

## Switzerland briefing: March - April 2024

*Reporting period: 1st March – 30th April 2024*

### **Rising Islamophobia reflected in media coverage of anti-Muslim attack**

- The Muslim associations in Switzerland report an escalation in Islamophobic attacks and confrontations against Muslims, Muslim institutions, and mosques, particularly since October 7th and Israel's subsequent war on Palestinians.
- Two actually unrelated incidents have starkly revealed the biased coverage of Swiss media concerning Islam and Muslims:
  - Following an antisemitic-motivated knife attack in Zurich by a 15-year-old Muslim adolescent professing allegiance to ISIS, which garnered widespread media attention beyond Swiss borders, there was erroneous speculation and false accusations, notably regarding the alleged involvement of local mosque communities in the radicalisation of the socially and psychological troubled youth.
  - In a similar vein, an Islamophobia-motivated assault by a Swiss national on two Muslims just a few days after the attack initially received scant media coverage. Only days later did a solitary newspaper address the incident, wherein an 18-year-old and his wheelchair-bound father were viciously attacked with a machete by their Christian neighbor, following an earlier act of vandalism against their vehicle.
- While in the former case, even before the full facts emerged, the media readily labeled it as an antisemitic assault, they hesitated to definitively attribute motives in the latter case.

Instead, they presented the victims' statements in a detached and ambiguous tone, thereby refraining from unequivocal identification of the motive. The same behavior could also be observed on the part of politicians, who eloquently condemned the first incident and expressed their sympathy for the victim, while maintaining silence about the Islamophobic attack.

- The conjunction of the Gaza war and the initial attack in Zurich has led to heightened coverage of individuals and groups labeled as 'extremists' within the Islamic and pro-Palestinian sphere in Switzerland.

Concurrently, there has been an increase in police actions targeting these entities. This trend has further blurred the delineation of what is publicly deemed "extremist," which can encompass fundamental tenets of Islamic theology, such as death or proper prayer, under the rubric of 'threat' and 'radicalism'.

## **Discrimination against Muslim women in the labour market highlighted**

- The case of a Muslim woman terminated from her employment at Switzerland's largest retailer, Migros, after years of service due to her decision to wear the hijab, once again underscores the precarious situation for Muslim employees in Switzerland.
- Muslim women wearing the hijab are generally prohibited from working in professions such as teaching or prosecution. Despite the impermissibility of a blanket ban on hijabs in the workplace, conflicts arise in private employment situations, where employers may cite legitimate business interests or alleged poor performance as grounds for terminating a Muslim woman.
- Given the weak employment protections in Switzerland, employers can dismiss a hijab-wearing employee on grounds of purported business necessity or perceived inadequacy without requiring proof of misconduct.

## **Swiss government continues to withhold funding for UNRWA aid agency**

- While numerous European countries, including Germany, resumed aid payments to UNRWA aid agency following Israel's baseless allegations, Switzerland, under Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis's decision, continues to withhold funds for the agency- which is itself led by a Swiss national.
- Despite new political demands for at least partial release of the funds, the Federal Council is still bound by the parliamentary decision from December 2023, which decided to suspend payments.

## **Switzerland questions membership of the Council of Europe**

- Following a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights against Switzerland regarding climate protection, calls for Switzerland's withdrawal from the Council of Europe grow louder.
- Such withdrawal and a detachment from the ECHR have long been demanded by right-wing parties like the Swiss People's Party (SVP) but are now finding increasing support even among liberals.
- Given Switzerland's lack of constitutional court oversight and in light of past initiatives to restrict Muslim life in Switzerland through various prohibitions, it is conceivable that such a move would further bolster this trend, backed by a majority of the electorate.