**CSS**
ETH Zurich

# Views on Islam in Times of Terrorism

Islamophobia is not more prevalent in Switzerland today than it was before the terrorist violence that Europe has experienced since the 2015 attacks in Paris. Still, Muslims today are often victims of discrimination. The polarized public discourse about Islam may have helped to erode psychological inhibitions against discriminatory behavior.

By Darius Farman and Enzo Nussio

Since the rise of the so-called "Islamic State" and a wave of attacks in Western Europe, the nexus between Islam as a religion and the use of violence has been at the center of political debate. Although there have been no noteworthy jihadist attacks in Switzerland in the recent past, there are fears in this country, too, regarding the phenomenon of jihadist radicalization and the return of so-called "foreign fighters". For this reason, the Swiss authorities, in coordination with other European nations, have taken certain preventive measures against terrorism. Among these are better coordination between the cantons and the federal authorities led by the Swiss Security Network, legal measures to facilitate prosecution, intensified international cooperation, an expansion of the intelligence service, and a national action plan for the prevention of violent extremism (PVE).



Protesters light candles after Switzerland bans the construction of minarets, on the Federal square in front of the parliament building in Bern, November 29, 2009. *Michael Buholzer / Reuters*

**Opinions on Islam Today**

How have the terrorist attacks and the attendant debate over the state's countermeasures affected attitudes towards Islam and Muslims in Switzerland? This question is a relevant one, as empirical studies show that the experience of discrimination is an important motivating factor in jihadist radicalization. As recent surveys reveal, negative attitudes are prevalent in this country. In early 2017, as part of the study "Sicherheit 2017" conducted by the Military Academy at ETH Zurich and the

CSS, about 1,200 people were asked whether they believed Islam constituted a threat to security in Switzerland. Nearly half of participants (47 per cent) responded in the affirmative.

But can this widespread negative attitude be attributed to the terrorist attacks perpetrated in Western Europe? There can be no firm answer to this question, since there are no consistent metrics for gauging attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. Moreover, the

respondents' biases towards Islam may have shifted over the years. For example, for some people in Switzerland, the success of the popular initiative to ban minarets ("Minaret Initiative") of 2009 may have removed inhibitions against displaying negative attitudes towards Islam.

**Anti-Muslim Sentiment**

A look at various opinion polls shows that despite some intervening fluctuations, there has been no increase of negative atti-

tudes in the longer term since the 1990s. The graph shows that opinions about the religion of Islam as such are considerably more negative than the views about Muslims as a visible population group.

In 1996, five years before the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, 18 per cent of respondents in Switzerland told the World Values Survey that they did not want Muslims as neighbors. In 2009, 16 per cent of respondents agreed with that same sentiment. This does not constitute an appreciable change. In 2008, after major attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), 44 per cent of respondents in the annual study "Sicherheit" (MILAK/CSS) stated that Islam was not a peaceful religion. At the beginning of 2017, when jihadist terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, and Berlin brought religiously motivated violence to the center of public awareness in Switzerland, 42 per cent of respondents stated that Islam was not peaceful.

Based on these cursory data points, it seems that attitudes critical of Islam or anti-Muslim views have not become more prevalent in the wake of jihadist terrorism. After the 2009 Minaret Initiative, which stirred considerable resentment, it even appeared for a while that prejudice against Islam was on the wane. Islamophobia had actually declined continually by 2016, i.e., soon after the major attacks in France and Belgium, from 45 per cent to 33 per cent. While the methodologies used to gather the data points presented here were not always the same, all survey series indicate a stable or declining trajectory.

**Bataclan Attack: No Effect on Views**
In previous cases of terrorist attacks abroad, especially after the 2001 attacks in the US, the countries in question have repeatedly experienced a rallying-around-the-flag effect. At the moment when the shock of violence is still very immediate, people tend to hold on to what is familiar to them, and to distance themselves from anything perceived as alien. This explains, for example, the overwhelming approval for then-president George W. Bush after the 2001 attacks as well as the increasing prejudice against Muslims in the US. However, the rise in bigotry affected not only Muslims, but also other ethnic groups, such as Mexicans.

A future attack in Switzerland could trigger a similar rallying-around-the-flag effect. The result might be stronger support for the institutions that represent one's
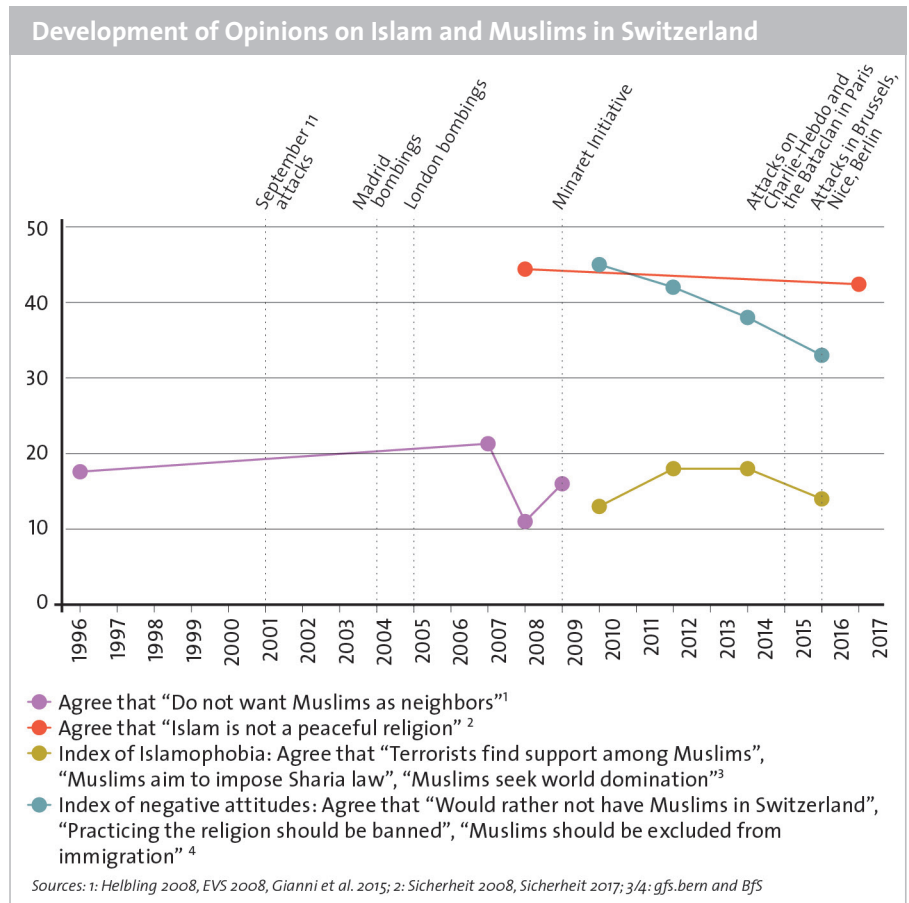
own identity, and more distanced attitudes towards "other" groups, including Muslims. However, attacks that were carried out in neighboring countries and caused great alarm in Switzerland nevertheless did not lead to such displacements. This can be inferred from the survey data gathered immediately before and after the Charlie Hebdo attack of January 2015 (European Social Survey) and before and after the Bataclan attack of November 2015 (Selects 2015). The share of negative attitudes towards Muslims and immigration remained unchanged in the aftermath of the attacks.

Thus, negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims in Switzerland did not become more prevalent in Switzerland either in the longer term since 1990 or in the wake of individual attacks in neighboring countries. This may also be due to the fact that Islam as a religion, and Muslims as a population group, had already been perceived quite negatively even before the attacks of 11 September 2001. Survey data collected in Western Europe in the late 1990s shows that respondents reacted more negatively

to the idea of "Muslims" as neighbors compared to "immigrants". A 2016 survey conducted by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO) on "Diversity and coexistence in Switzerland" suggests something similar: About 14 per cent of respondents had negative attitudes towards the Muslim community. With respect to people of color and the Jewish community, the numbers were 10 and 8 per cent, respectively.

**A Kind of Xenophobia**
Despite the relatively higher rates of prejudice against Muslims, Islamophobia is simply a specific manifestation of xenophobia, as several studies have confirmed. Similar factors appear to be conducive to both Islamophobia and xenophobia: People from rural areas who are older and less educated tend to be skeptical towards strangers and Muslims. Opinions about Islam are also determined by the political culture of a community, i.e., by the prevalent attitudes regarding the political system and society. This nexus becomes visible when the voting patterns in the hometowns of recently polled Swiss respondents are taken into account.



**Development of Opinions on Islam and Muslims in Switzerland**

- Agree that "Do not want Muslims as neighbors"[1]
- Agree that "Islam is not a peaceful religion" [2]
- Index of Islamophobia: Agree that "Terrorists find support among Muslims", "Muslims aim to impose Sharia law", "Muslims seek world domination"[3]
- Index of negative attitudes: Agree that "Would rather not have Muslims in Switzerland", "Practicing the religion should be banned", "Muslims should be excluded from immigration" [4]

Sources: 1: Helbling 2008, EVS 2008, Gianni et al. 2015; 2: Sicherheit 2008, Sicherheit 2017; 3/4: gfs.bern and BfS
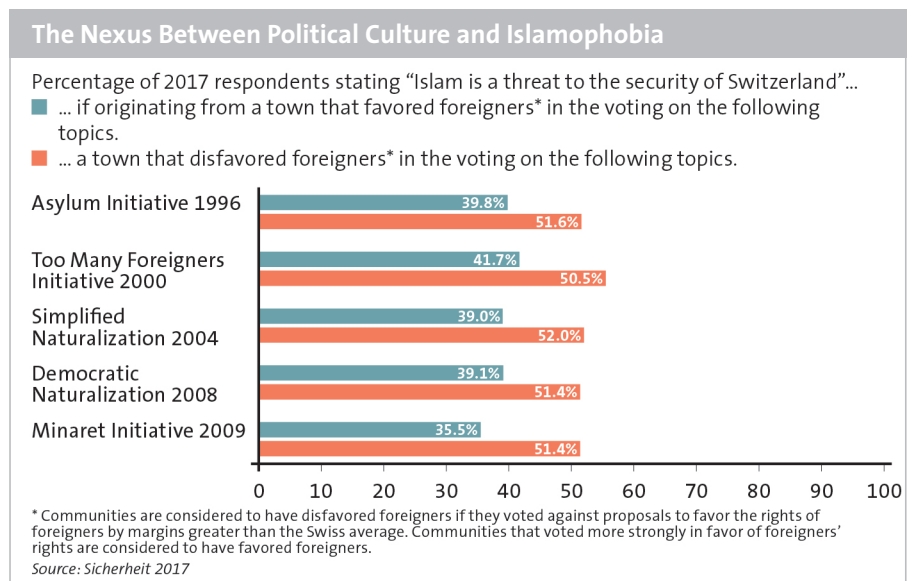
In the study "Security 2017" – as outlined above – 47 per cent of participants stated that Islam was a threat to the security of Switzerland. It is notable that the voting patterns in the hometowns of these respondents on immigration issues since the 1990s are closely associated with their current views on Islam, even though Islam at the time was not an important issue in public discourse. For example, at the national level, 46.3 per cent of voters supported the Asylum Initiative of 1996, which aimed to restrict the rights of asylum-seekers. When we look at those respondents in the 2017 survey whose hometowns supported the Asylum Initiative by more than 46.3 per cent, we find that they are considerably more likely to perceive Islam as a threat than the respondents from communities where the 1996 vote results were more in favor of foreigners (51.6 versus 39.8 per cent). Similar tendencies can be observed in the cases of other votes and referenda on immigration topics since the 1990s – unsurprisingly, since – as is well known – voting patterns tend to be relatively constant. In communities where the vote results favored foreigners, respondents tended to be less afraid of Islam than in communities with xenophobic voting patterns. The crucial point is that the political culture in the respondents' environments plays a key role in shaping attitudes towards Islam and other population groups perceived as "alien". This association remains even after taking into account other factors that determine attitudes towards Islam.

**The Public Debate on Islam**

Although these attitudes towards Islam are entrenched in the political culture, there is still an important difference to the 1990s, when the issue of jihadist terrorism was largely unknown. Today, the categories of "Muslim" and "Islam" are discussed in public much more frequently. This can be seen, for instance, in the number of references in the Swiss media to Muslims, as shown in a study. In the media, coverage of Muslims

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has exploded since the terrorist attacks of 2001. Especially since the attacks in London and Madrid in 2004 and 2005, the category "Muslims" has not only been covered in the international news sections of the Swiss media landscape, but is also "problematized" for Switzerland. The arrival of jihadist terrorism in Europe has led to Is-

**The Nexus Between Political Culture and Islamophobia**

Percentage of 2017 respondents stating "Islam is a threat to the security of Switzerland"...
- <span style="color:teal">■</span> ... if originating from a town that favored foreigners* in the voting on the following topics.
- <span style="color:orange">■</span> ... a town that disfavored foreigners* in the voting on the following topics.

| Initiative | Favored | Disfavored |
|---|---|---|
| Asylum Initiative 1996 | 39.8% | 51.6% |
| Too Many Foreigners Initiative 2000 | 41.7% | 50.5% |
| Simplified Naturalization 2004 | 39.0% | 52.0% |
| Democratic Naturalization 2008 | 39.1% | 51.4% |
| Minaret Initiative 2009 | 35.5% | 51.4% |

(scale: 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100)

* Communities are considered to have disfavored foreigners if they voted against proposals to favor the rights of foreigners by margins greater than the Swiss average. Communities that voted more strongly in favor of foreigners' rights are considered to have favored foreigners.
*Source: Sicherheit 2017*

lam being portrayed as a potential threat to Switzerland.

At the same time, the use of categories such as "Islam" or "Muslim" has changed. Population groups that used to be categorized as "foreigners" are today labeled with the more significant category of "Muslims", as an analysis of 2015 media reports shows. There is thus a clear difference between the relatively stable frequency of negative attitudes towards Islam and the increasing use of the categories "Islam" or "Muslim" in public debate.

Of course, the increasing availability of information and the "problematization" of Islam is not only linked to terrorism, but also connected to other developments. The rise of social media and free tabloids has brought about an upheaval of the media landscape and contributed to making public debate more emotional. Furthermore, according to the FSO, the Muslim community as a share of the permanent resident population increased from 1.6 per cent in 1990 to 5.2 per cent in 2016. This increase also brought challenges concerning the integration of Muslims in Swiss society, and especially the integration of refugees who have arrived in Switzerland in recent years from countries like Syria, Iraq, or Eritrea.

**Widespread Discrimination**

Although there has been no increase in negative attitudes towards Muslims in recent years, there are indications that attacks

and personal assaults on Muslims in public spaces have risen, especially since 2015. The Network for Victims of Racism has listed statistics for discrimination linked to Islamophobia since 2010. Until 2014, the number of annual reported cases was between 20 and 25, but it increased to 58 and 48 cases in 2015 and 2016, respectively (including hostility towards people from Arab countries). In 2017, there were even 90 cases of Islamophobia (54) or hostility towards people from Arab countries (36). These figures are not representative and the number of unreported cases could be high, but the tendency confirms the subjective impressions of Muslims living in Switzerland.

According to the survey "Living Together in Switzerland", conducted by the FSO in 2016, among all denominations, Muslim respondents felt discriminated against most frequently due to religious reasons. Out of the 148 Muslim respondents, 50 stated that they had experienced discrimination for religious or non-religious reasons. A pilot study conducted by gfs.bern in 2017 among 511 Muslims living in Switzerland showed that 30 per cent of respondents had been discriminated against in the past 12 months. Specific examples of discrimination can be found in the report "Muslims in Switzerland". In the interviews, Muslims describe being verbally abused or people spitting at them in public spaces. Some assailants tore off women's headscarves. Other respondents described how they had been refused or lost employment due to their religion.

## Negative Attitudes Hardening?

How is it that while negative opinions have not become more prevalent, discriminating behavior has increased? Greater access to information and a polarized political discourse may have hardened opinions in the course of recent years. If this is true, then Swiss people who already had vaguely negative views on Islam in the 1990s and 2000s may have reinforced that negative basic attitude over time with information that supported their views. In this process, terrorism may have played an important

**The integration of the Muslim population is an important factor for peaceful coexistence in Switzerland.**

role, especially the wave of jihadist attacks since 2015 that also implies a real threat to Switzerland. As a result of these entrenched attitudes, inhibitions against inflicting verbal abuse or even physical violence may have eroded. Conversely, people with a more positive basic attitude seem to have less trouble separating their attitudes towards Islam and Muslims from their views on jihadist terrorism.

## Integration Prevents Radicalization

The integration of the Muslim population is an important factor for peaceful coexistence in Switzerland, especially in times of jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe. The media has a central role in this process. The stable proportion of negative attitudes among the population stands in contrast to the severe polarization of public debate about Muslims and Islam. This debate can reinforce marginalization and deepen the divide between "us" and "them". Studies show how organizations like the "Islamic State" use the media to divide societies along religious lines and exploit perceived discrimination for the purposes of radicalization. According to the gfs pilot study with Muslim residents of Switzerland, 85 per cent of respondents viewed the Swiss media's coverage of Islam as negative. In addition to the traditional media, it is mainly the free tabloids and social media that reinforce the negative views about coverage among Muslims living in Switzerland.

For some years, the Swiss authorities have been making attempts to overcome potential rifts. Although the lack of state recognition for Muslim communities imposes limits on cooperation, the authorities are increasingly in contact with local Muslim associations, for instance through the cantonal police corps. Furthermore, a distribution policy for asylum seekers at the federal level, designed to counteract social ghettoization, creates good conditions for the integration of the Muslim population. This is precisely what terrorist organizations are trying to prevent with their attacks.

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