

## Switzerland no longer quite so neutral, positions itself as a player in Middle East disputes

Over the past year Swiss foreign policy towards the Middle East has shifted away from the country's long-held adherence to neutrality towards positions that fall more into line with the wider Western camp

**A**rab Spring unrest and increasing international pressure on the Iranian government to halt its nuclear programme have forced Switzerland to act more in accordance with policies advocated by the **United States** and *European Union*, rather than sticking to the strictly neutral stance that has, for decades, defined its foreign policy. Bern's decision to participate in wide-ranging sanctions against **Libya** and **Syria** has led some to say that Switzerland is now following a trend that may undermine its image as a state that follows an independent path. As *GSN* has observed, in Libya other players – notably **Turkey** – have started to play the roles traditionally reserved for Switzerland (*GSN 903/16*).

Based on principles of neutrality and the recognition of states rather than governments, Swiss policy in the Middle East has tended to be characterised by engagement, mediation and conflict resolution through arbitration. Switzerland over the past decade has played a central role in encouraging a **Palestinian-Israeli** peace deal (with the 2003 General Initiative/Accord), and while the US and EU list *Hizbollah* and *Hamas* as terrorist organisations, Switzerland is one of the few Western states to not participate in their isolation. Indeed, following Hamas' 2006 electoral victory, Bern tried to engage the movement in dialogue to encourage its moderation. In line with its unwillingness to isolate unpopular governments and movements, Switzerland has also been actively mediating between Iran and Western states; in 2003 Bern attempted to broker a deal between Washington and Tehran, and started a human rights dialogue with Iran.

While some Western governments have appreciated Swiss mediation efforts, Bern's approach to the Middle East is not without controversy. Switzerland has been criticised for being disproportionately critical of Israel, too complacent towards Hamas and *Hizbollah*, and opportunistic when it comes to engagement with Iranian President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**.

Some observers argue that internal disagreement on how Switzerland should position itself abroad has led to policy incoherence and political tensions. While Switzerland's right-wing parties regard neutrality as equivalent to 'not meddling' and 'keeping to oneself', centre-left social democrats argue that neutrality should not be confused with passivity and indifference. These diverging domestic interpretations of neutrality have increasingly led to tensions on foreign policy.

Recent Libyan-Swiss relations have not been easy; there was a furore when two Swiss businessmen were held captive in Libya

following the brief arrest in Geneva of former leader **Muammar Qadhafi's** thuggish son **Hannibal El Qadhafi** in 2008. But the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) still had to defend its decision to open Swiss airspace to Western aircraft on missions over Libya this year, by emphasising that this would not compromise the country's adherence to neutrality. Foreign minister **Micheline Calmy-Rey** had to argue that the *UN Security Council* could not be considered a party to the conflict, and therefore Switzerland was not taking sides by opening up airspace. Calmy-Rey – who has come under fire from right-wing politicians – recently announced that she will not stand for re-election in December elections and expressed regret that there is no internal consensus on the country's foreign policy positioning, meaning Switzerland is unable to react quickly to international challenges.

### The protective power mandate

Switzerland has been the principal facilitator of communications between the US and Iran since they cut off diplomatic relations following the 1979 revolution – in what is known as a 'protective power mandate'. This is a special feature of Swiss foreign policy which dates back to the 19th century, when the country looked after the interests of the Kingdom of Bavaria during the Franco-Prussian war. Under this term, the protecting power (in this case Switzerland) represents the interests of one state (the sending state) in a third state (the receiving state) and provides protection for the citizens of the sending state who live in the receiving state. Through these services a channel of communication is also kept open between the conflicting states. Other examples of this special Swiss mandate are the US in **Cuba** (and vice-versa), Iran in **Egypt**, and the **Russian Federation** in **Georgia** (and vice-versa).

The FDFA regards this as a "key element of Swiss foreign policy and a contribution to international efforts to resolve conflicts". Bern has repeatedly made use of this mandate to mediate between the Iran and the US. A FDFA official told *GSN* that "the professional and discreet provision of this service is greatly appreciated by the states concerned and earns Switzerland respect and goodwill at the international level. As for a current example: both the White House and the Department of State thanked Switzerland for its role in the release of the American hikers from Iran's Evin prison."

When *GSN* raised **Oman's** role in the release of the hikers, the FDFA source commented that the "US has simply been trying

to use all possible channels to release the hikers, and while Oman was one of these, this does not mean that the emirate is representing US interests any better than Switzerland” (GSN 909/16). Acting as the US representative in Iran is “to the benefit of Swiss foreign policy interests”, the FDFA official said.

According to Dr **Daniel Möckli**, research fellow at the *Centre for Security Studies* at Zurich’s *Federal Institute of Technology (ETH)*, it also “opens the door for Switzerland to decision-makers in Washington and Tehran to which it would otherwise not have access to”.

Bern’s good relations with the Iranian government helped to facilitate the €18bn gas deal of the Swiss energy company *Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft Laufenburg AG (EGL)* with the state-owned *National Iranian Gas Export Company*. Supported by the Swiss foreign ministry, EGL agreed in 2008 to buy 194 tcf/yr of Iranian gas for 25 years. However, the deal caused widespread international and domestic criticism, with some arguing that not only did it openly undermine Washington’s efforts at isolating Tehran, but the picture of Calmy-Rey dressed in headscarf and signing the contract in the company of Ahmadinejad was interpreted as her indifference to women’s rights in Iran, damaging Switzerland’s image as a country actively engaged in human rights dialogues.

Holding on to the principle of impartiality, Switzerland only joined the US and EU on tougher sanctions targeting Iran’s nuclear efforts at the beginning of 2011. This decision came just weeks after deputy foreign minister **Peter Maurer** announced in Tehran that Bern preferred negotiations to sanctions to settle differences between Iran and Western powers. The State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) welcomed this step, having reportedly been opposed to the foreign ministry’s earlier blocking of tougher policies against Iran.

Möckli told GSN the decision to delay the implementation of additional US and EU sanctions was due to Switzerland’s desire to position itself as a “mediator in the nuclear crisis and as bridge-builder between the West and the Muslim world”. But “this possibility became weaker as negative reactions to the 2008 gas deal prompted the Swiss government to switch to a low profile approach in the nuclear issue – and indeed in the Middle East at large.”

### Another Arab Spring revolution

The Arab Spring appears to have further reinforced Switzerland’s move to become a de facto member of the Western-led international order. Bern is now signed up to EU sanctions against Syria, in late September joining moves to halt investment in Syria. Such decisions over the past few months have led some to argue that Swiss foreign policy towards the Middle East reflects a stance that economic relations with the US and the country’s standing with the EU are now more important than retaining a position as neutral mediator.

In May, the foreign ministry announced the suspension of a

policy of engaging in bilateral human rights dialogues with countries such as Iran and **China**. But Bern wants to remain a player in the region. The Swiss government has proposed the earmarking of CHF50m (\$54.6m) over four years (2012–15) for a special programme of peace-building in North Africa and the Middle East as part of its *Rahmenkredit für zivile Friedensförderung und Menschenrechte* – a framework for the promotion of peace and human rights – approved recently by the *Nationalrat* (lower house of the Federal Assembly of Switzerland); it still has to go through the *Ständerat* (upper house). One observer told GSN, “it is not yet clear what activities in what countries the special programme would fund, but it’s certainly one element of the Swiss government’s response to the Arab Spring”.

### SUCCESSION IN QATAR

## Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani: heir apparent

Emir Sheikh **Hamad**’s fourth son Sheikh Tamim was appointed heir apparent in an August 2003 move, when he replaced his older full brother Sheikh **Jassim** (GSN 716/6). The changeover was widely regarded as sensible – the laid-back Jassim, who was seen as having little political ambition, had been a stopgap until Tamim had finished his education and gained more experience in high-level politics. There were two even older brothers, **Mishaal** and **Fahd**, by the emir’s first wife Sheikha **Mariam Bint Mohammed Al-Thani** but they were also jumped over in favour of Sheikh Tamim.

For several years in the mid-2000s observers would often speculate about Tamim’s position vis-à-vis his powerful distant relative foreign minister (and now prime minister) Sheikh **Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jabr Al-Thani** – HBJ (GSN 791/2). But Qatar-watchers say that in the past couple of years Tamim has become increasingly powerful. One senior source told GSN recently that as the confidence and resources of the heir apparent gradually rose in the late 2000s, the power of HBJ peaked. This observer said, “There has been a gradual transfer of power from the office of the prime minister/foreign minister to the office of the heir apparent. Of course HBJ still has great power on the international scene, but is not so powerful domestically.

There are long-running tensions between the ministerial system backed by HBJ and the palace system – this tension is increasing but will eventually resolve itself when Tamim becomes ruler...” By the ‘palace system’ the source meant the various Supreme Councils, which gradually became very influential in policy-making, seen around Doha which generally fall under the control of the emir’s high-flying wife Sheikha **Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Misnad** and Tamim. At times there has been confusion over the role of the councils vis-à-vis the official government ministries which supposedly handle the portfolios in question and report to HBJ.