

SWITZERLAND

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Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought Muslim congregational life in Switzerland almost to a complete standstill for several months. At the same time, the pandemic failed to hinder important structural developments in the field of Muslim religious umbrella organisations. Notably, the two Albanian Muslim umbrella organisations merged into one, thus giving more weight to the biggest ethnic group among Muslims in Switzerland.

Several legal cases that had been ongoing for several years were settled in 2020. They were related to board members of the Islamic Central Council Switzerland (*Islamischer Zentralrat Schweiz – IZRS*), on charges of support for terrorist organisations on the one hand, and to an acting member of Parliament for racial discrimination on the other. The repatriation of persons who had travelled to ISIS-controlled territories, in particular women and children, as well as two knife attacks by Muslim individuals, framed as terrorist incidents, were among the major matters of public debate in 2020.

Public Debates³

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³ An analysis on what types of Muslim perspectives received attention in mass media public discourses in German-speaking Switzerland, has been offered in Trucco, Noemi, “The variety of Muslim interpretations in mass media public discourses in German-speaking Switzerland”, *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, vol.46 (2020), pp. 1-23.

In 2020, public debates on Islam and Muslims in Switzerland can be divided into four main topics: issues linked to jihadism and Islamist terrorism; the face veil (niqab); the death of the most fervent defender of Islam in Switzerland; and ongoing controversies about imams.

Initiated in 2019, the repatriation of jihadi foreign fighters, their families, and others who had travelled to the territories controlled by ISIS and other jihadi groups, was still a debated question in 2020.⁴ The Federal Government opposed their repatriation, arguing that the abuses were committed abroad, and that the collection of evidence is more likely to be successful if the investigation is carried out there. Another argument was that these individuals had chosen to join a terrorist organisation and that they must now face the consequences. Among the organisations in favour of repatriation was the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which considers it a humanitarian duty, in particular when it comes to children.⁵ The advocates of repatriation also underlined the emergency of proper socio-educational support for minors in order to avoid potential radicalisation.

While the Federal Government assessed the possibility of repatriating children, the repatriation of their parents was more hotly debated. In February 2020, for example, *Le Temps* revealed that since 2018, Switzerland had refused repeated proposals from the United States to repatriate three Swiss jihadis detained in Syria.⁶ It should also be noted that the Swiss government is not opposed to their return, but it will not actively intervene to repatriate them. For example, a family of three supporters of ISIS (two men and one woman) expelled by

⁴ Schneuwly Purdie, Mallory, and Andreas Tunger-Zanetti, "Switzerland", in Egdūnas Račius, Stephanie Müssig, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, Jørgen S. Nielsen, and Oliver Scharbrodt (eds.), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, vol.12 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 646-647.

⁵ "Pour les mineurs suisses en Syrie, 'il y a un devoir humanitaire d'intervenir'", *RTS*, 19 February 2020, www.rts.ch/info/suisse/11104112-pour-les-mineurs-suisses-en-syrie-il-y-a-un-devoir-humanitaire-d'intervenir.html, accessed 5 April 2021. According to the available data, seven Swiss children are still in camps.

⁶ "Berne aurait refusé l'offre américaine de rapatrier ses djihadistes de Syrie", *RTS*, 21 February 2020, www.rts.ch/info/suisse/11108036-berne-aurait-refuse-loffre-americaine-de-rapatrier-ses-djihadistes-de-syrie.html, accessed 5 April 2021.

Turkey were admitted into Zurich in February 2020.⁷ The Attorney General of Switzerland opened criminal proceedings for their violation of the *Federal Act on the Proscription of the Groups Al-Qaeda and Islamic State and Associated Organisation (RS 122)*. These criminal proceedings are among around 70 ongoing cases for violations of *RS 122*, including the arrest of four people in Gruyère in October 2020.⁸

2020 was also the year of the first two presumed terrorist attacks linked to jihadism on Swiss soil. In Morges (canton of Vaud), on 13 September 2020, a 26-year-old man stabbed to death a 29-year-old man. The perpetrator, a Swiss man of Turkish origin, who had broken up with his family and was suffering from mental disorders, was released from prison in July 2020. He was incarcerated for attempted arson at a petrol station and was being watched by the Federal Intelligence Services for possible links with terrorist organisations. His conditions of release and his psycho-social follow-up were seriously questioned. In his confession, the young man confessed that he had acted to avenge the Prophet Muhammad.⁹

Two months later, in Lugano, a 28-year-old Swiss woman assaulted two other women with a knife in a department store in the city. One of them was seriously injured. The perpetrator of the attack was also known to the Federal Intelligence Services and had been placed in a psychiatric institution after attempting to travel to Syria in 2017.¹⁰ Although both offenders

⁷ Maître, Andy, “Trois sympathisants présumés de l’État islamique ont été rapatriés en Suisse”, *ArcInfo*, 3 January 2020, www.arcinfo.ch/articles/suisse/trois-sympathisants-presumes-de-l-etat-islamique-ont-ete-rapatries-en-suisse-892229, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁸ “Fribourg: Arrestation de quatre personnes suspectées de terrorisme”, *Le Temps*, 2 October 2020, www.letemps.ch/suisse/fribourg-arrestation-quatre-personnes-suspectees-terrorisme, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁹ Rocchi, Ludovic, “Le suspect de Morges a avoué et dit avoir agi pour venger le Prophète”, *RTS*, 17 September 2020, www.rts.ch/info/regions/val-de-romandie/11608255-le-suspect-de-morges-a-avoue-et-dit-avoir-agi-pour-venger-le-prophete.html; Skellaugs, Aïna, “Attaque à Morges: jusqu’à quand un terroriste peut-il bénéficier de la présomption de folie”, *Le Temps*, 16 September 2020, www.letemps.ch/suisse/attaque-morges-jusqua-un-terroriste-peut-il-beneficier-presomption-folie, both accessed 5 April 2021.

¹⁰ “L’auteure présumée de l’attaque à Lugano voulait se rendre en Syrie”, *Le Temps*, 25 November 2019, www.letemps.ch/suisse/lauteure-presumee-lattaque-lugano-voulait-se-rendre-syrie; “Possible motivation terroriste dans l’agression au couteau à Lugano”, *RTS*, 24 November 2020, www.rts.ch/info/regions/autres-cantons/11775931-possible-motivation-terroriste-dans-lagression-au-couteau-a-lugano.html, both accessed 5 April 2021.

were known to be mentally ill, their connection to jihadi networks was established. In addition, the perpetrator of the Morges killing left behind him a testimony explaining his act. These various proceedings and cases thus bring back to the forefront the precarious nature of Switzerland's legal instruments for criminally prosecuting terrorist suspects. The Federal Government proposed a new Law against terrorism.¹¹ This would be one of the most restrictive laws in Europe, thus this legal proposal has caused a wave of indignation, particularly among the youth sections of the Green and Socialist parties. They launched a referendum in November 2020.¹²

On 23 March 2020, Nora Illi, one of the main public figures of Swiss Islam, died at the age of 35 from cancer, leaving behind her husband and six children. She had grown up in the canton of Zurich, was baptised into the Catholic faith at the age of seven at her own request, delved into the punk scene as a youth, left high school early, converted to Islam at the age of 18, married Qaasim Illi, another convert, and founded the Islamic Central Council Switzerland (*Islamischer Zentralrat Schweiz - IZRS / Conseil central islamique Suisse*) at the age of 24 together with her husband and other young activists. Within the IZRS she was in charge of the department of women's affairs. To the general public she was known for wearing the face veil in public, defending polygyny and animating controversial questions.¹³ The style of publicity cultivated by Nora Illi and the IZRS as a whole was maintained by the organisation beyond her death: the funeral was broadcast as an internet livestream on YouTube on 26 March 2020.¹⁴

¹¹ "Mesures policières de lutte contre le terrorisme", *FedPol*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.fedpol.admin.ch/fedpol/fr/home/terrorismus/terrorismus-aktuelle-lage/botschaft-massnahmen.html>, accessed 5 April 2021.

¹² In January 2021, more than 140,000 signatures against the Law had been registered. The referendum will be voted on in June 2021. ATS, "Quelques 142'800 signatures contre la loi sur le terrorisme", 14 January 2020, www.letemps.ch/suisse/quelque-142-800-signatures-contre-loi-terrorisme, accessed 5 April 2021.

¹³ See Schneuwly Purdie, Mallory, and Andreas Tunger-Zanetti, "Switzerland", in Oliver Scharbrodt, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, Jørgen S. Nielsen, and Egdūnas Račius (eds), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, vol.9, (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 659-678. Obituaries: Kälin, Kari, "Feministin der anderen Art", *Aargauer Zeitung*, 25 March 2020, p. 7; Pelda, Kurt, "Sie war die bekannteste Niqab-Trägerin der Schweiz", *Tages-Anzeiger*, 25 March 2020, p. 6.

¹⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8YAo9MtNp4, accessed 5 April 2021.

With the death of Nora Illi the public debate on the ban of face veiling has changed in Switzerland. She had been the only person wearing a niqab to insist publicly on the freedom to dress as one likes. At the same time proponents of the ban are now lacking the *bête noire* she had been for many. The proposal to ban any face veiling, whether religiously motivated or not, had its final round at the Federal Parliament in June 2020. Both chambers declined an outright general ban as requested by a popular initiative brought in three years ago. They instead favoured a much more moderate proposal of the Federal Government stating the obligation to show one's face for identification before authorities and inspectors in public transport. The final decision is up to the voters in a referendum on 7 March 2021. The special circumstances caused by COVID-19, that have made disguised faces in public an everyday sight, seem to have cooled down considerably the controversial nature of wearing the niqab. The number of women doing so in Switzerland is around 30, not counting tourists from Arab countries in the summer.¹⁵

The public debate about the role of imams calmed down as compared to 2019.¹⁶ The case of a part-time imam in Kriens (canton of Lucerne), who had allegedly recommended the use of violence against unruly wives as a last resort,¹⁷ was closed politically and legally. A minor interpolation submitted in 2019 in the Cantonal Parliament, was answered by the authorities in a sober way.¹⁸ In May 2020, the prosecutor stayed the inquiry because the allegations had not been substantiated.¹⁹ Five weeks later, the local newspaper even managed

¹⁵ Tunger-Zanetti, Andreas, *Verhüllung. Die Burka-Debatte in der Schweiz* (Zürich: Hier und Jetzt, 2021), pp. 46–50.

¹⁶ Their uneasy position amidst contradictory stakeholder expectations is now discussed in Schmid, Hansjörg, “‘I’m just an imam, not Superman’: Imams in Switzerland”, *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, vol.9, no.1 (2020), pp. 64–95.

¹⁷ Schneuwly Purdie and Tunger-Zanetti, “Switzerland”, in Račius *et al.* (eds), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, vol.12, pp. 644–645.

¹⁸ Regierungsrat des Kantons Luzern (Government of the canton of Lucerne), *Antwort auf Anfrage A 117*, Luzern, 4 February 2019, /www.lu.ch/kr/parlamentsgeschaefte (search for “imam” and issue no. “A 117”), accessed 4 April 2021.

¹⁹ “Untersuchung gegen Prediger eingestellt”, *Luzerner Zeitung*, 6 May 2020, p. 15.

to interview the former imam, making his view of the case accessible to the public.²⁰ As to another, more controversial, imam, Abu Ramadan, legal procedures on behalf of instigative speech and fraudulent receipt of social security benefits, continued. Since the mosque in Biel-Bienne in 2020 did not offer him a platform any longer, Abu Ramadan engaged in similar discourses on social media.²¹

In August, *Tages-Anzeiger* revealed that the federal authorities had paid 40,000 Swiss Francs (€37,000) to the Turkish mosque in Ecublens near Lausanne for security measures. This newspaper and others found it appalling to see public funds given to an “Erdoğan mosque” as the newspaper labelled it, but the authorities stated that the mosque fulfilled the criteria, as well as the ten Jewish institutions that had been given between 3,750 and 125,000 francs. The subsidies had been allocated for the first time on the basis of a new Law to protect the security of interests and venues belonging to minorities.²²

In August 2020, a small publishing house in Vienna published the German translation of the *Qatar Paper* by Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot (the original is in French, published in 2019). The book, analysing documents from the years 2011 to 2014, aims to show the Qatar Charity Foundation’s funding of a number of Islamic centres in Europe, among them five institutions in Switzerland.²³ Although the German version adds nothing new compared to the French one, it prompted several press articles uncritically echoing the thesis of an ongoing Islamisation strategy by the Muslim Brotherhood, backed by Qatar, based entirely on the book’s outdated pieces of information.²⁴

²⁰ Knobel, Robert, “Jetzt spricht der Krienser Imam”, *Luzerner Zeitung*, 10 June 2020, p. 19.

²¹ Pelda, Kurt, “Abu Ramadan hetzt weiter”, *SonntagsZeitung*, 1 November 2020, p. 13.

²² Häfliger, Markus, “Der Bund finanziert eine Erdogan-Moschee”, *Tages-Anzeiger*, 7 August 2020, p. 5.

²³ For more details, see Schneuwly Purdie and Tunger-Zanetti, “Switzerland”, in Račius *et al.* (eds), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, vol.12, p. 650.

²⁴ For example Meier, Michael, “Wie Katar Europa islamisiert”, *Tages-Anzeiger*, 2 October 2020, p. 35.

Transnational Links

On 19 January 2020, the Muslim World League, administrator of the Geneva Cultural and Islamic Foundation and owner of the property, declared that they wanted to hand the Geneva mosque to a Swiss board of directors, representative of Muslims in Switzerland.²⁵ Since its creation in 1978, the Geneva mosque has been financed and directed by Saudi Arabia through the Muslim World League. This proximity between the Saudi state and the Geneva mosque has regularly been the subject of controversies because of Saudi Arabia's alignment with, and global propagation of, Wahhabi Islam. In 2015, the mosque was suspected to be a central location where jihadi sympathisers had recruited young people to join factions linked to al-Qaeda and ISIS. It was notably the latter cases, including the dismissal in 2017 of two of its imams listed in France for possible links with a terrorist organisation, which led Riyadh to withdraw from the mosques it finances, notably, in Europe. However, in February 2020, the president of the foundation said he could not find a satisfactory buyer. The question of the buyer is indeed critical on several levels, including the financial independence and the ideological orientation that the mosque could then adopt. At the end of December 2020, the discussions around a possible takeover by a Swiss organisation still seemed to be at a standstill.

On 3 November a special unit of the police forces of the canton of Zurich arrested two young men in the city of Winterthur. The action came as a consequence of information exchange with the Austrian authorities.²⁶ Subsequent investigation found that a man who had

²⁵ “La mosquée du Petit-Saconnex remise aux musulmans de Suisse”, *RTS*, 19 January 2020, www.rts.ch/info/regions/geneve/11025683-la-mosquee-du-petit-saconnex-remise-aux-musulmans-de-suisse.html; interview with Mallory Schnewly Purdie: *RTS La Première*, “La mosquée de Genève peut-elle s'affranchir de la tutelle saoudienne?”, *Forum*, 19 January 2019, www.rts.ch/play/tv/forum-video/video/la-mosquee-de-geneve-peut-elle-saffranchir-de-la-tutelle-saoudienne-interview-de-mallory-schnewly-purdie?urn=urn:rts:video:11026395, both accessed 5 April 2021.

²⁶ Minor, Liliane, Mirko Plüss, and Thomas Knellwolf, “Zürcher Polizei nimmt zwei Männer fest”, *Tages-Anzeiger*, 4 November 2020, p. 2.

shot four people dead and wounded more than 20 others in Vienna on 2 November, had been met by these two friends from Winterthur in the summer of 2020.²⁷

Law and Domestic Politics²⁸

The legal dispute involving, on the one side, those opposing the IZRS, and the Attorney General of Switzerland on the other, that had started in 2018, found its epilogue in 2020. Three board members had been charged for violation of the *Federal Act on the Proscription of the Groups Al-Qaeda and Islamic State and Associated Organisation (RS 122)* for producing and broadcasting two videos with Abdallah al-Muhaisini, a prominent figure linked to al-Qaeda in Syria.²⁹ These videos were considered to be propaganda under the jurisdiction of *RS 122*. At first the Federal Court had convicted Naïm Cherni, but acquitted Nicolas Blancho and Abdel Azziz Qaasim Illi. Cherni appealed against his conviction and the Prosecutor's Office appealed against the acquittal of Blancho and Illi. On 13 March 2020, the acquittal of the two board members was overturned, and the 20-month suspended prison sentence of Naïm Cherni was confirmed.³⁰ On 27 October 2020, the Federal Criminal Court pronounced suspended sentences against Blancho and Illi. The two founders of the IZRS were thus sentenced to 15- and 18-month suspended prison sentences respectively.³¹

²⁷ Pelda, Kurt, "Dünne Beweise für Mitschuld am Terroranschlag in Wien", *Tages-Anzeiger*, 27 February 2021, p. 6.

²⁸ An up to date overview on most legal aspects of Muslim life in Switzerland is offered in Pahud de Mortanges, René and Raimund Süess, *Muslims und schweizerisches Recht: Ein Ratgeber für Experten und Laien* (Zürich: Schulthess, 2019).

²⁹ Tunger-Zanetti, Andreas, and Mallory Schneuwly Purdie, "Switzerland", in Oliver Scharbrodt, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, Jørgen S. Nielsen, and Egdūnas Račius (eds), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, vol.11 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 614-630.

³⁰ "Acquittement annulé dans l'affaire de propagande terroriste du CCIS", *RTS*, 13 March 2020, www.rts.ch/info/suisse/11162641-acquittement-annule-dans-l-affaire-de-propagande-terroriste-du-ccis.html, accessed 5 April 2021.

³¹ "Des peines avec sursis pour Nicolas Blancho et Qaasim Illi", *Swissinfo*, 27 October 2020, www.swissinfo.ch/fre/des-peines-avec-sursis-pour-nicolas-blancho-et-qaasim-illi/46123772, accessed 5 April 2021.

The Federal Criminal Court handed down its verdict in two further cases relating to *RS 122*. Firstly, on 11 September 2020, it sentenced an ISIS supporter, named by the media “the Emir of Winterthur”, to 50 months in prison. He was found guilty of participation in a criminal organisation. He had also been accused of recruiting young people through the “*Lies!*” campaign (“*Read!*”, referring to Qur’an 96:1) in order to send them to Syria. He himself was in Syria in 2013.³² Secondly, the Federal Criminal Court sentenced a 52-year-old Iraqi man to 70 months in prison for supporting ISIS. The court held that the accused had worked for ISIS, played various roles in it, and maintained relations with its leaders.³³

Two legal proceedings, one initiated in 2014 against Jean-Luc Addor, National Councillor for the canton of Valais (and a member of the Lower House for the populist-right wing Swiss People’s Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei / Union Démocratique du Centre – SVP/UDC*)), and a second in 2019 against Yvan Perrin, former National Councillor of Neuchâtel, and a member of the same party as Addor, came to an end in 2020. Following a vendetta shooting (blood revenge) in a mosque in St Gallen that left a person dead, Addor had posted “We ask for more” (“*on en redemande*” in French) on his Facebook and Twitter accounts. In 2017, the District Court of Sion (canton of Valais) sentenced him to a suspended 60 day sentence and a fine of 3,000 Swiss francs. Addor had appealed, arguing that his comment was meant to be ironic; the Federal Court did not accept this argument. On the contrary, it saw an invitation to welcome the death of a Muslim man and confirmed the conviction.³⁴

³² “Un partisan de l’Etat islamique surnommé ‘l’émir de Winterthur’, condamné à 50 mois de prison ferme”, *Le Temps*, 11 September 2020, www.letemps.ch/suisse/un-partisan-letat-islamique-surnomme-lemir-winterthour-condamne-50-mois-prison-ferme, accessed 5 April 2021.

³³ “*Lourde condamnation mais pas d’internement pour un djihadiste*”, *RTS*, 8 October 2020, www.rts.ch/info/suisse/11663481-lourde-condamnation-mais-pas-dinternement-pour-un-djihadiste.html, accessed 5 April 2021.

³⁴ “*Le Tribunal Fédéral condamne Jean-Luc Addor pour discrimination raciale*”, *RTS*, 4 November 2020, www.rts.ch/info/suisse/11727360-le-tribunal-federal-condamne-jeanluc-addor-pour-discrimination-raciale.html, accessed 5 April 2021.

Conversely, Yvan Perrin was acquitted of similar charges. In 2019, Perrin published on his Facebook account comments about the Museum of Civilisations of Islam in La Chaux-de-Fonds, implying links between this cultural institution and the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation. The accusation claimed that the former National Councillor had propagated an ideology aimed at systematically denigrating Muslims because of their religious affiliation. While Yvan Perrin was acquitted of the charges of offense by omission, the six commentators of his initial Facebook post were convicted by court order.³⁵ It should be noted that in this case, Yvan Perrin was defended by Jean-Luc Addor who, in civil life, is a lawyer.

Muslim dress briefly became an issue in the National Parliament on 16 December 2020. Jean-Luc Addor, mentioned above, had asked both Houses of Parliament to create a constitutional clause allowing communes to prohibit head coverings in classrooms. The move, though formulated in neutral terms, was clearly aimed at the headscarf of Muslim girls, and followed a failed attempt to regulate the issue at the cantonal level in 2018. The National Council turned the request down with 130 to 51 votes.³⁶

Both chambers of Parliament debated a motion for obliging retailers to indicate the slaughtering method of meat products. The motion wanted to ban the import of meat not slaughtered according to Swiss standards. Since 1893 these standards state that slaughtering without prior stunning is forbidden, even in a religious context.³⁷ Certified halal and kosher meat has had to be imported since then. The proposal debated in 2020 would have stopped even

³⁵ “Yvan Perrin n’est pas coupable de discrimination raciale”, *Swissinfo*, 15 July 2020, www.swissinfo.ch/fre/yvan-perrin-n-est-pas-coupable-de-discrimination-raciale/45905464, accessed 5 April 2021. For new research on Muslims’ own perception of being discriminated against, see Lindemann, Anaïd, and Jörg Stolz, “Perceived discrimination among Muslims and its correlates. A comparative analysis”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol.44, no.2 (2020), 173-194.

³⁶ Text of the parliamentary initiative and the debate online is available at: <https://www.parlament.ch/de/suche#k=19.454>, accessed 20 December 2020. For the cantonal attempt, see Tunger-Zanetti and Schnewly Purdie, “Switzerland”, in Scharbrodt *et al.* (eds), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, vol.11, pp. 621–622.

³⁷ The ban of 1893 was the result of the first referendum on a popular initiative, clearly anti-Semitic in this case: Bolliger, Christian, “Die eidgenössische Volksabstimmung über das Schächtverbot von 1893”, in Adrian Vatter (ed.), *Vom Schächt- zum Minarettverbot* (Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2011), pp. 70-92.

this import, rendering life more difficult for Jews and Muslims adhering to kosher and halal rules. While the National Council accepted the motion by 122 to 65 votes, the Council of States rejected it by 37 to 4 votes, rendering it obsolete.³⁸

In 2016, the Government of the canton of Neuchâtel opened a consultation on the recognition of religious communities. The proposal was sent for revision in 2017. In September 2020, the Neuchâtel parliament approved a new version of the Law. The recognition of public law would give these communities the right to receive a voluntary contribution from their members through the State, to have access to school premises in order to give religious instruction classes to pupils (outside school hours), or the right to chaplaincy in public institutions such as prisons and hospitals. Both, the populist right-wing Swiss People's Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei / Union Démocratique du Centre – SVP/UDC*) and the Liberal Radical Party (*Die Liberalen / Les Libéraux Radicaux - FDP/PLR*), launched a referendum on granting this status to new religious communities automatically. According to these two right-wing parties, the people should be able to decide which communities can obtain this status.³⁹

In the canton of Zurich, the Government decided to strengthen its cooperation with the structures of the Union of Islamic Organisations in Zurich (*Vereinigung der islamischen Organisationen in Zürich – VIOZ*). It is the declared aim of the canton to make VIOZ the reliable representative organisation of the Muslim community for the State as well as for the public.⁴⁰ VIOZ is one of the oldest cantonal Muslim umbrella organisations, and nearly a quarter of Switzerland's Muslims live in the canton of Zurich.

³⁸ The text of the parliamentary initiative and the debate is available at: www.parlament.ch (search for 20.3005), accessed 5 April 2021.

³⁹ Henchoz, Guillaume, "Les citoyens neuchâtelois débattent de religion", *Réformés.ch*, 6 October 2020, www.reformes.ch/politique/2020/10/les-citoyens-neuchatelais-debattent-de-religions-suisse-neuchatel-politique, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁴⁰ Regierungsrat des Kantons Zürich, *Regierungsratsbeschluss Nr. 710/2020*, Zürich, 8 July 2020, www.zh.ch/bin/zhweb/publish/regierungsratsbeschluss-unterlagen./2020/710/RRB-2020-0710.pdf, accessed 5 April 2021.

While developments such as those just mentioned take place slowly and with much public attention, the Swiss army already discretely follows a strategy of opening its chaplaincy services to other confessions beyond the Roman-Catholic, Protestant, and Old Catholic. On 1 March 2020, lieutenant general Thomas Süssli, Chief of the Armed Forces, implemented instructions concerning chaplaincy and psychological services. Churches and other religious communities can now propose candidates for a service giving general counselling for army personnel of any denomination. Candidates must have served in the Swiss army and prove specific theological and counselling training, as well as having a recommendation from their religious community.⁴¹ The first Muslim candidates are expected to participate in the introductory course for army chaplaincy in 2022.

Activities and Initiatives of Main Muslim Organisations

Much of the activities of Swiss Muslim organisations in 2020 was about managing the COVID-19 crisis. The Federation of Islamic Organisations of Switzerland (*Föderation islamischer Dachorganisationen der Schweiz* - FIDS) took a leading role in disseminating the instructions of federal authorities to its member organisations and complementing them by specifications for the context of Swiss mosque associations. It translated some of the German and French material into Albanian, Bosnian, and Turkish and even produced a short explanatory video.⁴² After the total lockdown of nearly all public institutions, including places of worship, from the middle of March to the end of May 2020, congregational prayers were allowed to be held again, under several restrictions, for the rest of the year. The pandemic did not only compel the

⁴¹ Chef der Armee, *90.126 d, Weisungen über die Beratung, Begleitung und Unterstützung durch die AS, den PPD A und den SDA (WBBU)* (Bern: Schweizer Armee, 1 March 2020); Dienststelle Armeeeseelsorge, *Prinzipien der Armeeeseelsorge* (Bern: Schweizer Armee, 3 March 2020), both documents online at: www.vtg.admin.ch/de/mein-militaerdienst/dienstleistende/as.html#dokumente, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁴² All documents of the FIDS are accessible online at: www.fids.ch/index.php/covid-19/, accessed 5 April 2021.

community to develop online activities around Ramadan and for religious instruction for children, but to find ad hoc solutions for burials, since the transfer of the deceased, whether from COVID-19 or not, to the Balkans or Turkey became impossible or unaffordable. Organisations such as the FIDS or the cantonal organisation for Muslim pastoral care in the canton of Zurich, reacted with specific services, information sheets, and recommendations.⁴³ Transfers of deceased persons to other countries becoming impossible; the Muslim organisation of the canton of Lucerne temporarily obtained the permission for all deceased Muslims of the canton to be buried in the Muslim section of the cemetery of the city of Lucerne.⁴⁴ In Wil (canton of St. Gallen), a new section for Muslim burials, scheduled to be opened in 2021, was brought forward for the same reason.⁴⁵

On 20 September 2020, the two rival umbrella organisations of Albanian Muslims merged. Delegates of some 50 mosque associations unanimously voted for this step. The new organisation keeps the German name of the larger of the two former bodies, and changed the Albanian version: *Dachverband der Albanisch-Islamischen Gemeinschaften in der Schweiz – DAIGS / Komuniteti Musliman Shqiptar në Zvicër – KMSHZ* (Umbrella Organisation of Albanian Islamic Organisations in Switzerland).⁴⁶

⁴³ *Qualitätssicherung der Muslimischen Seelsorge in öffentlichen Institutionen im Kanton Zürich, Muslimische Seelsorge während Covid-19*, Zürich, March 2020, online: <https://islam-seelsorge.ch/covid-19/>, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁴⁴ Islamische Gemeinde Luzern, *Vorübergehende Regelung muslimischer Friedhof Luzern*, Luzern, 15 April 2020, online: www.igl-luzern.ch/2020/04/15/vor%C3%BCbergehende-regelung-muslimischer-friedhof-luzern/, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁴⁵ Stadt Wil, *Grabstätte für muslimische Glaubensgemeinschaft auf dem Friedhof Bronschhofen*, Wil, 8 April 2020, online: www.stadtwil.ch/aktuellesinformationen/908281, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁴⁶ *Dachverband der Albanisch-Islamischen Gemeinschaften in der Schweiz, DAIGS und AIVS vereinigen sich zu einer Organisation – Der Name DAIGS wird übernommen*, Zürich, 22 September 2020, online: www.fids.ch/index.php/09/2020/daign-und-aivs-vereinigen-sich-zu-einer-organisation-der-name-daigs-wird-uebernommen/, accessed 5 April 2021.

On 10 October, delegates of 16 Islamic associations, mostly mosques, founded an umbrella organisation for the canton of Bern (*Islamischer Kantonalverband Bern – IKB*).⁴⁷ It replaced an earlier organisation, *Umma*, that ceased its activities around 2010.

In April 2020, a couple of young professionals founded the Swiss Zakat Foundation (*Fondation Suisse pour le Zakat*, <https://zakatsuisse.ch>). Its aim is to collect *zakat* from Swiss Muslims for local projects instead of sending all donations to projects abroad.⁴⁸

The construction of a major Islamic centre started on 19 March 2020 in the commune of Reinach (canton of Aargau). Members of the local association, Albanians by origin, had devoted 5,000 hours of voluntary work to the project by the end of the year.⁴⁹

Muslim Population: History and Demographics

The first traces of a Muslim population in Switzerland date back to the tenth century when the Saracens crossed the Alps. They were Arabs, but their exact origin remains a mystery. Scattered chronicles and sparse archaeological evidence show that they were present in some valleys of today's canton of Valais, as well as in some places in the Grisons. Their presence lasted a few decades involving “only irregular troops – mercenaries, pirates, adventurers”.⁵⁰ In contemporary Switzerland, the Muslim presence dates from the second half of the 20th century. Since the 1960s, people with a Muslim background have migrated to Switzerland for three main reasons: first, economic immigration: since 1960, Switzerland has recruited Turkish and

⁴⁷ Föderation islamischer Dachorganisationen Schweiz, *Neugründung des Islamischen Kantonalverbands Bern – IKB*, Regensdorf, 27 October 2020, online: www.fids.ch/index.php/10/2020/neugruendung-des-islamischen-kantonalverbands-bern-ikb/, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁴⁸ Ray, Glenn: “Une fondation pour que les fruits de l’impôt musulman restent en Suisse”, *Le Temps*, 20 April 2020, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Helbling, Urs, “Der grösste Moschee-Neubau ist bald fertig”, *Aargauer Zeitung*, 12 December 2020, p. 23.

⁵⁰ Versteegh, Kees, “The Arab presence in France and Switzerland in the 10th century”, *Arabica*, vol.37, no.3 (1990), pp. 359-388 (360-361).

Balkan (farm and factory) workers to respond to the demands of its growing economy. They were essentially male workers, migrating without their wives and families. In those early years, they mostly lived in Switzerland as temporary residents. Secondly, familial reunification: since the 1970s, Switzerland changed its regulations concerning migration and authorised family reunion. This modified the composition of the Muslim population in terms of age and gender. Finally, humanitarian and political immigration: from 1960 onwards, asylum seekers from various countries (North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, the horn of Africa) have migrated to Switzerland. Switzerland witnessed a peak of immigration in the 1990s and more recently in 2015 in the wake of the refugee and migrant crisis of that year.

Since 2010, the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) has modified its method for analysing the Swiss population. It now conducts a yearly survey of a sample of 200,000 respondents. In January 2020, the FSO published its latest results based on the polling of three consecutive years (2016-18), thus the following results are based on a sample of 600,000 respondents.⁵¹ Some of the data presented in this report was taken from the 2019 annual survey, whereas other data has been drawn from the 2016-18 polling. Potential respondents must be permanent residents, above 15 years of age, and live in private households. As such, it excludes asylum seekers, refugees, diplomats, and a considerable number of expatriate workers, as well as prison inmates, and people living in social care and medical institutions. Based on this, the Muslim population in Switzerland can be presented as follows:⁵²

Muslim Population

Approximately 500,000 (5.5% of the total population, including those under the age of

⁵¹ www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/population/langues-religions/religions.html, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁵² The data and percentages presented in this table were collected by the Federal Statistical Office between 2017 and 2019. This is the most recent data describing the Swiss population at present.

15 and Alevis); the official number, limited to persons 15 years and older, is 391,703 as of 2019 (207,061 men, 184,642 women).

Ethnic/National Backgrounds

35.3 % of Muslims over 15 in Switzerland are Swiss citizens (including a few thousand converts); Alevis are estimated at 35,000.

Largest ethnic/national groups (as a percentage of overall Muslim population):

Balkan: 36%

Turkish (Alevis included): 11%

North African: 3.6%

Middle Eastern: 3.8%

EU and EFTA member states: 3.4%

Sub-Saharan African: 2.5%

Asia: 3 %.

Inner-Islamic Groups

Muslims in Switzerland are mostly Sunni. Since such data is not collected, estimates suggest that 85% are Sunni, 7% Shi'i, and up to 7% Alevi. The residual percentage includes minority community members, such as the Ahmadis and Sufis.

Geographical Spread

The Muslim population is present in every region of Switzerland:

- German-speaking region: 76.3%
- French-speaking region: 22.1%
- Italian-speaking region: 1.5%.

Number of Mosques

Switzerland has some 260 mosques and prayer halls; four of them have a minaret. Recently built mosques, mostly constructed by Albanian communities, show modest features of Islamic architecture (Netstal in 2016, Wil in 2017, Frauenfeld in 2018, and Grenchen in 2019).

Muslim Burial Sites

The first Muslim burial site in Switzerland was opened in Geneva in 1978. Other major cities such as Basel, Bern, or Zurich followed from the 2000s. Currently some 25 communes have a Muslim burial site. In 2020, the city of Wil (canton of St. Gallen) opened a Muslim burial site.

“Chaplaincy” in State Institutions

Traditionally, State institutions only hosted Christian chaplains. Nonetheless, the pluralisation of religion in the country encouraged the implementation of local Muslim chaplaincy initiatives, in prisons as

well as in hospitals. In this area, the Muslim umbrella organisations in several cantons (such as Zurich, St. Gallen, or Vaud) undertake sustainable steps in the process of the professionalisation of their chaplaincy services. The Swiss Centre on Islam and Society (CSIS) at the University of Fribourg proposed a Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) in Muslim Chaplaincy in Public Institutions (prison, asylum centres, and hospitals).⁵³ This new programme started in September 2020 with 17 participants. In the canton of Zurich, seven additional candidates completed a six-day educational programme on chaplaincy in hospitals proposed by the Swiss Centre on Islam and Society (CSIS). The University of Bern offers a Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) in Religious Care in Migration Contexts, and several diplomas for Religious Care in the penal system.⁵⁴

Halal Products

Halal slaughter without prior stunning is not permitted in Switzerland. The quantity of

⁵³ <https://www3.unifr.ch/szig/de/weiterbildung/seelsorge-cas>, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁵⁴ https://www.theol.unibe.ch/weiterbildung/index_ger.html, accessed 5 April 2021

imported halal meat is limited to 350 tonnes of beef and 175 tonnes of mutton per year.⁵⁵ Some butchers sell meat as halal which has been slaughtered by a Muslim after the animal was stunned. Halal food, meat or other, is usually not available in public institutions and not systematically in national retail chains, but international food factories based in Switzerland increasingly apply for halal certificates for products, except meat, made for global markets. Some of these products are available in Switzerland as well.

Dress Code

Switzerland has no legal restrictions on dress except for the cantons of Ticino and St. Gallen, where the wearing of the face veil has been banned since 2016 and 2019 respectively. Private enterprises are free to enact dress codes for their employees, and very few allow the headscarf. In 1996, the strictly secular canton of Geneva prohibited a woman teacher from wearing the headscarf at school, a decision backed by all courts up to

⁵⁵ Federal Council (Bundesrat), *Verordnung über die Einfuhr von landwirtschaftlichen Erzeugnissen*, 916.01, 26 October 2011, www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/20110403/index.html, accessed 5 April 2021.

the European Court of Human Rights. The vast majority of Muslim women in Switzerland do not cover their hair. Those wearing a headscarf face difficulties in finding employment and housing.⁵⁶ Resident women wearing a niqab are around 30.

Places of Islamic Learning and Education

Islamic education for children in Switzerland is taught in Qur'an classes organised by mosque associations or, less frequently, on an entirely private basis. Islamic education in public schools exists in very few municipalities (Kriens, Ebikon, and Luzern in the canton of Lucerne; Kreuzlingen, canton of Thurgau).⁵⁷ Alevi classes in public schools exist in Basel.

The Swiss Centre on Islam and Society (CSIS), founded in 2015, offers courses aimed at self-reflective Muslim learning and dialogue, for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It is very active in making research papers

⁵⁶ Auer, Daniel, Julie Lacroix, Dider Ruedin, and Eva Zschirnt, *Ethnische Diskriminierung auf dem Schweizer Wohnungsmarkt* (Grenchen: Bundesamt für Wohnungswesen, 2019), www.bwo.admin.ch/dam/bwo/de/dokumente/01_Wohnungsmarkt/15_Studien_und_Publikationen/Forschungsb erichte/Diskriminierung_DE.pdf.download.pdf/Diskriminierung_DE.pdf, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁵⁷ <http://www.viuk.ch/new/>, accessed 5 April 2021.

accessible to a broader public on websites⁵⁸ and on its new bilingual internet site on Islam and Muslims in the Swiss context: Islam and Society.⁵⁹ The visiting professorship for Islamic Theology and Education, established in 2015 at the University of Zurich was intermitted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the University of Lucerne, Professor Erdal Toprakyan, was appointed to the vacant chair for Islamic theology from 1 August 2020.⁶⁰

Muslim Media and Publications

Strictly speaking, in Switzerland there are no Muslim media outlets or publications. However, the main Muslim associations and organisations listed in the next section are active on their websites; they provide press reviews on current events related to Islam in Switzerland, as well as publishing position papers. Social networks, in particular Facebook and Twitter, are also important spaces for discussion.

⁵⁸ <https://www.unifr.ch/szig/fr/>, accessed 5 April 2021.

⁵⁹ <https://islamandsociety.ch>.

⁶⁰ <https://www.unilu.ch/news/berufungen-an-der-universitaet-luzern-5104/>, accessed 5 April 2021.

Main Muslim Organisations

- Federation of Islamic Organisations of Switzerland (*Föderation islamischer Dachorganisationen der Schweiz* - FIDS / *Fédération des organisations islamiques de Suisse* - FOIS, 80 Bahnstrasse, 8105, Regensdorf, <http://www.fids.ch>). Headed by Montassar BenMrad, it brings together twelve cantonal or ethnic organisations, which represent some 215 local associations, including 175–180 with a prayer hall / mosque. As such, the FIDS/FOIS is by far the most representative Muslim umbrella organisation.
- Islamic Central Council Switzerland (*Islamischer Zentralrat Schweiz* - IZRS / *Conseil central islamique Suisse* - CCIS, 695 Postfach, 3000, Bern 9, www.izrs.ch). The IZRS is headed by converts Nicolas Blancho (president) and Abdel Azziz Qaasim Illi (spokesperson). Known for its Salafi tendencies, IZRS/CCIS has strongly reduced its public activities.
- Turkish Islamic Foundation of Switzerland (*Türkisch Islamische Stiftung / İsviçre Türk Diyanet Vakfi* - İTDV, 102 Schwamendingenstrasse, 8050, Zurich, www.diyamet.ch). Since its foundation in 1987, it has been the Turkish Republic's official agency for Religious Affairs in Switzerland, assisting more than 40 local mosque associations all over the country. The İTDV became a member of the FIDS in 2017.
- Swiss Islamic Community (*Schweizerische Islamische Gemeinschaft / İsviçre İslam Toplumu* - SIG, 80 Bahnstrasse, 8105, Regensdorf, <https://sigzentrum.ch/>). Founded in 1999, it represents 15 local mosques of the *Millî Görüş* Movement in Switzerland, and one in the Principality of Liechtenstein. The SIG is a member of the FIDS.
- Umbrella Organisation of Albanian Islamic Communities in Switzerland (*Komuniteti Islame Shqiptare në Zvicër / Dachverband der albanisch-islamischen*

Gemeinschaften in der Schweiz, 58 Rautistrasse, 8048, Zürich, www.daigs.ch). In 2020 the organisation merged with the formerly independent Albanian Islamic Association Switzerland (*Albanisch Islamischer Verband Schweiz – AIVS*). It now represents some 50 mosques with an Albanian-speaking constituency.

- Union of Islamic Organisations in Zurich (*Vereinigung der islamischen Organisationen in Zürich - VIOZ*, 16 Pfingstweidstrasse, 8005, Zürich, www.vioz.ch). Founded in 1995, it represents some 35 associations running over 40 mosques throughout the canton. It is the most active among the cantonal umbrella organisations.
- Federation of Alevi Congregations in Switzerland (*Föderation der Alevitischen Gemeinden in der Schweiz - FAGS / İsviçre Alevi Birlikerli Federasyonu - İABF*, 7 Aumattstrasse, 5210, Windisch, www.iabf.ch). The federation was founded in 1998, and represents nine Alevi associations in the German and French-speaking parts of the country.