

SWITZERLAND BRIEFING

JUN – JUL 2026

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Putative IS-inspired Knife Attack Boosts Islamophobic Discourses in Politics and Society

On 28 May 2026, Winterthur became the scene of one of Switzerland's most consequential acts of suspected IS-related violence in recent years. A 31-year-old Swiss-Turkish dual national who putatively sympathised with the so-called Islamic State (IS) attacked passers-by with a knife at Winterthur railway station. Three men were injured before police arrested the suspect.

The case attracted particular attention because the suspect was not unknown to Swiss security authorities. Investigations had linked him to a Muslim youth group, several members of which later faced prosecution or convictions for activities related to the IS. In 2015, the suspect himself reportedly came under investigation for violating the Swiss prohibition on Islamic State propaganda. Research conducted after the attack further indicated that he had been exposed to IS propaganda and had played a role in a milieu in which young people were exposed to similar ideas.

The attack was also preceded by a serious institutional failure, although its precise significance remains a matter for investigation. On 25 May, the man contacted the Winterthur police and made what officers described as confused statements. Authorities arranged for his admission to a psychiatric institution. He was subsequently assessed as neither a danger to himself nor to others and was released on the day before the attack. Psychiatrists and forensic specialists have since stressed that psychiatric illness and ideological radicalisation are not mutually exclusive.

The political reaction was immediate and unusually forceful. Zurich Security Director Mario Fehr described the incident only hours after it occurred and without solid investigation as a "terrorist act" and spoke of a "turning point". He criticised the psychiatric assessment as an "obvious misjudgement" and demanded that the suspect lose his Swiss citizenship and be expelled to Turkey. Fehr argued that Switzerland should not tolerate individuals who commit

serious crimes or acts of terrorism after having acquired Swiss citizenship. He also sharply criticised the federal migration authorities and called for improved information-sharing between security institutions.

Fehr's intervention became controversial in its own right. He publicly disclosed the suspect's full name at a stage when the investigation was still developing, and he presented the case in highly political terms before the federal authorities had completed their assessment. Critics argued that this risked undermining the presumption of innocence and turning a criminal investigation into a political demonstration. The Zurich Cantonal Council subsequently received a formal parliamentary inquiry concerning Fehr's statements and their compatibility with principles of the rule of law. His statements are particularly objectionable, given that Fehr, in his capacity as Head of the Department of Security, bears political responsibility for the work of the security forces and public safety.

For many years, Mario Fehr has repeatedly attracted attention with statements and decisions that observers describe as Islamophobic. While Fehr himself claims to differentiate between "extremist" and "normal" Islam, critics accuse him of precisely the opposite. He has explored legal avenues and exerted public pressure to ban or otherwise suppress Quran distribution campaigns and Muslim events.

At the same time, Fehr was not the only politician to connect the attack to broader questions surrounding Islam, migration and social cohesion. FDP National Councillor Christian Wasserfallen supported the withdrawal of the suspect's citizenship and his expulsion. SVP National Councillor Mauro Tuena sharply criticised the State Secretariat for Migration, arguing that authorities had failed despite earlier indications of radicalisation. Centre politician Marianne Binder warned of extremist "parallel societies" and described the situation as a "ticking time bomb". SVP National Councillor Therese Schlöpfer went further in explicitly religious language, writing that terrorists were attempting to impose "their faith" through violence and declaring that Switzerland would not accept this.

The political rhetoric therefore moved rapidly from the specific question of an individual's crime and the failure of authorities in preventing it towards broader debates about immigration, religiously motivated terrorism, citizenship and the place of Islam in Swiss society. The Zurich branch of right-wing SVP framed the attack as evidence of the failure of "mass immigration", while subsequent parliamentary initiatives called for closer scrutiny of "radicalised" individuals and Muslims displaying signs of willingness to use violence. Particularly when it comes to "radicalization" – which is all too often connected to outward appearances – the lines between ideas that are violently directed against society and conservative religious practice are frequently blurred. Such responses illustrate a familiar process in European politics: a violent act committed by an individual can become a symbolic vehicle for discussing much broader questions that extend far beyond the circumstances of the attack itself and casts blanket suspicion on entire groups.

Research published in 2026 in [the Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization](#) found that exposure to terrorist attacks conducted by Muslims can increase public misperceptions about the proportion of Muslims and immigrants in European societies. These effects were

particularly pronounced among less educated respondents and people living in areas with relatively small foreign populations. In other words, a rare and highly salient event can distort perceptions of the much larger populations which it becomes symbolically associated with.

Other recent research points to a similarly complex relationship between terrorist violence and public attitudes. [A 2026 study in the European Journal of Political Research](#), based on a meta-analysis of more than 170 previous studies and over 800 effect estimates, found that repeated exposure to terrorism by a perpetrator perceived to be Muslim does not simply produce a uniform and permanent political reaction. Public responses can diminish over time as societies become accustomed to terrorist violence, although particular attacks can still generate substantial short-term. These short-term effects can nevertheless be politically significant.

This is precisely where political language matters. There is a substantive difference between arguing that Muslim violence represents a security threat and suggesting that Muslims collectively constitute such a threat. The former concerns violence. The latter risks assigning collective responsibility to millions of people who have no connection to the perpetrator. Such conflation is not merely a semantic problem. It can contribute to distorted perceptions, deteriorating attitudes towards minorities and a more polarised political environment.

Winterthur therefore became more than a criminal case. It exposed weaknesses in the coordination of security and psychiatric institutions, intensified Switzerland's debate about citizenship and migration, and provided political actors with a powerful symbol in the wider struggle over Muslims, Islam, integration and national security.

Furthermore, it became clear once again that the factor of a mental disorder is always pushed into the background or completely neglected in perpetrators with a Muslim background, despite clear evidence. Although the suspect had attracted attention in the days before the crime due to mental problems and the suspect's father similarly argued that his son was psychologically ill and needed treatment, this fact did not play any significant role in the public debate which puts even more focus on a motive rooted in the religion of Islam which is further reinforced by the Islamophobic rhetoric of prominent politicians.

Switzerland is Evading its Responsibility for its IS Fighters

A current debate over Swiss nationals who travelled to Syria to join the so-called Islamic State (IS) and were subsequently detained by Kurdish forces illustrates a fundamental tension in the practice of consular protection by the Swiss authorities: the state remains responsible for safeguarding the basic rights of its citizens even when those citizens have committed, or are suspected of having committed, serious crimes. After approximately 5,700 IS detainees were transferred from Syria to Iraq in early 2026, three Swiss nationals were among those moved to Iraqi custody. While the Swiss government stood firm on its position of not actively repatriating adult travellers who are suspected of going abroad for to join the group, a current decision of the Federal Administrative Court (BVGer) now requires the authorities to reconsider [the case of one detainee who filed a case against the Consular Directorate \(KD\)](#) of

the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (EDA), because his transfer to Baghdad potentially exposed him to the death penalty.

Moreover, the EDA's guidelines state explicitly that Swiss citizens detained abroad can receive consular assistance irrespective of the nature of the alleged offence. Consular protection may include contact with local authorities, assistance in understanding legal procedures and, where appropriate, visits to detainees.

Although the subsequent decision of the BVGer does not establish a general right to repatriation, it orders the authorities to reassess whether the specific circumstances have created a sufficiently serious risk to the individual's fundamental rights. In June, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (EDA) eventually sent consular representatives from its mission in Amman to visit the three Swiss detainees in Iraq. According to the department, the purpose of such assistance includes securing humane detention conditions, procedural guarantees and the right to a defence.

While this approach therefore is broadly consistent with Switzerland's general system of consular protection, it reveals another, more questionable stance: that the three detained Swiss citizens still await their court case to take place.

Swiss law provides a legal basis for returning Swiss nationals who joined IS and are suspected of having committed war crimes to Switzerland and prosecuting them before Swiss courts. This would be possible both under Article 7 of the Swiss Criminal Code, which governs offences committed abroad, and, irrespective of the specific offences that can be established in individual cases, on the basis of the prohibition of al-Qaida, the Islamic State and associated organisations.

Taken together with the fact that Iraq has repeatedly called on European states to repatriate their nationals and prosecute them in their own countries, the case of Swiss IS-fighters creates the impression that Switzerland has sought not only to evade its responsibilities regarding the consular protection of its citizens detained in Iraq, but also, above all, to continue avoiding responsibility for the acts they are alleged to have committed.

From Winterthur to Biel: The Islamophobic Politicisation of Muslim Visibility

A controversy surrounding the hijab in Biel illustrates how questions of religious freedom, child protection and social integration can become entangled in debates about Muslim visibility in Switzerland. It began when Biel city councillor Mohamed Hamdaoui claimed that he increasingly felt as though he were in "Marrakesh" rather than Biel and called for a ban on the hijab for girls under the age of twelve.

After receiving criticism, he defended the comparison as deliberately provocative and subsequently described the wearing of the hijab by pre-pubescent girls as a form of "child

abuse”. His argument rests on the assumption that covering a young girl necessarily expresses subordination and therefore constitutes a form of coercion.

The empirical basis for the alleged “hijab boom”, however, remains weak. Switzerland does not collect statistics on the number of women or children who wear the hijab. In Biel, the available figures concern religious affiliation rather than clothing. They show that 4,895 residents, around 11% of the city's population, were registered as Muslim in 2022, a proportion considerably above the Swiss average of approximately 6%. Yet the proportion of residents belonging to the Islamic faith has actually declined since 2020 after increasing during the 2010s. Since there is no statistical basis for establishing that hijab use in Biel has recently increased, the question arises as to whether, in the wake of the knife attack by a suspected IS supporter in Winterthur, Hamdaoui wanted to exploit the already heated atmosphere for his own political ends.

While Hamdaoui interprets the hijab worn by young girls primarily through the categories of sexualisation and subordination, Muslim women themselves however, frequently describe it as an expression of religious conviction and personal identity.

Although current Swiss law does not support a general prohibition of the hijab and previous attempts to prohibit girls from wearing hijab at schools, failed, there are repeated initiatives at both national and local levels aimed at such a ban.

Eventually Hamdaoui explicitly presented his intervention as an attempt to prevent the issue from being appropriated by more openly Islamophobic political actors despite using the very same arguments and language. Comparing a Swiss city with a foreign Muslim-majority city, describing children's religious clothing as abuse and presenting an unverified increase as a social trend frames Muslim visibility as evidence of cultural displacement.

Particularly in the aftermath of the events in Winterthur, which have already led to a noticeable increase in hostility and hate comments directed at Muslims in Switzerland, especially online, debates of this kind further fuel the exclusion and criminalisation of Muslims.