

Switzerland briefing

November / December 2023

Federal Council bans Hamas, cancels contract with NGOs operating in Middle East

- At its meeting on 22 November, the Swiss Federal Council decided to ban Hamas by federal law.

In this context, the contracts of three of the eleven NGOs that are partners of the Swiss Cooperation Programme for the Middle East were also terminated - the circumstances suggest that a (financial) connection to Hamas, which governs the civilian government in Gaza, is assumed following a review.

- In the past, a ban on Hamas has failed several times, partly due to Hamas' revised charter from 2017.

Cancellation of UNRWA aid funds pending vote in higher chamber

- At the beginning of December, the National Council decided to cancel CHF 20 million (\$23.36million) in funding to UNRWA, the UN aid agency for Palestinians.

Switzerland was previously one of the 10 largest donors to UNRWA, but the then-Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis criticised UNRWA's role back in 2018 and described it as 'part of the problem' in the Middle East.

- The cancellation of the funds was based on a motion by the right wing

nationalist SVP. According to the motion, the organisation had fallen prey to the anti-Israeli narrative and was reinforcing the Palestinian people in their role as victims.

The final cancellation of the funds still requires the approval of the second chamber of the Swiss parliament, the Council of States, which has initially proposed a compromise that provides for a 50% cut in funding.

Gaza war escalates enabling environment for Islamophobia, linking Muslims to anti-semitism

- As in other countries, there has been increased debate in Switzerland since 7 October about anti-Semitism, which is supposedly widespread among Muslims.

Criticism of the Israeli state or its actions is often generically identified as anti-Semitic, especially when it is voiced by Muslims.

- Kurt Pelda, a journalist known for his Islamophobic articles, disguised as a "fight against Islamism" or as being "critical of Islam", who has already sent informers into mosques or obtained internal information from security authorities in the past, writes:

"Those familiar with the scene have long known that a significant proportion of Jew-hatred comes from the Muslim-Arab corner and that many of these anti-Semites have arrived in Switzerland via the asylum route. But politicians and many in the media have so far preferred to look the other way. They didn't want to expose themselves to the accusation of „Islamophobia“."

- This media debate places Muslims under general suspicion of anti-Semitism. While people with a pro-Palestinian stance are regularly called for a distancing from Hamas and a confirmation of the legitimacy of the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip, there is little or no criticism of the latter - neither in the media nor in politics. Developments in the West Bank are also not addressed.