



RESEARCH BRIEFING · JUNE 2026

Anti-Muslim Discrimination in Europe

A Documented Record, Legal Pathways, and Policy Solutions

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EQUALITY · DIGNITY · JUSTICE

Executive Summary

Across the European Union, the evidence base for rising anti-Muslim discrimination is no longer anecdotal. The EU's own Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) found in October 2024 that nearly half of Muslims surveyed across 13 member states had experienced racial discrimination in the preceding five years — a sharp rise from 2016 [1][2]. This has coincided with a wave of new state measures restricting visible and audible Islamic religious practice: face-covering bans now enforced with real fines, a renewed government push in Denmark to ban the public call to prayer, and a Dutch parliamentary motion to outlaw the Muslim Brotherhood — alongside a continuing pattern of Quran-burning incidents that, in most jurisdictions, attract no criminal consequence at all. Running alongside the political and legal trend is a digital one: the concentration of enormous platform power in the hands of individuals who actively amplify anti-Muslim narratives, examined in Part III of this briefing.

This briefing does four things. First, it sets out the verified record of incidents and policy measures from 2024 to mid-2026, sourced to primary legal texts, government statements, and mainstream reporting. Second, it examines the documented role of Elon Musk and the platform X in amplifying anti-Muslim narratives across Europe. Third, it gives an honest assessment of the legal pathways available for redress — including where those pathways have already failed, most notably direct challenges to face-covering bans at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Fourth, it outlines what a comprehensive policy response would require.

The conclusion is straightforward: there is a documented problem, there is a realistic — if difficult — legal and political pathway toward redress, and governments and institutions can move that pathway forward.

Part I — The Scale of the Problem

The most authoritative recent data comes from the FRA's October 2024 report, *Being Muslim in the EU*, based on interviews with 9,604 self-identified Muslims across Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden [1]. Its key findings:

- 47% of respondents reported racial discrimination in the five years before the survey, up from 39% in 2016. Rates were highest in Austria (71%), Germany (68%), and Finland (63%) [1][2].
- Discrimination is most acute in employment: 39% reported discrimination when looking for work and 35% while employed, both up sharply since 2016 [1].
- 35% reported discrimination in housing, up from 22% in 2016 [1].
- 27% reported racist harassment at least once in the prior five years, most more than once; 4% reported a racist physical attack [1].
- 49% of those stopped by police in the prior year believed the stop was due to their ethnic or immigrant background, up from 42% in 2016 [1].
- Muslim respondents were three times more likely to leave school early than the general EU population (30% vs. 9.6%), and twice as likely to live in overcrowded housing [1].
- Reporting remains rare: only 6% of those who felt discriminated against filed any complaint, and 68% of victims of racist violence never reported it — most commonly because they believed reporting would change nothing [1].

FRA Director Sirpa Rautio summarised the findings as evidence of “a worrying surge in racism and discrimination against Muslims in Europe” [3]. The survey data was collected in 2021–2022 — before the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Gaza war — and subsequent monitoring by civil-society and academic researchers indicates the situation has deteriorated further since [2][3].

Part II — A Documented Record of Measures and Incidents (2024–2026)

A. Restricting Visible Religious Practice: Face-Covering Bans

Switzerland's nationwide ban on facial coverings in public entered into force on 1 January 2025, following a 2021 referendum that passed by a margin of 51.2% [4]. The law permits fines of up to CHF 1,000 (about €1,050). The first fine was issued in Zurich in March 2025, against a woman who police said was covering her face for religious reasons; she refused to pay the CHF 100 penalty and the case was referred to the cantonal governor's office [5]. Switzerland's law joined existing national or regional bans in France, Belgium, Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, parts of Italy, and parts of Spain [4][5].

B. Restricting Audible Religious Practice: Proposals to Ban the Adhan

In June 2026, Denmark's Immigration Minister, Morten Bødskov, announced a renewed government investigation into a nationwide ban on the Adhan, the Islamic call to prayer — the third such attempt by a Danish government since 2020 [6][7]. The minister said the call to prayer should not be heard “over Danish rooftops” and explicitly framed the proposal around resisting what he called “Islamisation” [6]. Legal analysts note the measure faces genuine constitutional obstacles, since Danish law guarantees the right to public worship; some municipalities, including Copenhagen, already restrict outdoor broadcast of the Adhan under general noise ordinances [6][7].

C. Targeting Muslim Organisations

On 17 March 2026, the Dutch House of Representatives adopted, by a margin of 76 votes, a motion proposed by Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) calling on the government to ban the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated organisations [8][9]. The motion is not itself a ban: implementing it would require the Justice Ministry and the Public Prosecution Service to seek a civil-court declaration under Article 2:20 of the Dutch Civil Code. Notably, the Dutch intelligence service (AIVD) has stated that the Brotherhood does not exist in the Netherlands as a structured organisation capable of being banned under current law [8]. The episode illustrates how a parliamentary majority can advance a measure targeting a Muslim-linked organisation even where the state's own security services identify no concrete domestic threat — a proportionality concern that would be directly relevant to any future legal challenge.

D. Quran Desecration With Limited Legal Consequence

Documented incidents of public Quran burning in Europe over the past two years include a demonstration in Stockholm on 17 February 2024 [10]; the fatal shooting in January 2025 of Salwan Momika, the central figure in Sweden's 2023 wave of Quran burnings [12]; an incident in London on 13 February 2025 in which a man burning a Quran outside the Turkish consulate was attacked with a knife [13]; and the subsequent prosecution of both the attacker and, separately, the man who had burned the Quran, who was found guilty of a religiously aggravated public order offence [14]. Separately, the Danish activist Rasmus Paludan was sentenced to four months in prison in Sweden in November 2024 — not for burning the Quran, which remains lawful there, but for hate speech he made while doing so [11].

This pattern reflects a broader legal reality across most of Western and Northern Europe: the act of burning a religious text is generally protected as free expression, and only accompanying speech that incites hatred against a religious or ethnic group is prosecutable. Such prosecutions remain rare, inconsistent across jurisdictions, and dependent on exactly what was said during the act — meaning the act of desecration itself routinely goes unpunished.

Part III — Elon Musk: Platform Power and the Amplification of Anti-Muslim Rhetoric

This briefing treats Elon Musk as a distinct subject because the harm documented here does not arise from holding political office or passing legislation. It arises from owning and personally controlling the infrastructure through which hundreds of millions of Europeans encounter information, combined with his own direct and repeated participation in spreading anti-Muslim narratives. That combination of ownership and participation is without precedent among the actors discussed elsewhere in this briefing.

A. Reach

Musk's personal account on X (formerly Twitter) has been documented at roughly 140 million followers [16]; he acquired the platform outright in 2022 and, as its majority shareholder, exercises what the European Commission itself has described as "decisive influence and effective control" over it [25]. X is classified as a Very Large Online Platform under EU law, placing it under the Digital Services Act [23][25].

B. A Documented Pattern, Not Isolated Remarks

- **August 2024:** Musk shared a meme widely described as Islamophobic, leading to a public feud with then Scottish First Minister Humza Yousaf, who called him "one of the most dangerous men on the planet" [15].
- **August 2024, during the Southport riots** — sparked in part by false online claims that the attacker who murdered three girls was a Muslim asylum seeker (he was not) — Musk commented that "civil war is inevitable," and when UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer called for the protection of Muslims facing mob attacks on mosques and refugee shelters, Musk publicly replied, "Shouldn't you be concerned about attacks on *all* communities?" [16].
- **In the two weeks following the Southport attack**, Tommy Robinson's X account — banned, then reinstated after Musk's 2022 acquisition of the platform — received over 580 million views, according to Amnesty International's analysis [16].
- **January 2025:** Musk published 51 posts reframing UK "grooming gang" cases as a story about Islam and Pakistani-heritage communities collectively. An independent study found the wider discourse he ignited generated 1.53 billion views, that 53.81% of sampled posts during the peak period promoted hatred against Muslims, British Pakistani men, and South Asians as a group, and that Musk's 51 posts alone drove 1.2 billion in engagement — a roughly 93-fold increase over the same discourse across the whole of 2024 [18].
- Musk has repeatedly reshared content casting ordinary religious practice as threatening, including a 2025 video of a Shia Muslim Muharram procession in Manchester captioned "Manchester is scary," which he framed as evidence of a "root of the immigration crisis" [20].
- A year after the Southport riots, the Centre for Countering Digital Hate found X was still failing to remove violent anti-Muslim and anti-migrant rhetoric that explicitly violated the platform's own published rules, with several explicitly anti-Islam "hateful influencers" still drawing millions of views daily [19].

C. Structural Enablement

Since acquiring the platform in 2022, Musk has dismantled most of its Trust and Safety function, disbanded its safety advisory council, laid off content-moderation and safety-engineering staff, and reinstated numerous previously banned accounts associated with hate speech, including Tommy Robinson's [16][18]. Amnesty International's review of X's own published recommender-system code found that its ranking algorithm prioritises posts that generate engagement, regardless of accuracy or harm — meaning false and inflammatory claims about a perpetrator's religion or immigration status can systematically outpace corrections in reaching users [16].

D. Political Alignment

Musk has financially and rhetorically backed European political figures and movements whose platforms include explicit anti-Islam positions. He appeared by video link and spoke at Tommy Robinson's "Unite the Kingdom" rally in London in September 2025, remarks British politicians condemned as "dangerous" [17]; he separately agreed in 2025 to fund Robinson's legal costs in two specific court cases [22]; he spoke at a campaign event for Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in January 2025 [15]; and he has voiced public support for the UK's Reform UK party [17].

E. Regulatory Response — and Its Limits

In December 2025, the European Commission fined X €120 million for breaching the Digital Services Act's transparency obligations, specifically over the deceptive design of its paid "blue checkmark" verification system [23][25]. The decision named Musk personally, alongside the corporate entities, as jointly liable, on the basis that he exercises decisive influence and effective control over the platform [25]. X is challenging the fine before the EU General Court, in proceedings that were ongoing as of February 2026 [24].

It is important to be precise about what this fine addressed: deceptive verification design and advertising transparency — not, directly, the platform's well-documented pattern of failing to remove anti-Muslim hate speech described in section B above, which remains, per the research cited there, largely unaddressed by any regulator to date.

F. Why This Matters

Musk and his supporters describe all of the above as legitimate free speech and immigration-policy debate, and frame regulatory scrutiny of X as politically motivated censorship — a position the Commission has explicitly rejected, stating its fine concerned transparency and deceptive design rather than content [23]. Whatever view one takes of that framing, three features distinguish this case from ordinary political speech. First, Musk does not merely speak: he simultaneously owns the infrastructure, sets its moderation policy, and configures the algorithm determining what hundreds of millions of people see. Second, the documented engagement data shows his individual interventions can multiply the reach of anti-Muslim narratives by close to two orders of magnitude over baseline. Third, this reach has been used, repeatedly and across multiple distinct episodes, to associate entire religious and ethnic communities with violence or threat in the immediate aftermath of real but unrelated tragedies. This is the platform-power dimension of the discrimination problem documented in Parts I and II — it operates outside courts, ministries, and parliaments, and any policy response that ignores it addresses only part of the problem.

Part IV — Why This Matters, Taken Together

The discrimination FRA documents at the individual level — in jobs, housing, and policing — is occurring in the same period as a visible shift in what is politically acceptable to propose against a religious minority, amplified by the platform dynamics described in Part III, and that shift is no longer confined to fringe actors. A sitting immigration minister proposing to ban a religious call to prayer, and a parliamentary majority voting to outlaw a religious organisation despite its own intelligence service finding no structured threat, both send a signal that suspicion of Muslims is not merely tolerated in European public life but actively legitimised by the state and amplified at scale online. The FRA's finding that almost half of European Muslims report discrimination — and that the overwhelming majority never report it because they expect nothing will change — suggests that signal is already being received, and that existing institutional channels are not currently functioning as a meaningful check.

Part V — Legal Pathways for Redress: An Honest Assessment

A credible strategy requires an accurate map of where the law currently helps, and where it does not. This section examines the legal frameworks and institutions that could address anti-Muslim discrimination in Europe.

A. The Existing EU Framework

EU Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA already requires member states to criminalise public incitement to violence or hatred directed at a group defined by, among other things, religion. This is the legal basis on which Rasmus Paludan was convicted in Sweden — not for burning the Quran, but for the hateful speech that accompanied it [11]. Enforcement is inconsistent across member states and depends heavily on national prosecutorial discretion.

B. Extending the EU's List of 'Eurocrimes' (Article 83 TFEU)

In December 2021, the European Commission proposed adding hate speech and hate crime — covering religion alongside race, gender, and other grounds — to the closed list of 'Eurocrimes' under Article 83(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU [26][27]. This is a necessary first step before any EU-wide directive defining minimum criminal penalties could be drafted. The proposal requires a unanimous Council decision plus European Parliament consent. A broad majority of the Council supported the idea in March 2022, but it has been stalled by the unanimity requirement ever since [27]. In January 2024, the European Parliament adopted a resolution (397 votes to 121) urging the Council to act and calling for use of the 'passerelle clause' to bypass the unanimity deadlock [27][28]. As of this writing, the file remains stalled at the Council stage [27].

C. The European Court of Human Rights: A Mixed Record

Direct legal challenges to face-covering bans have not succeeded at Strasbourg. In *S.A.S. v. France* (2014), the Grand Chamber ruled 15-2 that France's face-covering ban did not violate the European Convention on Human Rights, accepting the French government's argument that the ban served the legitimate aim of 'living together' in a democratic society [29][30]. Belgium's equivalent ban was upheld on similar grounds shortly afterward. Any litigation strategy that assumes the ECtHR will strike down face-covering laws is working against a clear and unanimous-leaning precedent.

The Court has, however, been considerably more willing to find violations where a state's justification for restricting religious expression is weak, inconsistently applied, or where authorities have failed to act — for example, in cases involving the wearing of religious symbols in the workplace, or failures by national authorities to adequately investigate or prosecute hate-motivated violence. This suggests that case selection is decisive: claims built around discriminatory policing, failure to investigate religiously motivated hate crimes, employment or housing discrimination, or disproportionate denial of permits for mosques or religious organisations, are likely to have materially better prospects than a renewed direct challenge to existing face-covering or symbol bans.

D. UN Treaty Bodies

Where domestic remedies are exhausted, individual complaints can also be brought to UN treaty bodies such as the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) or the Human Rights Committee, for states that have accepted their individual-complaint procedures. Findings from these bodies are not directly enforceable in the way a domestic court order is, but they carry diplomatic and reputational weight, and can run in parallel with — or as an alternative to — an ECtHR application.

E. Political and Civic Channels

A European Citizens' Initiative — one million signatures gathered across at least seven member states — can formally compel the European Commission to respond to a proposal, including renewed pressure on the Article 83 TFEU process described above. Direct engagement with the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), which already has an own-initiative file open on this subject, is a second, complementary channel [27].

Conclusion

Being Muslim in Europe today means, on the documented evidence set out in this briefing, living a measurably harder life than being non-Muslim in the same countries — harder in finding work, in finding housing, in dealings with the police, and now increasingly in the simple, daily practice of one's own faith. In a growing number of European states, the freedom to dress, to pray aloud, or to organise a religious community is no longer a settled right; it is something actively narrowed by ministers, parliaments, and the platforms that shape public opinion, often faster than courts or institutions can respond.

This does not have to be irreversible. The legal frameworks exist. The European Court of Human Rights can adjudicate cases of discriminatory policing, state failure to investigate hate crimes, and employment/housing discrimination. The EU's political institutions have pathways — stalled but real — to harmonise hate-crime law across member states. UN treaty bodies can receive complaints when domestic avenues are exhausted. The question is not whether the law can respond, but whether the political will, institutional capacity, and community support exist to make it do so.

Addressing anti-Muslim discrimination at scale will require coordinated action across multiple institutions: governments strengthening enforcement of existing hate-crime law and pursuing the stalled Article 83 TFEU process; the European Court of Human Rights exercising consistent scrutiny over discriminatory policing and state non-response; civil-society organizations and human-rights funders prioritising access to justice for affected individuals; and platforms enforcing their own published standards against anti-Muslim hate speech. This briefing provides the evidence base for that coordinated response.

Respectfully submitted,

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