

Switzerland briefing

July/August 2023

Key figures and national context

- About 392,000 Muslims live in Switzerland, which is 5.5% of the total population.
- In recent years, Switzerland has frequently caused a stir with laws explicitly directed against Muslims, including the ban on minarets in 2009 and the ban on veils in 2021.

Both bans were anchored in the constitution by means of a federal popular initiative. The initiators are a committee of politicians and members of the right-wing populist SVP (*Schweizerische Volkspartei* - Swiss People's Party), the third largest Swiss party.

In Switzerland, there is the direct-democratic means of the popular initiative at federal, cantonal and municipal level. This makes it possible for every person entitled to vote to initiate a popular initiative for the inclusion of a new provision in the Federal Constitution via a defined procedure. If the initiative is successful, it will ultimately be voted on by Swiss nationals and the Council of States which is the political representation of the cantons.

Problems with the concept of the popular initiative include the fact that the content is insufficiently examined for violations of fundamental rights and that the campaign for the vote is usually polemical and not fact-oriented.

For example, Adrian Vetter's book "Vom Schächt-zum Minarettverbot" (*From the Ban on Shechards to the Ban on Minarets*) shows that supporters of the ban on minarets spoke out in favour of the ban, among other things, because they want to speak out against the circumcision of girls or forced marriage, two issues that ultimately have nothing to do with the ban on minarets.

During the referendum campaign on the niqab ban, it was also proclaimed that such a ban would protect women from oppression and make Switzerland safer - two scientifically refutable arguments.

- In addition, it is forbidden for Muslim women in Switzerland to exercise the profession of teacher, public prosecutor or judge wearing a hijab.
- There have been several attempts to enforce a hijab ban for schoolgirls, which have ultimately been rejected by the Federal Supreme Court.
- In Switzerland, since the introduction of the "Federal Act on Police Measures to Combat Terrorism" (PMT) in June 2022, there has been a far-reaching catalogue of preventive measures in the case of alleged or suspected terrorism.

The law itself does not define the concept of terrorist threat against which it is directed clearly enough to prevent abuses of the law.

The use of algorithms to recognise such threats can quickly lead to false suspicions as well.

In this context, the PMT offers a broad range of measures restricting fundamental rights that may be applied preventively and often without a court order to persons aged 12 and older, including:

- Rayon and contact bans
- Ban on leaving the country
- House arrest
- Electronic surveillance and mobile phone localisation

The law is still sharply criticised today, among others by various human rights organisations, an association of over 60 legal experts at Swiss universities and the UN Special Rapporteurs.

Islamophobia

- A [study by ETH Zurich](#) in cooperation with the University of California and Stanford University has found that the willingness of the Swiss, and Europeans in general, to accept refugees depends significantly on their identity.

Young, Christian women are particularly popular. This fact is also reflected in the much greater solidarity of society as a whole towards those refugees who are currently coming to Switzerland because of the war in Ukraine.

In comparison, there is a much greater rejection of refugees from predominantly Muslim countries such as Iraq or Syria.

- For this year's Eid al-Adha, an Eid prayer was held as a field service for the first time for members of the Swiss Armed Forces. Those involved were advised - probably out of fear of the expected reactions - not to go public with it.

After media reports about the prayer, the SVP politician and member of National Council Andreas Glarner came forward, calling the Swiss army "lost" because of the "Muslims praying towards Mecca".

Barely three weeks after the army's Eid prayer, the right-wing populist Weltwoche, one of the most widely read magazines in Switzerland, attempted to accuse the imam and Muslim chaplain of the army, who had led the Eid prayer and who has acted as a contact for state institutions for years, of being close to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban and al-Qaeda.