המרכז הירושלמי לענייני ציבור ומדינה
Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism

Number 115

7 Shevat, 5772 / January 1, 2012

http://jcpa.org/article/a-special-case-direct-swiss-democracy-the-european-debate-on-islam-and-the-diminishing-political-stature-of-swiss-jewry/

A Special Case? Direct Swiss Democracy, the European Debate on Islam, and the Diminishing Political Stature of Swiss Jewry

Dr. Simon Erlanger

For some time now Switzerland has been at the forefront of the European debate on Islam, Islamism, and Islamization. The country is thereby abandoning its traditional approach of safeguarding its neutrality, staying on the sidelines of any major European conflict, and keeping out of the respective great debates of the time.

Switzerland's newfound avant-garde role is rooted in its direct democracy. Elite discourse with its emphasis on political correctness does, however, exist in Switzerland as it does in the rest of Europe. Because of direct democracy, however, it traditionally carries much less weight than elsewhere; it is just one of many voices being heard.

Thanks to Swiss direct democracy, it is the popular voice that in the end can make itself heard. Therefore, popular unease with a growing Islamic presence could make itself felt and have political consequences. This also accounts for the fact that, while taking a leading role in the debate on the European role of Islam, Switzerland is much less torn apart by it than are other countries.

Whereas the Muslim community in Switzerland is growing fast and likely to gain influence, the Jewish community today totals less than eighteen thousand, not much different from the 1950s. Given its small size,

high age profile, and emigration and assimilation, the Jewish community cannot be counted on to exert influence in situations of need for Israel, Diaspora Jews, or even for itself, and no political role is foreseeable for Swiss Jewry in the future.

For quite some time Europe has been in the grip of a political and social debate on Islam. While because of the escalating crisis of the Euro this controversy has lately subsided a bit, the issue is still seen as defining European discourses on identity, freedom of religion, multiculturalism, the future of liberal democracy, security, and the like. What is unusual about the current debate, however, is that much of it centers on or has emanated from small and neutral Switzerland, which ever since it was reorganized as a modern liberal democracy in 1848 has done its best to stay out of European strife.

But this has been changing: long on the sidelines of European politics, Switzerland has emerged as a leader and pioneer in the raging debate on Islam.[2] In Switzerland issues are defined, arguments are advanced, and frontlines are drawn. With the prohibition of minarets in 2009 and new laws against “criminal foreigners” in 2010, popular initiatives have been ratified that aim to counter a perceived threat of Islamization.

Although the meteoric (until recently) rise of the rightist Swiss Popular Party (SVP) on an anti-immigrant, anti-Islamist, and pro-Israeli platform has been central to these developments, the reasons for Switzerland’s new role run much deeper.[3] They are to be found in its time-honored political system, which devolves power in the extreme, where no party has ever managed to garner over 30 percent of the vote, and where entities on all levels of the body politic are governed by multifaceted coalitions. Thanks to direct Swiss democracy, popular sentiment can make itself heard and felt much more efficiently and much faster than in other democratic systems, where the political will is usually expressed through representative bodies and the average citizen is excluded from day-to- day decision-making.

A Special System

Switzerland’s democracy is direct. The political system is built from the bottom up. Power does indeed reside with the people and neither with a representative body nor with unelected officials, as tends to be the case in the European Union. Popular sentiment can therefore easily find a political outlet and quickly be translated into policy. There is no rule by committee. The freedom of action of elected and unelected officials in matters of policy is constrained by frequent popular votes. If officials overstep boundaries, sanctions at the ballot box can be immediate and harsh.

Thus the voice of the people is indeed heard and carries political weight-not only, as elsewhere, every four years or so in general elections, but also in the years in between on a wide range of issues, from the trivial to matters of utmost national importance.

Direct Democracy

Switzerland is one of the few places in Europe where many of the communal freedoms of the Middle Ages have largely been preserved.[4] Having been a loose confederation of independent small states for centuries, the country was transformed into today’s federal state only after 1848. Despite federation and the introduction

of a national currency, a national army, and a unified penal code by the early twentieth century, the country still is highly decentralized today. While many public functions such as education, law enforcement, and public health are increasingly coordinated on a national level, they are still decided on locally.

For example, there still are twenty-six different education systems. Courts are organized differently in all twenty-six Swiss states or cantons, as are hospital systems and the police. There is no national police force. Much of the road system is run not by the federal state but by the cantons and the communities. Although the railway system was nationalized in the early twentieth century out of security concerns, most public transportation is locally organized.

The twenty-six cantons still resemble semi-independent entities. Each controls its own budget, raises its own taxes, and determines its own economic policy; the federation has no right to interfere. All twenty-six cantons have their own parliament and their own state government. Often it is state law that determines federal law and not the other way around. Parties are first organized on a local and a state level rather than nationally.

Even the ideological and programmatic orientation within the same party may differ from state to state. For example, the Zurich Liberals are much more to the right than the Basel Liberals, while the Liberals of the French part of Switzerland, traditionally called Radicaux or Radicals, would be considered socialists in the German part of the country. Still, they all are in the same Liberal Party, the FDP, having a common parliamentary group in Berne and being represented as one in the national government, which has been a coalition of four parties for the past fifty-two years.

While debates in the parliament in Berne certainly serve a purpose and many powers are concentrated in the capital city, the real center of power of the Swiss body politic lies further down. It is the community or Gemeinde. There are more than 2,600 of these Gemeinden, with the right to tax and to decide on anything local from roads, building codes, to education and local health care. Every Gemeinde has its own council and its own purely local popular votes. Such votes are also held regularly on the state and national levels.[5] Overall, then, Switzerland is extremely decentralized with a very high involvement of the average citizen at local, state, and national levels.

Indeed, even Swiss citizenship is defined locally. It is not conferred by the federal state but by the local community, into which one has be accepted, often in a vote by an assembly of the local citizens. In principle there is no national “Swiss” citizenship. One becomes Swiss by becoming a citizen of the Gemeinde-the village or town. Only then is one a citizen of the canton and thereby of Switzerland.

The most famous feature of Swiss democracy is the procedure of initiative and referendum. By collecting a certain amount of signatures,[6] citizen committees and political parties can within a relatively short time obtain a popular vote on virtually any issue. In addition, certain decisions and actions by the local, state, or national parliaments-such as the introduction of laws necessitating changes in the constitution-automatically require a popular vote. Thus voting takes place regularly, in some cases up to six times a year, and it is usually the citizen who has the last word in any political debate. This makes for a rather slow-reacting system but also for a highly democratic state where power truly resides to a high degree with the individual citizen and not with a representative body or an elite group. This reality is taken for granted in Swiss political culture.

The Swiss system of local government through a network of semiautonomous communities and cantons and of direct democracy through regular popular votes is periodically questioned by European intellectual, political, and economic elites. Popular votes have again and again been rejected in Britain, where sovereignty is seen as residing not with the common people but with "king-in-parliament." Also in Germany, where the postwar West German democracy was built on the representative Anglo-Saxon parliamentary model, the Swiss way is viewed with suspicion. Thus the eminent historian Heinrich August Winkler, who has written extensively on Germany's democratization and the history of the West, recently expressed distrust of direct democracy, thereby speaking for much of liberal opinion.[7] He argued that people should trust elected officials, whom they delegate every few years for representative governing institutions. Direct democracy, in Winkler's view, leads to the dictatorship of well-connected minorities. Critics also say it is very slow to react to challenges.

Indeed, while the traditional decentralized Swiss system produces a high degree of social cohesion and political consensus, it does not allow for rapid decision-making. Building a road, instituting new taxes, or-as recently-acquiring new planes for the army can require many years for the political process to run its course. Getting anything done entails a lengthy opinion-generating process; large segments of the population must be persuaded of the necessity of a new road, a new tax, or a new treaty with the European Union. It is the task of the many political parties to be the agents of this decision-making process. In a rapidly changing twenty-first-century environment, this sluggishness can be a liability. In earlier times as well it took Switzerland longer to reform and to modernize than other European countries. Yet slow change tends to be more profound and sustainable because it is deemed more legitimate by the population, which in any case has the last word.

In light of Europe's recent economic and social challenges, to which elites are widely seen as reacting too slowly or even as ignoring the stated will of a majority of their constituencies, the Swiss system is gaining wider currency. For example, in the recent debates in Germany on immigration, Islamization, and European integration, Switzerland is often favorably depicted as the prototype for a functioning democracy where the people can truly participate and express their misgivings in legitimate debate.[8] With European politicians and experts having recently been proved wrong on so many issues they sold to their citizens, such as the common currency or the benefits of uncontrolled immigration, the rest of Europe is increasingly seen as suffering from a Demokratiedefizit.[9] This compares unfavorably to Switzerland, where the system seems to have gained even greater acceptance. Indeed, it was direct democracy that prevented Switzerland from joining the European Union and the Euro and ceding sovereignty to Brussels. At the time this was deplored by many; considering the present European state of affairs, it may have been a blessing. Today Switzerland has much higher economic growth and much less unemployment than any of its European neighbors caught within the Euro crisis.

Having been ridiculed, Swiss-style direct democracy now starts to look attractive. For example, in the German state of Baden-Wurttemberg a decade- old argument about expanding the Stuttgart main train station, which has toppled governments and ended coalitions, was finally decided by a referendum on 27 November.[10] An overwhelming majority rejected green and ecological protest and voted in favor of building a new underground Megatrain station. This led commentators to describe direct democracy as Switzerland's most important export and the Swiss model as exemplary for the rest of Europe.[11]

While direct democracy can lead to a policy more in tune with the popular will, it also perpetuates-as noted-an inherent conservatism, where old popular prejudices can influence policy much longer than anywhere else. Thus traditional anti-Judaism, which as elsewhere permeated society, retained political relevance in Switzerland long after it had become politically irrelevant and been replaced by modern anti-Semitism elsewhere.

Democratization, then, does not always herald positive change; at times it helps sustain old prejudices. While, for example, it was the enlightened elite who granted emancipation in the nineteenth century to the Jews of Western and Central Europe, progress in Switzerland was slow because the population did not want it. Although this was also the case in parts of France and Germany, the population was not asked or consulted by an enlightened bureaucracy or enlightened lawmakers. Thus emancipation was established. Not so in Switzerland, where emancipation came late and the consequences of traditional, religious anti-Judaism have continued to shape minds and policies well into the present.[12] A high level of democratization helps express the popular will much more accurately than a representative system. This, however, does not necessarily improve things.

The Popular Will Expressed

To summarize, the Swiss system allows popular unease to be expressed and to be felt politically. This largely accounts for the fact that Switzerland has gained influence over the European debate on Islam and Islamization. It was the only place where a general unease could find a legitimate outlet. While Swiss elites, like their European counterparts, deemed the debate as counter to the current paradigm of multiculturalism and politically incorrect, this had little effect on the Swiss discourse, in stark contrast to Germany. In 2010, German federal banker and Social Democratic politician Thilo Sarrazin published his book Deutschland schafft sich ab (Germany Does Itself In), which criticized what he saw as failed German policies on Muslim immigration and integration. As for the general population, the book quickly sold one and a half million copies. Yet the media and the political and intellectual elites received it much less well. For questioning the political correctness of the day and past policies, Sarrazin was condemned by virtually every major politician from the chancellor down and finally fired from his position at the German Federal Bank. This made the book even more popular.

Although Switzerland is not free of attempts to subdue critical voices, the barrier to actually doing so is much higher. Thanks to direct democracy, even sharp critics can not only make themselves heard but also influence both discourse and policy. First, of course, they have to convince the population by tapping widespread sentiments. In such a climate political correctness is much less pervasive than in other Western societies; there is also less openly expressed anger and violence. Because people can participate in the decision- making process on all levels almost daily, less frustration seems to be expressed politically than in France, Britain, or Germany. For example, the debate on the ban of minarets has raged verbally for months-with part of the left voting in favor in the end-but so far involving almost no open violence.

Rapid Growth

We should ask, nevertheless, what led to the ban in the first place. Why would a large part of the Swiss electorate suddenly fear Islamization? Is Switzerland in the grip of Islamophobia as critics have claimed?[13] Or are there other reasons?

While Switzerland is indeed often perceived as highly xenophobic, the charge does not withstand closer scrutiny. The country is traditionally multilingual and culturally diverse. Its makeup out of semiautonomous entities allowed for centuries a more or less peaceful coexistence between German-, French-, and Italian-speakers and between Protestants and Catholics. At present Switzerland has a foreign population of 22.4 percent.[14] Considering that at least an additional 10 percent of its inhabitants are only recently naturalized citizens, about a third of the population is foreign or foreign-born. This is the highest percentage for any European country and even puts Switzerland ahead of immigrant societies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Israel.

Yet, despite large-scale immigration since 1945 and a xenophobic undercurrent in certain segments of society, Switzerland has been rather successful at integrating its diverse population until recently. With the rapid growth of its Muslim population this seems to be changing. While the situation is still much better than, for example, in France, the Netherlands, or Germany, as elsewhere in Europe the points of discontent seem to be refusal to integrate into the host society, low educational standards, the status of women, the addiction to welfare, and the emergence of parallel societies.

The Muslim population in Switzerland increased from some 16,350 persons in 1970 to 152,217 by 1990.[15] Most immigrants were so- called guest workers from then-Yugoslavia and to a lesser extent from Turkey, and most were secularized in their daily lives. They also were hard-working, much needed in factories, construction sites, and hotels and restaurants to fuel Switzerland's postwar economic miracle. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s they took the menial jobs that native Swiss were increasingly refusing.

These workers usually were only allowed to stay for a few months at a time. They were prohibited to bring their families. Pressure by the European Union during the 1990s led to a liberalization of this policy. In 1991, the seasonal-workers system was effectively canceled. It ended officially with the bilateral agreement on free movement between the EU and Switzerland, which was signed in 1999 and came into force in 2002.[16] Already by 1991, however, many of the seasonal workers from Yugoslavia and Turkey were permitted to stay and bring in their families. It was then that the influx increased. However, a large proportion of the Turkish citizens coming to Switzerland were largely secular Kurds, fleeing violence and unrest in eastern Anatolia and the Iraqi-Turkish border area where the Turkish army and the Kurdish PKK had been warring since the 1970s.

More Muslim immigrants arrived during the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Some 150,000 refugees from Bosnia and Kosovo joined friends and relatives who had come as guest workers. For this reason Switzerland today has the largest community of Kosovo Albanians outside Kosovo.[17]

In the French part of Switzerland there has been an influx of immigrants from North Africa and the wider Arab world. By 2000, when the last Swiss census was conducted, the number of Muslims had grown to 310,800.[18] Today the estimated number is 433,000.[19] In the same span the general population grew from around six million to 7.9 million.[20] It is projected that by 2030 there will be 663,000 Muslims in Switzerland.[21]

In comparison, the Jewish community today totals less than eighteen thousand,[22] a number that has basically not changed since the 1950s. Whereas the Jewish community, given its small size, high age profile, and emigration and assimilation, is likely to shrink and therefore lose influence, the Muslim community is growing fast and likely to gain influence. In the large cities already up to 8 percent of the population is Muslim. Muslims in Switzerland are younger and less well educated than average, whereas the Jewish community is older than average and the best-educated group in the country.

Although labor migration since 2000 has consisted mainly of highly skilled non-Muslim individuals from the European Union with Germany topping the list, several waves of asylum seekers fleeing unrest or economic hardship in North and West Africa have contributed to further increasing the Muslim population. This trend is continuing, with many asylum seekers from Iraq, Lebanon, Eritrea, and Somalia reaching Switzerland from 2007 to 2010. Recently, because of the upheavals of the so-called Arab spring, asylum seekers from the Maghreb are increasingly reaching Switzerland.

On the whole, the Muslim community in Switzerland originates in some 105 countries and is marked by religious, ethnic, social, and economic diversity. No voice or organization speaks for all. In religious terms, 75 percent of the Swiss Muslims are Sunni, 10-15 percent are Alevites, and the rest belong to the Shia and other groups, such as the Sufis. Most Swiss Muslims, especially those originating in the Balkans, are still secular with some ties to tradition. Over the past decade, however, a religious awakening has occurred among Swiss Muslims, particularly of North African and Turkish origin but also among young Bosnians and Kosovars, reflecting the trend in their home countries and in the wider Muslim world. So far this has not much affected the majority of Swiss Muslims, who still are largely secular and not attracted to Islamism, with the Alevites especially professing a liberal version of Islam.

While the range of religious observance is therefore very broad, Islamic radicals are gaining ground as well. They include a relatively high number of Swiss converts to Islam.[23] It is from the ranks of these radicals that in the last few years many challenges to the Swiss ordre public have arisen, such as the refusal to send schoolgirls to mixed swimming classes and the issue of wearing hijabs, nikabs, burkas, and so on. Recent calls to introduce parts of Sharia law, however, have come from liberal scholars and lawyers concerned about coping with the large-scale Muslim presence and respecting cultural diversity.[24] To counter is, a popular initiative has been called in the canton of St. Gallen, and there may soon be a parliamentary vote on this issue as well.[25]

While there are no immigrant “ghettos” on the French or German model, most Swiss Muslims live in or around the big cities. For example, as of 2000 the highest percentages were in Lausanne (6 percent) and Basel (7.4 percent). It is in the big cities that problems of integration are greatest. For example, the city and canton of Basel, which is governed by a green-left coalition, has implemented a strict integration policy under the slogan Fördern und Fordern-translatable as “to advance and at the same time to demand”-which teaches language and Swiss civic values to new immigrants.[26] Noncompliance, such as not attending language courses, is penalized by the state, which is trying to achieve integration through housing policies and other means. Penalties include the loss of rights and entitlements, up to denial of residence and expulsion from the country. The state has been less successful in its education policy. In many city schools, non-German- or non-French-speaking children outnumber German- or French-speaking ones, which puts integration in question.

Over the past few years, concurrent with the rise of the SVP and the emergence of the first signs of parallel societies, the earlier paradigm of multiculturalism and laissez-faire has largely been abandoned and replaced by rigid state intervention. This is not only supported by the right but also by the center, the center-left, and parts of the left, which have bought into the SVP's now-mainstream narrative even though many reject the party's provocative and politically incorrect language and ways.

For example, following Basel's lead, in several cantons contracts or Integrationsverträge between the state and the individual immigrant are now common.[27]To be allowed to remain in the country, the immigrant must commit himself to fulfill certain conditions such as learning the language and integrating into a secular, Western, democratic culture. Although this seems to imply a give-and-take between society and the individuals concerned, in reality it simply means coercion.[28] People who do not want to learn German or attend courses on Swiss society and history can be denied residence and even deported. Even minor offenses can now lead to that result. Unlike in other European countries, this approach is now largely accepted, even by most of the liberal media.

The abandonment of the earlier paradigm testifies to the unease of the population-which, thanks to direct democracy, has to be addressed by shapers of opinion and policy. Yet, despite the now assertive and overall rather successful integration policies, the unease among the general population remains. It focuses on two groups, which sometimes overlap: Islamists and young Muslim men. As in France and Germany, growing numbers have led to growing visibility and the emergence of a parallel society. Because of the Muslim population's heterogeneity and still largely secular or-as in the case of the Alevites-liberal character, this phenomenon is so far not as developed in Switzerland. Nevertheless, as elsewhere in Europe there have been honor killings, and Islamic headscarves have become a public issue.

It was the question of integration, of the immigrants accepting Swiss and Western values, that finally led to the ban on minarets. Widely discussed was whether minarets are purely religious symbols-in which case they would fall under freedom of religion and had to be allowed-or signify the aspiration to political dominance and the refusal to accept the ways and laws of the Swiss ordre public. The Swiss electorate, going against intellectual and media opinion at home and in much of Europe, voted overwhelmingly for the ban. Behind this debate on the nature of minarets there is a discourse on identity. Most Swiss, even if secular, still see Switzerland as a Christian country. In response to the recent controversies, religion has become more central in Switzerland.

The second group on which popular unease centers are young Muslim men, usually Swiss-born to parents from Turkey and the Balkans. Since the “Arab spring” began, newcomers from Tunisia and Morocco have augmented their ranks. These young men are seen as clinging to a macho culture complete with car racing, petty crime, sexual harassment, and violence. Statistics support this perception. Whereas foreigners now constitute 22 percent of the Swiss population, young men of foreign origin now commit more than half of the violent crimes and account for 70 percent of prison inmates. Although a significant number of these young perpetrators are non-Muslims, popular discourse does not differentiate.

This is reinforced by the fact that petty crime and violent offenses are even more rampant among the North African young men coming to Switzerland since the spring of 2011.[29]One result has been an ongoing debate

on asylum policies, stricter penal codes, internal security, and beefing up police forces. Initially the domain of the right, even large parts of the left now recognize these as needs. Since 2008, referendums have been submitted and voted on to make it easier to deport offenders.

Rising Muslim and Declining Jewish Political Influence

While so far political activity by the 433,000-strong Muslim-immigrant community within the Swiss direct-democracy system has been limited, this is about to change given the community's rapid numerical growth and its youth. The pace of the change will depend on the speed of naturalization. As mentioned, presently 22.4 percent of all people living in Switzerland do not hold Swiss nationality or, therefore, the right to vote. As this changes because of naturalization, the immigrant groups' political weight will grow.

Thanks to direct democracy this will be felt first in the large cities such as Basel; already in 2010 Muslims were around 10 percent of the population in these cities.[30] However, since Basel's Muslim community largely consists of Kurdish and Turkish Alevites, their future political influence is not considered cause for great concern. Alevites, as noted, practice a liberal version of Islam; some Sunni and Shia authorities regard them as having left the religion. Seeking compatibility with modern liberal democracy, Alevites, for example, emphasize good relations with the Jewish community. Already by 2011 five of the one hundred members of the parliament of the canton of Basel-Stadt were secular Turkish and Kurdish Alevites representing Swiss parties of the left and center-left.

It is a different story with the Islamischer Zentralrat der Schweiz (Islamic Central Council of Switzerland).[31] This fast-growing organization is largely led by young Swiss converts to Islam. It is Islamist in orientation and seeks to promote its aims by public campaigns, demonstrations, and measures of initiative and referendum. While it still lacks the demographic mass to do so effectively, it has gained a following among the traditionally religiously and politically passive Bosnian and Albanian Muslim immigrants. Many of the Zentralrat's followers are in the city of Biel, where the Muslim population has grown rapidly in recent years. The Zentralrat is opposed by older, more established Muslim bodies and basically by all Swiss political parties.

At present it is unclear whether the future political influence wielded by Swiss Muslims will be on the liberal or the Islamist side. Developments in other European countries and in North Africa show the Islamists to be gaining influence. In general, the very fact that a group of non-Christian newcomers will have a say in Swiss direct democracy causes unease in a society that is essentially conservative, based on communal entities, loyalties, and identities dating back to the Late Middle Ages. While mostly secularized, large parts of the population still regard a common Christian heritage as the foundation stone of Swiss political culture and social cohesion.

That is one of the reasons Switzerland always had difficulties in dealing with its ancient Jewish presence and refused Jewish immigration for a period beginning in the nineteenth century.[32]Numbering just under eighteen thousand, Jews constitute a tiny fragment of Switzerland's population of 7.9 million. Nevertheless, since at least as far back as the first centralized Swiss state, Swiss public discourse has been preoccupied with things Jewish. The Helvetic Republic, founded in 1798, fell apart largely over the issue of Jewish emancipation. This issue remained at the very center of the discourse up to 1868 when, under American and

French pressure, Switzerland granted equal rights to the Jews. Having benefited from foreign intervention, Jews in Switzerland have come to symbolize unwanted change and foreign influence.

This is attributable to the special, bottom-up character of the Swiss body politic-which, as noted, with its semiautonomous cantons and communities, has enabled medieval stereotypes to survive into modernity. In modern Swiss history the medieval image of the Jew as the religious other has thus transformed into the image of the Jew as the essential other against which, for most of the twentieth century, Swiss identity was defined.

This mindset, which has only been changing since the 1950s, has helped exclude Jews from Swiss Switzerland and helps explain Switzerland's anti-Jewish refugee policy from 1933 to 1952. During the Second World War, Jews fleeing the Nazis were turned back at the border by the thousands; after the war, those who had managed to get in were denied permanent residence and had to leave the country.

This is one of the reasons the Jewish community has stayed small. It now numbers fewer people than in 1900 while the general population has more than doubled since that time.[33] Moreover, the Jewish population is rapidly aging and shrinking. For example, over the past twenty years the 204-year-old Basel Jewish community has diminished by about a third and now numbers about 1,100. Young Swiss Jews have either been opting out of the organized Jewish community and, in most cases, any form of Jewish life, or emigrating, mostly to Israel.[34] According to the Swiss Foreign Ministry, the number of Swiss and their descendants still holding Swiss passports in Israel is some 14,600 and growing.[35]

Not surprisingly, then, the aging and shrinking Swiss Jewish community does not wield much political, social, or cultural influence. Unlike the Jewish communities of Britain, France, or Germany, its public capital is very limited if not nonexistent. There are perhaps a dozen public figures who are Jewish or of Jewish descent. They tend to keep a very low profile regarding that identity or descent. This inconspicuousness, perfected by some Swiss Jews into a veritable art, seems to indicate a social anti-Semitism in the best of times. There still seems to be a "glass ceiling" that inhibits careers. There are virtually no Jews on the boards of any of the major Swiss companies operating globally, whether in banking, insurance, biotechnology, or pharmaceuticals. There are today virtually no Jews in the top ranks of any national political party. Although some members of parliament have Jewish roots, they mostly only admit it behind closed doors. There are also very few large Jewish firms, besides two or three private banks and the occasional medium-sized law firm.

Thus, despite being highly educated and largely middle-class, the Jewish community lacks influence. It is simply too small and too old to have any real political leverage. As the older generation fades away and there is no one to replace it, the community's resources are increasingly limited. Since in direct democracy it is the number of voters, influential local constituencies, and the ability to mobilize citizens so as to organize referendums and win elections that determine power and influence, no political role is foreseeable for Swiss Jewry in the future, beyond a certain moral influence associated with what today are termed "Judeo-Christian values."

This community, then, cannot be counted on to exert influence in situations of need and crisis for Israel, Diaspora Jews, or even for itself. In contrast, even if its growth slows down a bit, the Muslim community stands to wield considerable leverage in the future.

Conclusion

The developments discussed here are not unique to Switzerland; they are part of a wider European trend. What is unique is the Swiss means of reacting through direct democracy. This allows popular unease to express itself and have a real political effect; it also accounts for the fact that, regarding immigration, the situation in Switzerland is not escalating as elsewhere. Because issues are not suppressed but are addressed freely in debate within the limits of the Swiss Anti-Racism Law, there is much more acceptance of the new demographic reality and much less anger and frustration than elsewhere.

At the same time, the new immigrants are under closer scrutiny and have to fulfill more stringent immigration demands than elsewhere. It is because Switzerland is virtually the only country in Europe where the popular voice can be expressed via direct democracy that it has taken a leading role in the current European debate. In other countries it is the elites who decide how to deal with the recent demographic change. Apart from elections every four years or so, the voice of the people is rarely heard if at all.

Dr. Simon Erlanger is a journalist and historian. He was born in Switzerland in 1965 and educated in Basel and Jerusalem. A former employee of the Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem, he presently teaches Jewish history at the University of Lucerne. He also is an editor for Telebasel, a television station for northwestern Switzerland. Dr. Erlanger is an associate of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

[1] This article is based on a lecture presented at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs on 16 January 2011.

[2] For some of the issues under debate, see articles collected by the liberal newspaper Tages-Anzeiger: www.tagesanzeiger.ch/dossiers/schweiz/dossier2.html?dossier_id=572 (last viewed on November 2011). [German]

[3] While the rise of the SVP was stopped in the recent general elections, it still has the highest share of the vote with 26.6 percent; next is the Social Democratic Party with 19.5 percent. Although the SVP has been aiming for 30 percent for years, there seems to be a kind of ceiling built into the Swiss system so that no party can gain more than 28-29 percent of the vote.

[4] Jonathan Steinberg, “Die Schweiz und die Juden: zwei Sonderfälle?” Vortrag im Rahmen der internationalen Tagung “Jüdische Geschichte im deutschsprachigen Europa und die Schweiz,” anlässlich des 50-jährigen Jubiläums des Leo Baeck Instituts, Zürich, 2005. [German]

[5] For example, see the lists and links to the next few votes in the northwestern Swiss canton of Baselland (275,000 inhabitants) at www.baselland.ch/Abstimmungen-Wahlen.310245.0.html (last viewed on 29 November 2011). [German]

[6] On the national level the numbers are one hundred thousand signatures for a Volksinitiative to initiate a law or fifty thousand signatures for a referendum to counter a law proposed by the parliament.

[7] See Jacques Schuster, “Was ist das überhaupt der Westen?” Die Welt, 8 October 2011, www.welt.de/print/die_welt/vermischtes/article13648362/Was-ist-das-ueberhaupt-der-Westen.html (last viewed on 27 November 2011). [German]

[8] See, e.g., Reinhard Mohr, “Träumen von der Toblerone-Republik,” Spiegel Online, 3 December 2009, www.spiegel.de/kultur/tv/0,1518,664896,00.html (last viewed on 26 November 2011) [German]; Benno Tuchschmid, “Die Schweizer Rechte huldigt dem Roten Thilo Sarrazin,” AZ Solothurner Zeitung, 8 September 2010, www.solothurnerzeitung.ch/schweiz/die-schweizer-rechte-huldigt-dem-roten-thilo-sarrazin-11801151 (last viewed on 26 November 2011). [German]

[9] See, e.g., Fabrizio Tassinari, “In Europa übernehmen Technokraten die Macht,” Die Welt Online, 15 November 2011, www.welt.de/debatte/die-welt-in-worten/article13718005/In-Europa-uebernehmen-Technokraten-die-Macht.html (last viewed on 27 November 2011). [German]

[10] See Simone Kaiser, “Ja zu Stuttgart 21. Souveräne Schwaben,” Spiegel Online, 27 November 2011, www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,800250,00.html (last viewed on 28 November 2011). [German]

[11] Michael Hermann, “Direkte Demokratie als Exportschlager?” Tages-Anzeiger, 29 November, 2011, print edition, 11. [German]

[12] Simon Erlanger, “Muslims and Jews in Switzerland,” Changing Jewish Communities 37, 15 October 2008, www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=0&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=623&PID=0&IID=2606&TTL=Muslims_and_Jews_in_Switzerland (last viewed on 22 December 2012).

[13] See Josef Bossart, “Bern. Mit Muslimsternen gegen die Islamophobie,” Kipa, 29 October 2011, hwww.kipa-apic.ch/index.php?na=0,0,0,0,d&ki=225291 (last viewed on 29 November 2011). [German]

[14] For statistics, see www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/01/07/blank/key/01/01.html (last viewed on November 27). [German]

[15] See Matteo Gianni, “Muslime in der Schweiz. Identitätsprofile, Erwartungen und Einstellungen. Eine Studie der Forschungsgruppe ‘Islam in der Schweiz’” (GRIS), Eidgenössische Kommission für Migrationsfragen EKM, Bern, 2010, 12. [German]

[16] Press Communiqué, Bundesamt für Migration, http://www.bfm.admin.ch/bfm/de/home/dokumentation%20/medienmitteilungen/2002/2002-04-19.html%20 (viewed on 2 September 2008). [German]

[17] It is estimated that 10 percent of all Kosovar Albanians presently reside in Switzerland. Many leading members of the former Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK), and of the first government of newly independent Kosovo, have a Swiss connection. Switzerland was one of the first countries to recognize independent Kosovo in the spring of 2008.

[18] See www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/01/05/blank/key/religionen.html

(last viewed on 28 November 2011) [German]. Instead of a population census, data is now collected in an ongoing process.

[19] See “2030 ist jeder 12. Schweizer ein Muslim,” 20 Minuten, 27 January 2011, www.20min.ch/wissen/news/story/21852273 (last viewed on 27 November 2011). [German]

[20] See www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/01/02/blank/key/bevoelkerungsstand/02.html (last viewed on 27 November 2011). [German]

[21] See www.20min.ch/wissen/news/story/21852273 (last viewed on 27 November 2011). [German]

[22] See www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/01/05/blank/key/religionen.html (last viewed on November 27). [German]

[23] See “Muslimische Konvertiten wecken Ängste,” Swissinfo, 20 April 2010,

www.swissinfo.ch/ger/Specials/Die_Schweiz_und_die_Muslime/Im_Fokus/Muslimische_Konvertiten_wecken_Aengste.html?cid=8695342 (last viewed on 27 November 2011). [German]

[24] Pascal Hollenstein, “Scharia-Gerichte in der Schweiz?”NZZ am Sonntag, 28 November 2008, www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/politik/schweiz/scharia-gerichte_fuer_die_schweiz_1.1606772.html (last viewed on 30 November 2011) [German];

Désirée Pomper, “Scharia-Eherecht in der Schweiz?”20 Minuten, 26 June 2011, www.20min.ch/news/schweiz/story/28678820 (last viewed on 30 November 2011). [German]

[25] See “Keine Scharia in der Schweiz,”Tagblatt Online, 30 November 2011,http://admin.toggenburgertagblatt.ch/ostschweiz/stgallen/kantonstgallen/tb-sg/art122380,2776485 (last viewed on 30 November 2011). [German]

[26] See the respective state law: www.welcome-to-basel.bs.ch [German], and the new Law of Integration at www.welcome-to-basel.bs.ch/integrationsgesetz_april07.pdf (last viewed on 27 November 2011). [German]

[27] See “Migranten-Verträge zeigen erste Früchte,” Swissinfo, 9 May 2010, www.swissinfo.ch/ger/gesellschaft/Migranten-Vertraege_zeigen_erste_Fruechte.html?cid=8838332

(last viewed on 28 November 2011). [German]

[28] “‘Der Druck des Amtes ist entscheidend’: Andreas Ross vom Migrationsamt will Ausländer in die Pflicht nehmen,” Basler Zeitung, 1 April 2008. [German]

[29] See Andrea Sommer, “Kanton Bern greift durch in den Asylzentren,”Tages-Anzeiger, 23 November 2011, www.tagesanzeiger.ch/schweiz/standard/Kanton-Bern-greift-in-den-Asylzentren-durch/story/24559833 (last viewed on 30 November 2011) [German]; “Kriminalität von Asylbewerbern nimmt zu,”Schweizer Fernsehen, 27 November 2011 (last viewed on 30 November 2011). [German]

[30]See “BS: Aktuelle Zahlen zur Religionszugehörigkeit,” 4 November 2011, Das Portal der Reformierten, http://www.ref.ch/nc/de/hauptseiten/news/single-news/article/bs-aktuelle-zahlen-zur-religionszugehoerigkeit/ (last viewed on 8 December 2011). [German]

[31]See http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamischer_Zentralrat_Schweiz andhttp://www.izrs.ch/ (both last viewed on 8 December 2011). [German]

[32]See Simon Erlanger,”Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic Roles of Jews in Swiss Society,”Jewish Political Studies Review 22, 1-2(Spring 2010).

[33]Claude Bovay, ed., “Eidgenössische Volkszählung 2000: Religionslandschaft in der Schweiz,” Swiss Federal Statistical Office, Neuchâtel, 2004, 17 [German]. The exact number is given as 17,914, constituting 0.25 percent of the Swiss population in 2000.

[34]See Ralph Weill, “Demographische Charakteristika der Schweizer Juden,”SIG Factsheet, www.swissjews.ch/pdf/de/factsheet/SIG_Factsheet_Demografie_de.pdf (last viewed on 8 December 2009). [German]

[35]On Swiss citizens in Israel, see www.eda.admin.ch/eda/de/home/doc/publi/ptrali.html#ContentPar_0011 (last viewed on 8 December 2011) [German].

Simon Erlanger is a journalist and historian. He was born in Switzerland in 1965 and educated in Basel and Jerusalem. A former employee of the Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem, he presently teaches Jewish history at the University of Lucerne. He also works as an editor for Telebasel, a television station for northwestern Switzerland.