

# THE SWITZERLAND BRIEFING

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## Local Resistance to Islamic Religious Infrastructure in Switzerland

Plans by the Albanian Islamic Community (AIG) to establish an Islamic cultural centre in the village of Siebnen in the canton of Schwyz have failed following sustained local opposition. In the village, which has approximately 7,100 inhabitants, the local branch of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) reportedly collected around 5,000 signatures against the project. Opponents argued that a mosque would not fit into the character of the village and further suggested that long established residents and “proud Swiss citizens” should not be expected to accommodate Muslims. Sinan Sadriu, president of the AIG, who himself belongs to the third generation of a migrant family in Switzerland, works as a tradesman and coaches the youth football team in a neighbouring village, also reported verbal abuse and hostility from sections of the local population.

The incident reflects broader patterns of resistance to visible Islamic religious infrastructure in Switzerland. Although freedom of religion and conscience, including the right to practise one’s faith freely, is protected under the Swiss Federal Constitution, opposition to mosques and Islamic cultural centres has repeatedly emerged at both local and national level. As a consequence, most mosques in Switzerland remain largely inconspicuous and are frequently located in converted industrial units, office buildings, or other non descript premises often referred to as “backyard mosques”. Only a small number of Islamic places of worship, such as the Geneva Mosque or the mosque in Volketswil, Zurich, are visibly recognisable as purpose built religious structures.

Public debates surrounding Islamic visibility in Switzerland intensified significantly after the 2009 national referendum that introduced a constitutional ban on the construction of minarets. The initiative attracted substantial international criticism

and serves as an example of the institutionalisation of Islamophobic sentiment through direct democratic processes. Public broadcasting of the adhan is generally not permitted under Switzerland's restrictive noise regulations, despite church bells typically remaining exempt from comparable scrutiny in practice. In several instances, attempts to broadcast the adhan publicly have reportedly led to police intervention.

Current debates have again intensified in response to plans for the construction of a new mosque in St. Gallen, for which the local Muslim community is currently raising funds. Led by former member of parliament Walter Wobmann (SVP), the Egerkinger Committee that previously initiated the campaigns that resulted in the constitutional ban on minarets and the prohibition of face coverings such as the niqab, has announced further political initiatives targeting Islamic institutions in Switzerland. The committee intends to advocate for measures that would prohibit Muslim communities from accepting foreign funding for the construction of mosques or the financing of imams. In addition, proposals are being discussed that would grant municipalities veto powers over the establishment of mosques. Supporters of these measures argue that they are necessary to counter what they describe as the "Islamisation" of Switzerland.

Just as in other European countries, the controversy surrounding Islamic religious infrastructure forms part of a wider trend in which debates on migration, national identity, secularism, and security increasingly converge around Muslim communities. In Switzerland, these discussions have been shaped not only by concerns surrounding integration and social cohesion, but also by longstanding political campaigns portraying Islam as culturally incompatible with Swiss values and traditions. This leads to the normalisation of Islamophobic narratives within political discourse, particularly in connection with referenda, electoral campaigns and media debates focused on migration and public security. Together with increasing restrictions targeting Islamic religious practices, these developments increasingly contribute to the social marginalisation of Muslim communities and reinforce perceptions of unequal treatment within the public sphere.

## **The "10 Million Switzerland" Initiative and the Normalisation of Anti Migration Narratives**

The so-called "10 Million Switzerland"-initiative, initially launched by the Swiss People's Party (SVP), represents one of the most prominent contemporary examples of anti migration mobilisation that are often fueled by Islamophobic narratives in Swiss politics. The initiative seeks to constitutionally limit the permanent resident population of Switzerland to ten million people before 2050.

Should the population exceed this threshold, the federal government would be required to adopt restrictive measures aimed at reducing immigration even if this means reconsidering international agreements that are considered incompatible with this objective, including arrangements linked to the free movement of persons with the European Union.

Public communication surrounding the initiative has relied heavily on allegations portraying demographic growth as a threat to national identity, public security, social cohesion, and economic stability. Campaign rhetoric employed by representatives of the Swiss People's Party frequently frames migration as a process of "overforeignisation" and cultural displacement. The initiative has been justified through references to increasing pressure on housing, transport infrastructure, healthcare systems, and schools, while simultaneously linking immigration to rising criminality and declining quality of life. Such arguments echo earlier campaigns by the party that have centred on fears of cultural loss and the perceived erosion of Swiss traditions and values while representatives of the Swiss industry continuously issue warnings that Switzerland's labour market is heavily dependent on foreign workers across multiple sectors. Demographic ageing, limited domestic training capacities and longstanding shortages of qualified personnel have contributed to structural labour deficits that domestic recruitment alone has so far been unable to address, especially in research (higher) education and healthcare, where already 40% of the practitioners obtained their education abroad, while difficult working conditions, high levels of stress, and comparatively limited domestic training output have contributed to persistent recruitment problems, especially in nursing and long term care.

According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, foreign nationals accounted for approximately 27% of the Swiss workforce in 2022, with significantly higher concentrations in several highly skilled sectors. Implementing this initiative would further exacerbate the shortage of skilled workers.

In addition, Switzerland already faces the challenges of an ageing population combined with declining birth rates. Without continued immigration, the ratio between economically active individuals and pension recipients would deteriorate further, at a time when public debate already centres on potential increases to the retirement age, higher wage contributions, increases in value added tax, or reductions in pension benefits - measures that would primarily affect the currently working population. Given that migrants make a disproportionately high contribution to the financing of the Swiss old age and survivors' insurance system (AHV), their economic role remains significant. Individuals without Swiss citizenship currently contribute approximately one third of AHV payments while receiving only around one fifth of total benefits, thereby playing an important role in maintaining the financial stability of the social security system.

Although the initiative formally addresses migration in general terms, political discourse surrounding the campaign has repeatedly focused on asylum seekers and

migrants originating from Muslim majority and Arabic speaking countries. Statements by party representatives and affiliated campaign material have frequently associated migration from these regions with insecurity, religious extremism, difficulties of integration, and patriarchal social norms.

The Egerkinger Committee and actors associated with the SVP have also relied on provocative visual campaigning and digital media formats to mobilise anti Muslim sentiment linked to the initiative. One prominent example was the online game “Save Switzerland from Creeping Islamisation”, in which players were encouraged to symbolically defend Switzerland against the construction of minarets and the spread of Islamic influence. This game clearly reduced Muslims – irrespective of whether they are Asylum seekers, already living in Switzerland or are even converts whose families had held Swiss citizenship for generations – to a civilisational threat. It normalised exclusionary narratives through gamified political communication. The Federal Commission against Racism classified the game as potentially criminally relevant with regard to the jurisprudence on Art. 261bis of the Swiss Criminal Code (discrimination and incitement to hatred). Following a campaign by the organization Campax and protests by different Human Rights Organisations, the game was taken offline by the hosting service Netlify.

At a broader scale, the controversy surrounding the game reflected growing concerns regarding the increasing use of populist media strategies that frame Islam as fundamentally incompatible with Swiss national identity, since also in other public and political debates, asylum policy has increasingly been discussed through a securitised lens in which refugees and migrants are portrayed not primarily as individuals seeking protection, but as potential burdens or risks to the state and society. Member of parliament Anna Rosenwasser (Social Party, SP) summed up the initiative’s objective by stating that it is not directed against “Germans, Italians or Portuguese”, but against people who were “less white, less Christian, less rich”.

The rhetoric related to the initiative contributes to the broader stigmatisation of Muslims and people of migrant background in Switzerland and forms part of a longer political trajectory in which the Swiss People's Party has strategically linked demographic anxieties with questions of national sovereignty and cultural identity. As with the minaret ban and the ban of Muslim face veils, the current campaign operates through simplified binaries contrasting a supposedly threatened “native” population with external cultural or religious influences.

Human rights organisations, anti racism groups, and representatives of migrant communities have expressed concern that repeated public campaigns centred on migration and Islam contribute to the normalisation of exclusionary discourse and reinforce negative perceptions of Muslims, refugees, and Arabic speaking communities within Swiss society.

## **Institutionalised Islamophobia and Racial Profiling**

The case of 18 year old Talia, which occurred only a few weeks ago, illustrates that this far reaching Islamophobic discourse, although initiated by actors associated with the Swiss People's Party, but sustained by a broader range of politicians, media figures, and public personalities, has a tangible impact on the everyday lives of Muslims in Switzerland and reveals broader tensions surrounding Islamophobic discrimination, public security discourse, and institutional trust in Switzerland.

According to media reports, Talia stated that after experiencing hostility linked to her Muslim background by her sister's neighbours, when she called the police a police officer told her that she needed to "understand mistrust against Muslims".

In Switzerland, Muslim organisations and civil society groups have documented experiences in which visibly Muslim individuals report increased scrutiny, preventive monitoring, or discriminatory treatment by authorities, while racial profiling has become an increasingly prominent and controversial issue in Switzerland over the past decade, particularly in relation to policing practices, border controls, and migration enforcement. Although legally prohibited under the anti discrimination provisions enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly Article 14, and recognised by the European Court of Human Rights as a violation of fundamental rights, racial profiling remains a structural problem within Swiss institutions, particularly among security and law enforcement authorities.

The Alliance Against Racial Profiling and other Non-Governmental Organisations describe these practices not as isolated incidents of individual misconduct, but as manifestations of broader institutional and historical patterns of exclusion. Since its public emergence in 2016, the organisation has documented testimonies, conducted collaborative research projects, and supported legal challenges concerning discriminatory police practices. Academic studies and human rights organisations similarly argue that racial profiling disproportionately affects individuals perceived as foreign, particularly Black people, Muslims, North Africans, Arabs, asylum seekers, and other racialised minorities. Research based on interviews with affected individuals has highlighted recurring experiences of humiliation, fear, restrictions on freedom of movement, and long term mistrust towards public institutions. Several widely discussed incidents have intensified the public debate around this issue. While Swiss police authorities generally reject accusations of systematic racism and maintain that identity checks are based on behavioural indicators, crime patterns, or migration related enforcement obligations rather than ethnicity, critics argue that apparently neutral categories such as "suspicious behaviour" often function through implicit racialised assumptions and institutional cultures.

The debate surrounding racial profiling is closely linked to broader political and media discussions concerning migration, criminality, and Islam in Switzerland. Civil society organisations argue that these discourses contribute to the social normalisation of racialised suspicion, particularly towards Muslims and individuals perceived as originating from the Balkans, North Africa, or the Middle East. Alongside formal studies and legal proceedings, discussions on online forums and social media platforms indicate that perceptions of discriminatory policing are widespread among sections of the population. Numerous individuals describe repeated identity checks at train stations, airports, border areas and even when walking to school or work, particularly when visibly non white or perceived as Muslim or foreign. Although such accounts remain anecdotal and cannot always be independently verified, they nevertheless reflect a broader public perception that racial profiling continues to represent an unresolved structural issue within Swiss society.