average, while they're least common in Iran, India, Indonesia and Egypt.

	Don't remember	Remember, but no negative impact	Some negative impact	Clear negative impact
Associates Quran burnings / the LVU campaign to Sweden	Does not associate the issues with Sweden	Not the only/first thing associated with Sweden	Not the only/first thing associated with Sweden	Only/first thing associated with Sweden
View of Sweden	Unchanged or improved and positive/neutral	Unchanged or improved and positive/neutral	Damaged but still positive/neutral	Damaged and negative
Desire to interact with Sweden	High	High	Fairly high	Very little
Share (average of all countries)	57%	31%	3%	9%

Figure 2: The table breaks down the four different degrees of change in perception of Sweden as a result of the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign.

The impact is probably less than indicated

The Quran burnings and the LVU campaign have damaged the image of Sweden among certain groups of the public in all nine countries. At the same time, the impact seems to be limited, both to what degree and in which countries it has affected. There's a particularly limited level of negative impact in India, Iran, Indonesia and Egypt, which are also the countries where media coverage of the issues has been less widespread.

Although the proportion of people with a more negative view of Sweden is unusually high in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Pakistan, Türkiye and Iraq, the effect is probably less dramatic than indicated above. The reason is that among some of those most affected, there is a general scepticism towards countries in 'the West'. This is particularly evident in Iran. There, the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign have had very little impact, and there are few people whose opinions have worsened in the past year. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of the population has a negative view of Sweden. Similar patterns can also be found in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iraq. There, the

proportion of people who are generally negative about ‘the West’ is twice as large as those who are only negative about Sweden.

Therefore, the probability that they had a negative opinion of Sweden before the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign is high. It’s possible that they have an even more negative image of Sweden than before.

A varying degree of impact on companies as well

The attention surrounding the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign has also meant a risk of Swedish companies being negatively affected, especially in light of calls to boycott Swedish products and brands. The 20 representatives of Swedish companies interviewed in Egypt, India, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye attest to different levels of effects on their respective businesses.

The most common is that they have not been impacted at all or to a small degree for a short period. Of all the participating company representatives, just over half state that they have been affected to some extent, most often due to the attention surrounding the Quran burnings.

Proactive measures in response to the Quran burnings

Just over half of the companies report that they were worried that they would be affected in some way, above all as a result of the extensive media coverage of the Quran burnings. Being a Swedish company has been regarded as a business risk in the context of the Quran burnings.

Most companies voicing concerns also took some form of proactive action. Several prepared strategies for how they would respond to the issue but rarely needed to implement them. Other companies chose to communicate proactively and clarify their corporate values, such as inclusion and equality. They also chose to express through external communications that they do not support the Quran burnings and that they respect Islam. Some also reported the need to communicate these types of responses internally within the organisation after local employees had raised concerns. Several companies needed information and advice on how to respond and therefore sought support from Swedish agencies abroad and Business Sweden’s local office.

A few companies chose the opposite approach and instead kept a very low profile in view of the Quran burnings. A company in Türkiye, which was one of those targeted for boycott, chose not to make any public statements for a period of time. Others chose to tone down their connection to Sweden. Two companies in Saudi Arabia, one with close links to the Saudi government and the other the subject of calls for a boycott, chose to stop marketing themselves as Swedish. Another precaution, one taken by an industrial company in Saudi Arabia, was to urge employees not to wear anything with Swedish symbols or display Swedish flags.

Few companies affected commercially

Despite initial concerns, very few Swedish companies report that business has suffered due to the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign. Only two companies that work with government contacts in Saudi Arabia have been affected. One company was hit particularly hard, losing sales and being unable to hire staff as planned, which its representative attributes to the Quran burnings. They state that there’s pressure in the country to stand up for Muslim values and be very critical of the Quran burnings.

At the same time, the companies report that the situation could probably have been worse if Saudi Arabia's leaders had not been concerned about international business relations. In connection with the Quran burnings, Saudi leaders chose to downplay their response and opposed the boycott of Swedish companies, which was discussed within the ICO. Companies other than those in Saudi Arabia report that they have not experienced any decline in business. In fact, the representative for one company with other businesses as its customers reported that they'd broken sales records last year.

Outside of Saudi Arabia, a consumer-facing company in Egypt reported that the number of visits to stores had decreased due to the Quran burnings. However, the decline in business also paralleled an increasingly tougher economic situation, so it is uncertain what role the Quran burnings played in this case.

One reason why few Swedish companies have been negatively affected in terms of business may be that they have a high level of trust and that the image of Swedish brands and companies is very positive in all the countries in the study, as both the survey respondents and the companies themselves report. Most of the company representatives interviewed work for businesses that have other companies as customers, which creates a different dynamic for those working with the public sector or dealing directly with the end customer. According to the representatives interviewed, there's a focus on business, so political issues such as the Quran burnings are not given much weight.

A company in Morocco and two in Egypt declined to participate in any interviews. The companies in Egypt do not state specific reasons, but the one in Morocco cited the impact of the Quran burnings and the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Still a delicate situation

The majority of the companies that were initially concerned or affected by the Quran burnings report that they've now shifted focus. The exceptions are those companies in Saudi Arabia that, at the end of 2023 (six months after the summer's highly publicised Quran burnings), are still generally cautious and have not gone back to marketing themselves as Swedish. One of the companies believes that they also see no benefit in the long term in marketing themselves as Swedish.

Several of the companies mentioned that other events, both major geopolitical trends and Sweden-related events, affect their situation. The conflict between Israel and Hamas is often one such factor that has increased tensions between countries in 'the West' and the Middle East, which impacts Western companies operating in the region. Companies in the Middle East also highlight Sweden's path towards NATO membership, which is not always seen as positive but a clearer indication of being part of 'the West'. The uncertainty surrounding Swedish attitudes towards the Middle East and Islam is also cited by individual companies in the context of domestic political developments, such as the rise of what is perceived as right-wing extremism in Sweden.

Reasons for differing views of Sweden

As noted in previous sections, the respondents reacted very differently to the Quran burnings in Sweden and the LVU campaign. In most cases, the media coverage of both did not affect respondents' perception of Sweden, and other views of the country were more dominant. However, a smaller portion of the respondents have reassessed their view of Sweden because of the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign.

Common factors behind different reactions and perceptions of Sweden

There are many reasons why people have reacted differently. It depends on several layers of knowledge acquired about Sweden, the world at large, different values and different individual motivations. To understand the reasons behind the different reactions, the respondents were asked questions about general values and life choices.¹⁰

The strongest factor for different views of Sweden is one's previous Swedish experiences. For example, a respondent who's studied in Sweden, been exposed to Swedish culture or bought products from Swedish companies is more likely to be aware of the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign and not have a diminished view of Sweden in the past year. Experiences connected to Sweden can be said to create a resistance to negative influence. But even one's personal values can play a part. Those who have values that are more similar to Swedish values are also less often likely to be affected by media about the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign. It is not primarily a question of how religious or what the faith of a person is, but rather having values that are more individualistic than traditional.

Five personas

To demonstrate how different combinations of background variables seem to affect a person's perception of Sweden, we have developed five 'personas' that can also be used to develop communication strategies for different target groups.

- The lifestyle-curious conservative
- The like-minded & values-driven
- The somewhat disappointed
- The young & inexperienced
- The highly educated sceptic

¹⁰The background questions are based on a selection of questions from the World Value Survey. By combining each respondent's answers to the questions about Sweden with various background questions, it becomes clear that certain patterns are particularly important for how a person views Sweden.

All personas can be found in all the countries surveyed, but their proportions vary widely. India is not included in this section as the Indian respondents differed in several aspects from the respondents in other countries.¹¹

	The lifestyle-curious conservative	The like-minded & values-driven	The somewhat disappointed	The young & inexperienced	The highly educated sceptic
Share	32%	34%	14%	14%	6%
Most commonly found in	Indonesia, Egypt & Morocco	Iran, Iraq & Türkiye	Morocco, Pakistan & Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia, Morocco & Pakistan	Saudi Arabia & Morocco
Age	26–35 years	36–49 years	36–49 years	18–35 years	26–49 years
Education level	High	Lowest	High	Low	Highest
Values	Very religious & conservative	Less religious, more progressive	Very religious & conservative	Very religious & conservative	Very religious & conservative
Experiences of Sweden	Media, culture	Visited Sweden, family and friends, products and culture	Media, culture, family and friends	Media, culture, products	Media
View of Sweden	Very positive	Positive	Positive/neutral	Negative	Very negative
Shift in their perspective of Sweden	Unchanged or improved	Unchanged or improved	Worsened	Worsened	Severely damaged
What they see as the driving forces of trade	Economic growth, innovation, environmental protection	Human rights, competent & honest government	Equality, high quality of life	Modernity, innovation	Science, education
What they see as the driving forces of tourism	Heritage, safety, high quality of life	Modernity, equality, human rights	Beautiful scenery, high quality of life	Beautiful scenery, high quality of life	Beautiful scenery, high quality of life
Views of other countries	Positive towards other countries in 'the West'	Positive towards other countries in 'the West'	Positive towards other Nordic countries but not the USA	Negative to Sweden	Negative towards other countries in 'the West'
Primary news sources	Al Arabiya	CNN, BBC, Sky News	CNN, BBC, Sky News	Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya	Al Jazeera

Figure 3: This table shows the five typical personas found in eight of the nine surveyed countries. The personas are created based on how each respondent views Sweden, their personal values and various demographic factors.

The lifestyle-curious conservative

The persona that holds the most positive view of Sweden is largely found in Indonesia, Egypt and Morocco. We call it 'The lifestyle-curious conservative'. Apart from being the most favourable towards Sweden, this persona is characterised by strong religious and conservative views. They are more often in the younger age range of 26–35 years and highly educated. Their view of Sweden has not worsened in the past year but is stable or has improved somewhat.

In terms of values, this persona has a very strong religious faith and high trust in religious leaders. They are very proud of their nationality and emphasise classical conservative values as important. For example, they don't condone homosexuality or abortion. They favour strong respect for

¹¹The Indian respondents differ in several aspects compared to the respondents in the other eight countries. This applies both to values and beliefs, but also in the very rarely negative views of Sweden.

authority and cannot see themselves getting involved in politics. Although they are far from how Swedes generally view these issues, they feel that their values are in line with those in Sweden. They are very satisfied with their lives, but trust in other people is generally low.

The lifestyle-curious conservative rates their knowledge of Sweden the highest of all personas, but they don't have nearly as much personal experience with Sweden as other personas do. Their Swedish experiences come mainly through media and culture. Their familiarity can probably be interpreted as a desire to know more about Sweden. They usually get news from sources like Al Arabiya but very rarely from those like Al Jazeera. They remember the media coverage of the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign, but they also emphasise a wide range of Sweden-related news, from ABBA's reunion to Sweden's NATO membership and the green transition in Norrland.

Those who fit The lifestyle-curious conservative persona seem to see Sweden as a leading country in terms of social development. Their interest is not in politics but rather in the opportunities that Sweden offers in terms of economic growth, environmental policy and innovation. They also consider Swedish opportunities for education and quality of life interesting. They're also just as positive about other countries in 'the west', such as Norway, Denmark and the USA.

The like-minded & values-driven

Those that fit the like-minded & values-driven persona are common in Iran but also in Iraq and Türkiye. They are not so highly educated and often middle-aged. What distinguishes this persona is the positive view of Sweden combined with more liberal opinions. Even though they are favourable towards Sweden, they have a significantly more nuanced view than The lifestyle-curious conservative. Their perception of Sweden is typically unchanged. If it has changed, it is for the better.

In terms of values, the like-minded & values-driven persona stands out from the other personas in that they are more secular and are often of a different faith than Islam. They also have more individualistic and self-actualising views. In that way, they are closer to values that are common in Sweden. The like-minded & values-driven also seems to be more critical of their own country than other personas. This is reflected, for example, in how they talk about issues in their own country, such as disinformation. They also see a greater need for free and independent media. The like-minded & values-driven persona also differs compared to the others in that they're more likely to trust other people but are less likely to be satisfied with their lives.

This persona often rates their knowledge of Sweden as high and often has personal experience with Sweden. The like-minded & values-driven is the persona that most often reports having visited Sweden and has friends or family in Sweden. The media is an important source of information about Sweden but to a much lesser extent than the other personas. The like-minded & values-driven often consumes international Western news media such as CNN, BBC and Sky News. Although many seem to have read about the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign, they, like The lifestyle-curious conservatives, have also often read about lots of other issues – from Sweden's path to NATO membership and the handling of COVID-19 to the new migration policy direction and the change of government in 2022.

The like-minded & values-driven person shares The lifestyle-curious conservative's image of Sweden as a modern, safe, stable country with a high quality of life. However, interest in Sweden is more values-driven. This persona more often associates human rights and social welfare with

Sweden than, for example, economic growth. Although they are generally positive about Sweden, there are some negative views. They more often see the country as boring, condescending and in decline. They also have a more negative view of Swedes than the other personas, and they think that Swedes can be intolerant, arrogant and unfriendly.

The like-minded & values-driven persona seems to have more layered perspectives than the other positive-leaning personas, not least through their own experience with Sweden but also via friends and family in Sweden.

The somewhat disappointed

The somewhat disappointed persona is mainly found among middle-aged people in Morocco, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Those who fit into the persona have a positive view of Sweden, but not as positive as The lifestyle-curious conservative persona and more in line with the like-minded & values-driven person. Yet, in contrast to the other two positive-leaning personas, the somewhat disappointed is much more likely to remember media coverage of the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign and have a somewhat diminished view of Sweden as a result. However, they have not yet shifted over to a negative opinion. Rather, the decline means they have a less positive perspective than before.

Compared to the personas with more negative views of Sweden, the somewhat disappointed persona's diminished perspective has rarely motivated them to act – aside from talking to family or co-workers. The things they associate the most with Sweden are not the Quran burnings or the LVU campaign, but – like the other personas with positive opinions – social issues such as quality of life, education and civil rights.

The somewhat disappointed persona rates their own knowledge of Sweden as lower than the other two positive personas, but it is still clear that they have a fair amount of experience with Sweden. The experience comes mainly through friends and family in Sweden but also through exposure to Swedish culture and buying Swedish products. They thus have more Swedish experience than The lifestyle-curious conservative persona but less than the like-minded & values-driven persona.

The media is a very common information channel for this persona – often international Western news media, as well as independent or oppositional media sources in their own country. In terms of values, they lie between the two other positive personas. Although they consider religion to be very important, they attach less significance to the words of religious leaders and hold slightly less conservative views than The lifestyle-curious conservative. For example, they cannot accept homosexuality, but abortion is usually condoned. The somewhat disappointed also recognise Sweden as home to a great variety of education and valuable knowledge.

The young & inexperienced

The young & inexperienced persona has a negative view of Sweden and is most often found in Saudi Arabia and Morocco. These are also the countries with the largest proportion of respondents who are unfavourable towards Sweden. This persona is the youngest, often between 18 and 35 years old, and has a slightly lower level of education. Compared to the somewhat disappointed, the young & inexperienced persona's view of Sweden has clearly declined due to the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign. Their opinion of Sweden is now neutral or negative.

They have partially negative associations with Sweden but are not nearly as strong as those of the highly educated sceptic person (see below). Nor have they, like the highly educated sceptic, behaved any differently after the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign. But what most clearly separates the young & inexperienced persona from the highly educated sceptic is that they are not negative towards other Western countries like Norway, Denmark and the USA but are focused on Sweden. It is, therefore, likely that this persona did not have a negative view of Sweden before the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign.

This persona clearly has less experience with Sweden than the somewhat disappointed and also rates their knowledge of Sweden the lowest of all the personas. The young & inexperienced persona's most important source of information is traditional news media like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. But despite the fact that they clearly remember Quran burnings and the LVU campaign, they're also aware of several other Swedish news such as Zlatan Ibrahimovic, the handling of COVID-19 and Sweden's path towards NATO membership.

The highly educated sceptic

The last persona, which we call the highly educated sceptic, is the most negative towards Sweden. Like the young & inexperienced, those who match this persona are mainly in Saudi Arabia and Morocco. The persona is also among the most highly educated and fits all age groups. They have a clearly diminished view of Sweden and associate it with more negative qualities – such as condescending, unsafe and untrustworthy – than any other persona.

The Quran burnings and the LVU campaign are the strongest and almost only issues or events this persona connects with Sweden. The respondents who fit the highly educated sceptic persona also report that their diminished opinion of Sweden has led them to act differently, such as boycotting Swedish products and brands and becoming more negatively disposed toward Swedes. They have significantly less interest in interacting with Sweden than any other persona.

In terms of values, the highly educated sceptic is close to The lifestyle-curious conservative, although they have a somewhat more extreme view of religion and issues such as military defence, abortion and homosexuality. In contrast to The lifestyle-curious conservative persona, they are less likely to feel that they have similar values to those in Sweden.

The lack of experience with Sweden may play a role in this persona's negative view. They rate their knowledge of the country as very low and rarely have any Swedish experiences. They rely to a very high degree on news media such as Al Jazeera and rarely remember reading or hearing about issues and events related to Sweden besides the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign. The only other issue this persona highlighted was Sweden's path towards NATO membership.

The lack of experience with Sweden can also be interpreted as a lack of interest in Sweden and 'the West' in general. In addition to the most negative view of Sweden of the persona, the highly educated sceptic is just as unfavourable to other Western countries such as Norway, Denmark and the USA. For this persona, their already negative view of Western countries was probably confirmed by the portrayal of Sweden in the context of the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign.

How Sweden's image varies between and within the nine surveyed countries

In all nine countries surveyed, more respondents were positive about Sweden than negative. However, the average share of those with positive views (54 per cent) is lower than the average share in other parts of the world (65 per cent). The size of groups with positive and negative views varies greatly between countries.

In some surveyed countries, the view of Sweden is almost exclusively positive, which is similar to what can be found in other regions. Areas of strength that respondents identified with Sweden include education, social welfare and human rights. In other surveyed countries, there is a relatively large proportion with strongly negative views of Sweden. This is due to the fact that the five personas identified are of different sizes in each country. Full information on Sweden's image in an individual country can be found in the appendix for that individual country.

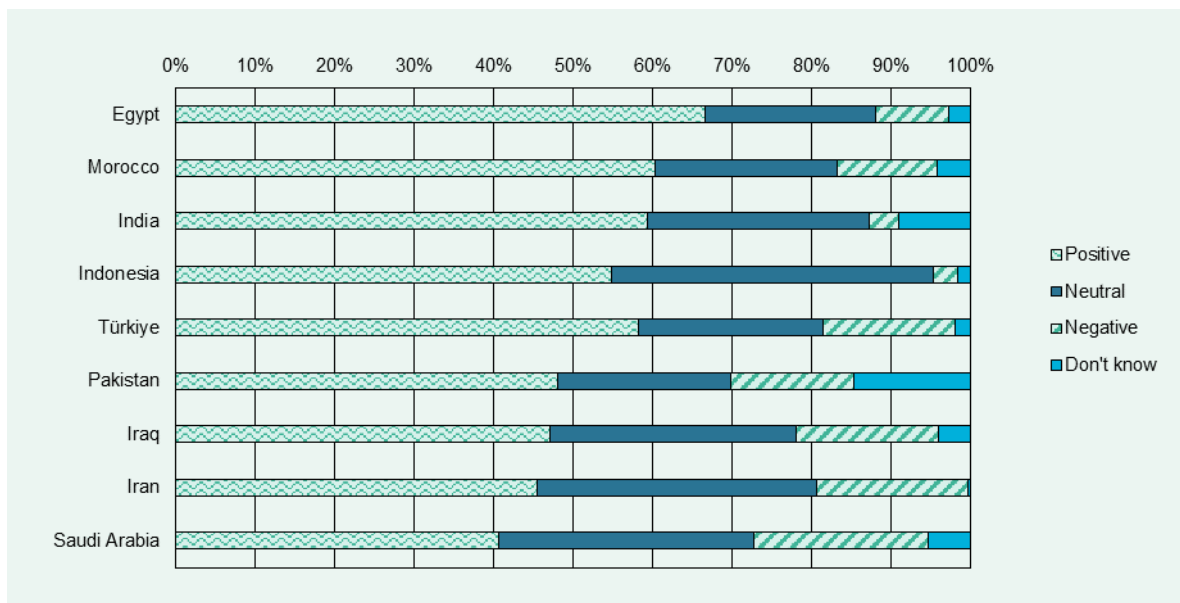


Figure 4: The chart shows the respondents' view of Sweden per country. The views are broken down into positive, neutral, negative, and those who replied that they 'don't know'.

Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan – relatively large proportions of negative views

In Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan, between 15–22 per cent have a negative attitude towards Sweden, and between 41–48 per cent have one that's positive. Despite the fact that the proportion of those who are favourable is greater than the proportion that is unfavourable, the view of Sweden in these countries is unusually negative. This is not only in relation to the other countries in this study but also in relation to other parts of the world, where the average share of unfavorability is 5 per cent. Such a share for negative views of Sweden, like in these four countries, has only been measured once before, in Russia in 2022 – when the share of respondents with a negative view was 18 per cent, and the share with a positive view was 34 per cent.

Additionally, respondents in these four countries more commonly indicated the strongest degree of negativity: ‘very unfavourable’ rather than just the ‘unfavourable’ response option. In Saudi Arabia, just over half of those that indicated a negative view of Sweden are ‘strongly negative’, while in the other three countries, it’s less than half.

Negativity is consistently reflected in the perceptions of Sweden. Survey respondents in these countries consistently had a more negative attitude towards Sweden, regardless of whether it was about Sweden’s strengths or what’s associated with Sweden. Nevertheless, they tend to agree with respondents in the other countries on what is characteristic of Sweden. In all countries, for example, respondents report Sweden is characterised by a high quality of life, care for the climate and being a safe country.

The personas with a negative image of Sweden described in section 3 can be found to a greater extent in these countries. There are groups that describe Sweden as untrustworthy, dangerous, and condescending to others. There is also a relatively large number who associate Sweden with the media portrayals in connection with the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign, like that Sweden is racist and Islamophobic. The word ‘progressive’ is repeatedly used to describe Sweden, but it is assumed that the word is regarded as negative because few of the respondents share values with Sweden.

The exception to the otherwise rather negative view of Sweden is the attitude towards Swedes, who are described in very positive terms. There is also some interest in travelling to Sweden.

India, Egypt, Indonesia and Morocco – countries with more positive attitudes

India, Egypt, Indonesia and Morocco have a more positive view of Sweden. Here, the proportions of those who are more favourable vary from 55–67 per cent. The share of those who are unfavourable is also very low, between 3–13 per cent. Morocco stands out somewhat from the other countries in this group, with a higher proportion of those with a negative view. However, even though the proportion is significantly higher, the vast majority of respondents in Morocco indicated a lower degree of negativity in their answers.

The view of Sweden’s strengths is very uniform and shared by more than those who are favourable to the country. For example, 70–80 per cent believe that Sweden is a country characterised by a high quality of life, a safe place to live and a country that takes responsibility for protecting the climate. Nearly as many agree that Sweden is considered to act responsibly in relation to international peace and security and that people in Sweden care about social equality.

The first, and thus strongest, attribute that respondents personally associated with Sweden is usually ‘beautiful’, often in reference to nature. Others mentioned civil rights, high quality of life, and social welfare, as well as culture. Descriptions generated from the provided options also detail a Swedish society that is modern, stable and safe. Sweden is also generally considered appealing, above all to visit as a tourist but also to live and study there, as well as a country to buy products from.

Türkiye divided, both negatively and positively

Türkiye is distinct from the other countries in this study. Here, there is both a relatively large proportion of people with a negative attitude towards Sweden and a large proportion with a positive one. In Türkiye, the views of Sweden are not only more polarised, but it's also more common to have an opinion about Sweden. This is a consistent pattern for Türkiye. The net change for the image of Sweden in the country is close to zero, with just as many people having an improved view as those with one that's worsened.

Overall conclusions and possible ways forward in promoting Sweden

A more negative image compared to other countries – but also predominantly positive

This study shows varying perceptions of Sweden in the nine surveyed countries, broken down at the individual level. In Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, the perception of Sweden is unusually negative compared to what SI has seen in previous studies. The Quran burnings and the LVU campaign are part of the reason for the more negative image since coverage of them was widely spread to the public in these countries. Another explanation is a generally sceptical attitude towards countries in ‘the West’. It’s likely already unfavourable views were reinforced by the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign.

In the remaining three countries – Egypt, India and Indonesia – the views of Sweden are significantly more positive, and the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign have had a more limited effect on Sweden’s image.

Despite an unusually negative image of Sweden in some countries, more people are favourable than unfavourable towards Sweden. The country appeals to them on the basis of economic growth, education and innovative strength but also because of its democratic and softer values. The desire to engage with Sweden remains strong. There’s interest in visiting Sweden as a tourist, but also studying or living there and buying products made by Swedish companies and brands.

Swedish companies report that there was an initial concern about reduced sales in connection with the Quran burnings, but in the end, almost none of the companies with representatives interviewed for the survey experienced negative financial effects as a consequence. Instead, they confirm that the Swedish brand is still strong abroad.

The clearest explanations for why respondents’ views of Sweden have not been more affected by the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign are their own experiences with Sweden and Swedish values. That in itself appears to build resilience. People who experience Sweden – for example, by going there to study interacting with Swedish culture or buying Swedish products – have been significantly less affected by the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign. Being closer to Sweden in terms of values also increases resilience.

Continued risk of damage to Sweden’s image

Although the negative impact has so far been limited, the risk of more damage to Sweden’s image is not over. Some Swedish diplomatic missions are still unable to operate abroad as usual due to security issues that arose during the Quran burnings.

Perhaps the main effect of the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign is that the events established negative depictions of Sweden among a broad target group. The portrayal of Sweden is recognisable from how other countries in ‘the West’ have been portrayed during similar situations. Sweden is described as a country where people of Muslim faith are not respected or systematically

discriminated against. If these depictions are established and reinforced among different target groups, the risk increases that more people will change their opinion of Sweden in the long term.

There is a risk that the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign will be combined with other negative depictions and situations in other parts of the world. The conflict between Israel and Hamas escalated on October 7, 2023, after this study began. The conflict has so far taken the focus off Sweden and Quran burnings. Should Sweden or its actions, both in the future or the past, be linked to the ongoing conflict, there is a risk that the now-established negative depictions can contribute to damaging the image of Sweden even more in many countries. Sweden, like many other countries, is also perceived as a symbol representing the interests of 'the West'.

Possible ways forward in the promotion of Sweden

Both the Quran burnings and the LVU campaign show the need for strengthened cooperation between different agencies in Sweden, whether acting nationally or internationally. Quick and effective coordination is necessary in order to respond to backlash and information influencing, which can contribute to negative portrayals.

There is a wide range of tools available for various parts of Swedish society to counter information influence campaigns and other threats. These include economic, legal, political and military resources, all of which can affect a malicious actor's ability and willingness to harm Sweden.

The focus should be on being Sweden's voice to those people exposed to negative depictions and thus become outraged or worried. The mission of those who promote Sweden is not to focus on specific antagonists. Providing fact-based information and answering questions is a critical role, but they also have an important long-term responsibility to communicate what Sweden is and stands for, as well as create Swedish experiences and help build resilient views of Sweden and trusting relationships among foreign target groups.

Swedish companies and organisations are critical embodiments of Swedish innovation and values, and many companies have been operating abroad for a long time. A goal of information influence is to create unease. It would be problematic for the image of Sweden if this unease leads companies to tone down their Swedishness. We would then risk losing key positive associations with Sweden and thus competitiveness.

Maintaining communication about Sweden, in all its forms, is important. The different personas presented in this report should be seen as tools to be used as the basis for various forms of communication and relationship-building activities, adapted to the different starting points of the target groups and combined with Swedish interests.

Finally, in a troubled world where economic interests and defence policy interact, high demands are placed on media response and management. Sticking to proactive, fact-based communication about Sweden works as an effective counterforce to negative depictions, especially when combined with strategic relationship building. Communicating what Sweden stands for is also a way to safeguard democratic values.