



European
Eye on
Radicalization

How a Swedish Agency Stopped Funding the Muslim Brotherhood



sveriges unga muslimer

By Dr. Evin Ismail

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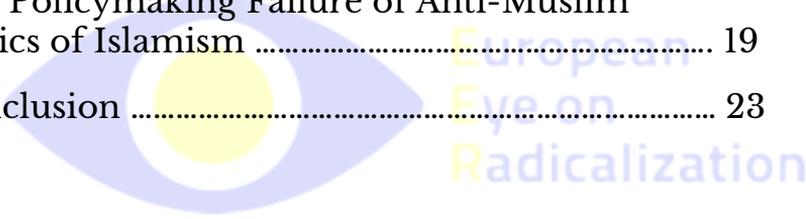
How a Swedish Agency Stopped Funding the Muslim Brotherhood

About the author:

Dr. Evin Ismail holds a PhD in Sociology from Uppsala University, Sweden. Her doctoral thesis investigates the trajectory of Islamist violence, from the Muslim Brotherhood to the Islamic State. Dr. Ismail has researched terrorism for a decade and has written several government agency reports on political Islam.

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Introduction

In December 2016, the Swedish Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated youth organization, Sweden's Young Muslims (*Sveriges Unga Muslimer*, SUM), were denied state funding from the Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*Myndigheten för Ungdoms-och CIVILSAMHÄLLESFRÅGOR*, MUCF), a Swedish government agency that used to fund parts of their activities. It is the first case in Sweden where a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organization is denied funding because it is connected to the Muslim Brotherhood and is undemocratic. This report will detail the process leading to the decision to withhold funding to this Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organization, a process that eventually ended up, and was settled, in the Swedish court system.

Background

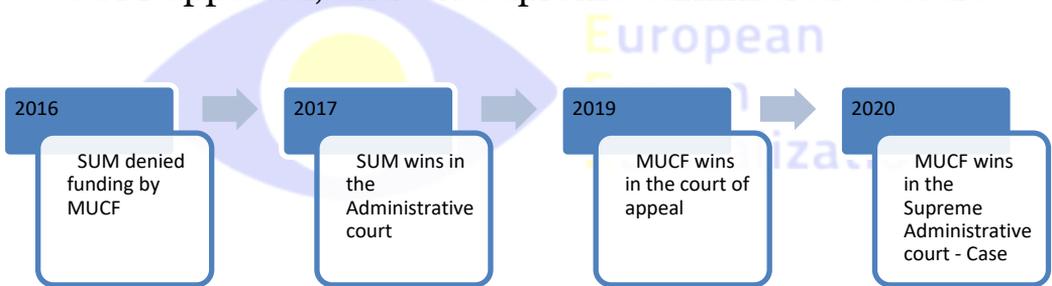
Sweden's Young Muslims (SUM) was a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated youth organization established in 1991 and dissolved in 2020. It was a national Swedish youth organization with forty umbrella organizations across the country. It claimed to have approximately 5,000 members, and it used to organize seminars, camps, and conferences on issues such as Islamophobia and Muslim identity and it often represented Muslims in the media. SUM stated that it is a democratic organization whose aim is to promote democratic education among Muslim children and young people. However, as this report will show, it also had non-democratic elements and did not do enough to tackle these issues. SUM was eventually dissolved due to losing the last court case against them.

The Legal Process

The SUM application in 2016 was denied funding from MUCF with the following formulation:

“It cannot be considered demonstrated that SUM operates in a manner that respects the ideas of democracy, including the principles of equality and non-discrimination.”

After SUM appealed the decision to deny them state funding, the case was taken to court. The first case in the administrative court (*Förvaltningsrätten*) gave a verdict in SUM’s favor in November 2017. After that, MUCF appealed, and the case was opened in the court of appeal (*Kammarrätten*), which gave a verdict in MUCF’s favor. SUM appealed, and the supreme administrative court



(*Högsta Förvaltningsdomstolen*) gave a verdict in MUCF’s favor and reiterated that SUM needed to pay back the previous funding they received due to not following the requirements of democracy, equality, and non-discrimination.

The Investigation

After losing in the administrative court in 2017, MUCF ordered an investigative report on SUM, which was used as evidence against the organization in the coming court case. The findings of the report show the following problems in the SUM organization:

- 1) Antisemitism;
- 2) Members involved in extremism and joining the war in Syria;
- 3) Spreading Islamic State (ISIS) propaganda and working against counter terrorism;
- 4) Recurringly inviting non-democratic speakers and
- 5) Muslim Brotherhood connections

Antisemitism in Sweden's Young Muslims

SUM and other Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations in Sweden have continuously found themselves in controversies related to antisemitism. For instance, SUM invited a speaker who had previously claimed that “Jewish money controls American politicians”.¹

Furthermore, the findings of the MUCF report show that in 2010, the local SUM organization Jönköping Young Muslims started a magazine, *As-Sirat*, in which they published an interview with a well-known Holocaust denier and also hired a well-known antisemite as a columnist.

One of the problems with the interview with the Holocaust denier is that his Holocaust-denying views were published in the magazine and left unchallenged

¹ “Organisationen Sveriges Unga Muslimer: ideologi och koppling till antidemokratiska miljöer”, 2011. Available [here](#).

by the interviewer. The paper was eventually shut down after receiving criticism.

Moreover, a critical consequence of these cases of antisemitism concerning people invited by Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations is that it initially seems to suggest a problem with antisemitism within Islam itself. This problem has been augmented by the Muslim Brotherhood denying having any links to the antisemitic Muslim Brotherhood ideology and, therefore, disingenuously only calling itself “Muslim” and following Islam. Thus, on a societal level, the problem of Islamist antisemitism is seen as a problem of Islam as a religion being antisemitic. This means that Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations increase anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments in Europe.

Antisemitism was, to a large extent, introduced to the Muslim world through the creation of the antisemitic Muslim Brotherhood ideology, especially Sayyid Qutb’s writings. As noted by the historian Bernard Lewis noted, “European antisemitism, in both its theological and racist versions, was essentially alien to Islamic traditions, culture, and modes of thought”.² However, the Muslim Brotherhood was financially supported by the Nazis,³ and developed Islamist antisemitism, which they claimed to be authentic to Islam. Additionally, the Nazis invested more money in the Muslim Brotherhood than in any other anti-British organization in Egypt.⁴ Hence, there is an ideological explanation for why Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations find themselves in controversies regarding antisemitism.

² Lewis, Bernard. 1998. “Muslim Anti-Semitism.” *Middle East Quarterly*.

³ Matthias Küntzel, “How to Challenge Islamic Antisemitism?”, in *Confronting Antisemitism in Modern Media, the Legal and Political Worlds*, 2021, pp. 257-258.

⁴ Ibid.

Sweden's Young Muslims Individuals involved in extremism and joining the war in Syria

The second reason for denying SUM state funding is that the MUCF report shows that some members have been involved in extremist violence. For example, the chairman of one of the SUM's umbrella organizations was arrested for allegedly preparing to kill cartoonist Lars Vilks. However, the court deemed the evidence too weak, and he was only convicted for carrying a knife.⁵

The police investigation, however, showed that the chairman was most likely radicalized. For instance, the police found extensive extremist propaganda on his computer, such as propaganda from al-Qaeda's al-Shabab in Somalia and tributes to suicide bombers. Moreover, he was convicted of threatening a woman in Sweden by saying he was a jihadist warrior who would kill her.

Another SUM umbrella organization, Eskilstuna, had a member who shared al-Qaeda propaganda and supported ISIS. Moreover, two other members who were part of the Eskilstuna board joined an al-Qaeda-affiliated group in Syria, and one of them is confirmed to have died there.⁶

Members of the Sweden's Young Muslims Involved in ISIS Propaganda and Work Against Counterterrorism

One SUM umbrella organization (Islamiska ungdomsföreningen i Gävle) in the city of Gävle had a chairman who sympathized with ISIS online. For example, a few weeks after ISIS declared its caliphate, he shared a picture of a passport with the ISIS symbol

⁵ "Organisationen Sveriges Unga Muslimer: ideologi och koppling till antidemokratiska miljöer".

⁶ Ibid.

on it and a plane ticket signed by the Islamic State on his social media.

Another problem is that when the national SUM chairman was asked to condemn ISIS recruitment on public TV and to do something about the issue of extremism, the response was accusations of Islamophobia instead of taking responsibility. This inability to act was also reflected in how SUM responded to the findings of the MUCF report. The issues raised by MUCF were not taken seriously by SUM but instead excused and trivialized, and this weak response is something that the MUCF mentioned in their assessment as a determining factor in also asking SUM to hand back received funding. The MUCF demanded to reclaim funding that they gave SUM from the year 2016, that is, SEK 1,366,741 (about US\$128,000). The last and final court verdict confirmed that the money should be returned to the MUCF from SUM.

Furthermore, the MUCF report shows that SUM has, on several occasions, cooperated with a Swedish organization that oppose establishing laws against terrorism. This organization is called Muslim Human Rights Committee (MMRK). In 2010, SUM and MMRK held a seminar called "Terrorism in Terror Law." The seminar focused on two individuals who were invited to talk about how they have been affected by terrorist legislation. The first one was an open supporter of al-Qaeda and had served a prison sentence for financing terrorism in Iraq.

The second one had been arrested twice abroad, once in Kenya with Islamist rebels, and the second time in Pakistan on his way to the al-Qaeda stronghold of Waziristan. More than six months after the MMRK seminar, one of the speakers was arrested a third time, this time in the process of carrying out a massacre of journalists at the Danish newspapers *Jyllandsposten*, a

crime for which he is now in jail. Moreover, the chairman of SUM was himself active in the MMRK at the time and defended these invitations.⁷

Sweden's Young Muslims Recurringly Inviting Non-democratic Speakers

The investigation shows that SUM has recurringly invited non-democratic speakers. For instance, SUM invited a person who has praised Anwar al Awlaki and given antisemitic statements. Moreover, a man who has supported suicide bombings, was invited to speak for SUM.

Muslim Brotherhood Connections of Sweden's Young Muslims

The MUCF report shows that, according to SUM, they co-established the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FEMYSO). Furthermore, the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) was one of SUM's sister organizations. According to MUCF, this shows that SUM has a connection to the Muslim Brotherhood since it has been established that FEMYSO and FOSIS are connected to the Muslim Brotherhood. The evidence given is based on Lorenzo Vidino's book, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West*. In it, Vidino writes:

“As usual, the terminological difficulties in defining the nature of the Brotherhood make the identification of organizations related to it controversial. But, as in most cases, the confirmation of affiliation with the Brotherhood, intended as an ideological movement and not as organization, comes from members of the Brotherhood itself Mohammed Akef has made it clear that FIDE [or FIOE, the Federation of Islamic

⁷ Ibid.

Organizations in Europe], FEMYSO, and their member organizations fall under the large umbrella of the global Muslim Brotherhood and, more specifically, the trend led by [Qatar-based Brotherhood cleric Yusuf al-]Qaradawi. “These organizations and institutions are independent and autonomous. We do not control them,” said Akef in an interview with the Swiss journalist Sylvain Besson. “It is the Brothers abroad that control them. The structures linked to Qaradawi are organizations of the Brotherhood directed by the Brothers of different countries.” An organization’s membership in the FIOE and in FEMYSO provides a formal indicator of its affiliation with the European wing of the New Western Brothers.”⁸

Regarding the SUM sister organization FOSIS, Vidino writes:

“Arab activists linked to various branches of the Muslim Brotherhood established a presence in the early 1960s, giving birth to two prominent student organizations (the Muslim Students Society and the Federation of Student Islamic Societies, FOSIS), and have been quite active in various British-based Islamist organizations ever since.”⁹

Hence, the report shows, with the support of Vidino, that SUM had a Muslim Brotherhood affiliation through its close cooperation with FEMYSO and FOSIS. Moreover, MUCF asserts that the Muslim Brotherhood is not to be regarded as a movement that is in line with democratic ideas, including equality and non-

⁸ Lorenzo Vidino, 2010, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West*, pp. 119-21.

⁹ Vidino, 2010, p. 252.

discrimination. Therefore, MUCF concluded that SUM also, due to this connection, does not adhere to the democracy requirement of receiving state funding. However, SUM responded to this criticism by claiming that FEMYSO and FOSIS are not connected to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The final court verdict concluded that the link to the Muslim Brotherhood is too weak and, therefore, should not be considered in the final verdict. This shows how Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations are, to some extent, successful in hiding their affiliations and that it can be difficult to legally prove these affiliations due to the Muslim Brotherhood culture of secrecy.

However, plenty of examples indicate SUM's affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood ideology. For example, SUM's former chairman was involved in a controversy where he was questioned about "liking" Yusuf al-Qaradawi on Twitter. He told a Swedish magazine that Al-Qaradawi "is often very balanced in his rhetoric." He continued to say:

"Al-Qaradawi is one of the world's most prominent theologians, if you want to make that comparison, you could compare him to the Pope. He is established and well known. I certainly don't share the views that he has expressed that are antisemitic, like when he talks about the Holocaust being God's punishment. But at the same time, he has participated in positive contexts and denounced suicide bombings. 'When I say he has balanced views, that's what I'm talking about'."¹⁰

¹⁰ Daniel Vergara, "S-topp: Vi behöver bli tydligare", *Expo*, 9 April 2013.

Here, one can note that the view of the Holocaust being God's punishment, as repeated by Al-Qaradawi, was once formulated by Sayyid Qutb, who wrote:

“Then the Jews again returned to evil-doing and consequently Allah sent against them others of his servants, until the modern period. Then Allah brought Hitler to rule over them.”¹¹

Here, Qutb blames Jews for Hitler's emergence. This indicates that Qutb acknowledges that the Holocaust has taken place and sees it as a punishment from God, a view that Al-Qaradawi most likely adopted it from him.

Moreover, the former chairman's view of Al-Qaradawi being important despite these antisemitic remarks is an example of the low threshold SUM has for extremism. Additionally, the remark indicates that he sympathizes with the Muslim Brotherhood since a non-sympathizer would likely not call Al-Qaradawi a Muslim “Pope” but rather a Muslim Brotherhood spiritual leader. Lastly, it is important to note that Al-Qaradawi actually supported suicide bombings in 2005 when he advocated for suicide bombings in Iraq and Palestine by claiming it was an Islamic duty.¹²

¹¹ Sayyid Qutb. 1987. In Nettler, Ronald L., *Past Trials and Present Tribulations: A Muslim Fundamentalist's View of the Jews*. Oxford: Published for the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem by Pergamon. P:87.

¹² W. J. Berridge, 2018, *Islamism in the Modern World: A Historical Approach*, p. 214.

Muslim Brotherhood Victimhood Narrative

Another requirement of MUCF funding is that the organization needs to take gender equality into account in its activities. The MUCF report shows that SUM does not mention gender equality other than when Islamophobia against women is mentioned. This suggests that a victim role is assigned to Muslim women who were only deemed to be seen as women in relation to Islamophobia. This can be understood as part of the Muslim Brotherhood building a Muslim identity based on victimhood.

In fact, even the Muslim Brotherhood's establishment was based on an understanding of victimhood, namely that the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to reclaim what it understood to be the lost dignity of Muslims caused by British imperialism.¹³ In my previous research,¹⁴ I argue that the notion of Muslims' having lost dignity due to imperialism was channeled, by the Muslim Brotherhood and combined with the ideas of European fascism that blamed "the Jew" for the ills of the world. This means that Islamist identity construction is dependent on Muslim victimhood and having "the Jew" as an enemy and that, without antisemitism, Islamism and Islamist identity as we know it today would not exist.

However, in the case of SUM, there were also tendencies of "woke Islamism".¹⁵ For example, only focusing on Muslim women as oppressed by racists can be

¹³ John Calvert, 2009, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁴ Evin Ismail, "The Antisemitic Origins of Islamist Violence: A Study of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State", *Uppsala Universitet*, 2022. Available [here](#).

¹⁵ Lorenzo Vidino, "The Rise of 'Woke' Islamism in the West", *Hudson Institute*, 23 January 2022.

understood as part of this trend. It is important to emphasize that anti-Muslim sentiment against Muslim women is a real problem . However, only focusing on this problem in relation to women can be understood as a distorted politicization of what matters to Muslim women. For example, empowerment, leadership roles, and similar issues can be understood as more constructive activities than the mere reproduction of victimhood.



The Verdict

The final verdict against SUM was the following:

“The Administrative Court of Appeal considers that MUCF’s investigation reveals a number of actions and statements linked to member organizations and former elected representatives that strongly suggest that SUM does not respect the ideas of democracy in its activities. Like the Administrative Court, the Administrative Court of Appeal considers that the investigation certainly shows that SUM has acted when these situations have arisen. However, the Administrative Court of Appeal considers that in some cases there are reasons to question the proportionality of the SUM’s positions and actions when serious criticism has been raised. An example is the incident with Jönköping’s Young Muslims, where the member organization started a magazine that gave space to antisemitism. The protocol of a board meeting in 2010 cited by SUM state that ‘[the chairman of the meeting] will contact Jönköping Young Muslims to sort out the problems’.”

According to the court, SUM’s measures were not proportionate to the demonstrated shortcomings. The shortcomings were, for example, inviting speakers who had undemocratic views. However, even though they were canceled, the court deemed it to be an insufficient measure:

“Cancellation of an inappropriate speaker may, on an occasional basis, be a sufficient measure. However, when this type of situation occurs on a repeated basis, there is reason to

look at the matter differently. This is particularly the case when the questionable statements attributed to speakers in several cases have a similar theme, such as derogatory statements about women, Jews, and LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer] persons. Although it may be the case that the organization does not stand for these views, it may be perceived as systematic if several lecturers with these types of problematic statements are repeatedly invited. The same can be said to apply when cancellations are made only after the information about the unsuitability of the lecturers has come to the attention of the organization, which has often coincided with some publicity or criticism of the invitation.”

According to the court, the problem was that even though SUM never invited the same criticized speakers again, other unfit speakers were subsequently invited. Hence, the court concluded that the circumstances surrounding the invitations are such that they may be considered to be attributable to SUM:

“All in all, the Court of Appeal considers that, due to the actions of member organizations and representatives, as well as the lecturers who have been invited, there are reasons to question whether SUM respects the ideas of democracy in its activities. The measures taken by SUM are not such that the SUM can escape responsibility for what has been revealed about its former representatives, member organizations and invited speakers. The fact that SUM carries out other work against, e.g. radical Islamism, does not change this assessment. Against this background, the Administrative Court of Appeal considers that

MUCF has made it likely that SUM has failed in its activities to respect the ideas of democracy, including equality and the prohibition of discrimination.”

Therefore, the administrative court of appeal concludes that SUM failed in its explanations and that it also failed in respecting the ideas of democracy in its activities, which is a condition for receiving the state grant. Moreover, the court concluded that SUM needs to hand back the previously received grants.



The Policymaking Failure of Anti-Muslim critics of Islamism

A crucial question in regard to the withdrawal of state funding to this Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organization is why the decision was not made earlier. According to MUCF, one reason is that it decided to tighten the democracy criteria, which also meant that a populist youth organization (*Sverigedemokratisk Ungdom*) lost its funding.¹⁶

However, criticism of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations had been widespread and ongoing for over a decade in Sweden. Here, it is important to note that this criticism was made by a few academics and more often made by non-mainstream, and sometimes populist debaters, bloggers, and non-academic opinion writers, who seemingly also, sometimes, had an anti-Muslim agenda. This meant their criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood often involved anti-Muslim prejudice or was too sweeping in its description of different organizations and individuals.

For example, it is important to note that not every individual in SUM knew they were involved with a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organization, since the Muslim Brotherhood has a very elitist structure and also keeps it secrecy in relation to its members. This means that young Muslims who do not know that they have been involved in Islamist organizations are sometimes accused of being Islamists, which further augments the

¹⁶ Olof Svensson, Susanna Hållbus, and Jonathan Jeppsson, "Muslimsk organisation blir av med statligt miljonstöd", *Aftonbladet*, 19 December 2016.

Muslim Brotherhood worldview of an ongoing war against Islam.

Therefore, it is likely that this sweeping anti-Muslim agenda delayed the response of the Swedish government agency since the Muslim Brotherhood could easily point toward the critics as being anti-Muslim and discriminatory and that they, therefore, should not be taken seriously in their criticism.

In the public debate, there was an issue of conflating criticism against Islamism with attacks on Muslims and Islam, in a way doing precisely what the Muslim Brotherhood do themselves, thus also serving their agenda by being easy targets for accusations of Islamophobia.

Hence, there are several reasons for the failure of populist anti-Muslim narratives in influencing policymaking against Islamist movements:

- 1) The conflation of Islam and Islamism: confirms the Islamist worldview and alienates Muslims from countering Islamism.
- 2) It represents its own form of extremism: it has no plan for a tolerant coexistence in Europe but targets Muslims and Islam, playing into the Muslim Brotherhood narrative.
- 3) Opinions over science: populists assume that opinions are equivalent with “knowledge” , but when advocating action against Islamists , it is necessary to produce objective scientific knowledge, something which has been lacking.
- 4) Credibility issue: Anti-Muslim voices are not viewed as credible by many European

policymakers and thus undermine the cause of restricting Islamist movements.

- 5) Conspiracies about power empower the Muslim Brotherhood: Too much power is attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood in the form of conspiracies, a power they do not have but rather benefit from notions of having. For instance, the conspiracy about the Muslim Brotherhood wanting, or being able to control, Europe. In the case of Sweden, the Muslim Brotherhood do not have the support of government agencies as a whole. However, they might have had a person inside who had an important role in “whitewashing” them during inspections or similar activities, while other employees were unaware of this happening. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood forge friendships with individuals in power. Hence, the funding is not necessarily a matter of Swedish naiveté, as populists like to claim, but rather about a strategic effort from the Muslim Brotherhood side to cultivate key relationships and positions that work in their favor discretely. Most importantly, the Muslim Brotherhood does not have the support of the majority of Muslims. Hence, conspiracies can work in Islamists' favor as they can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the belief of having unlimited power can work as a manipulation tool against those individuals they want to cultivate to do their favors, eventually leading to this outcome.

However, in the recent years before the court cases against SUM, more nuanced voices, including Muslims, had been heard in public, and the problem of ISIS recruitment was apparent, while SUM initially did not want to condemn ISIS exclusively but rather “condemned all forms of violence.” This might have

contributed to the agency becoming more skeptical of funding SUM.

Moreover, there is a tendency that when criticizing Islamist movements, actual anti-Muslim racism is not acknowledged but instead denied. This double-standard discourse hinders convincing younger generations that Islamism is not a better or more credible answer or alternative. For two reasons: (1) It confirms the Islamist worldview about Europe as racist and indifferent to Muslims, and (2) It does not resonate with Muslim youth in Europe who do experience discrimination, and therefore it immediately puts these critics in a disadvantaged position in relation to Islamists.



Conclusion

Since SUM never admitted to being affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood ideology, the problems raised in relation to them have been attributed to Muslims and Islam. This means that, among other things, Islam has been portrayed as inherently antisemitic in Sweden. This has caused damage to Islam and Muslims and was augmented by the lack of research on the difference between Islam and Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood ideology in Sweden. Few academics have taken on the role of actually conducting this research. Instead, Sweden has had researchers who support Islamists, those who are silent, or researchers who claim that Islamism and Islam are somewhat similar.

Even though the Muslim Brotherhood takes advantage of, invents, and misuses Islamophobia accusations, objectively speaking, anti-Muslim sentiments exist and fuel the Muslim Brotherhood narrative by confirming their exaggerated and conspiratorial worldview. This implies that the Islamist “war against Islam” narrative is partly constructed by anti-Islam activists who are rarely taken seriously by policymakers. Hence, those who amplify Islamist views were also unsuccessful in reaching out to policymakers in their endeavor to raise awareness about the problem of Islamist movements.

The final criticism from SUM was that they did not get an answer as to what they could have done better to remedy the problems. What could they have done? Probably not much because the problem lies in their ideology, and the “mistakes” that led to their downfall were all related to their ideology rising to the surface.

Even though the court could not accept the evidence for SUM being Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated, the court's

own words were that there was a problem with systematically inviting inappropriate speakers with a common theme of derogatory statements about women, Jews, and LGBTQ individuals.

Ultimately, the reason these speakers attacked women, Jews, and LGBTQ individuals is likely because it reflects the Muslim Brotherhood ideology. In countering Islamist influence in Europe, anti-Muslim exaggerations and putting opinions over scholarship has contributed to delaying an effective response. Therefore, the case of stopping the funding of SUM shows the importance of science in countering Islamist groups and the need for more research on Islamism for constructive solutions to the challenges that Europe faces.

