



Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism
Tel Aviv University

Topical Brief No. 5, 2009

THE SWISS REFERENDUM IN ARAB AND MUSLIM DISCOURSE

Esther Webman¹

The referendum that took place in Switzerland on November 29, 2009, in which 57.7 percent favored a ban on the construction of minarets, triggered a lively debate in Europe about relations with the Muslim communities in its midst and the limits of tolerance toward them. The *Spiegel* encapsulated the dilemma faced by Europe in the headline: "How Much Allah Can the Old Continent Bear?" The ban reveals a deep-seated fear of an Islam that is becoming increasingly visible, and its ramifications affect the identity of the entire continent. The referendum campaign poster of the far right Swiss People's Party, featuring a black-veiled Muslim woman surrounded by minaret towers that jutted out of the Swiss flag like missiles, clearly played on this fear, which has come to be known since the early 1990s as islamophobia.

The Swiss vote was denounced by prominent Arab and Muslim politicians and clerics. For example, Egypt's Grand Mufti 'Ali Gom'a branded the ban "an attack on freedom of belief and an attempt to insult the feelings of the Muslim community within and without Switzerland." The 57-member Islamic Conference Organization condemned it as xenophobic, prejudiced, discriminatory and a violation of universal human rights values.

Overlooking the state of freedoms in their own countries, several Arab and Muslim commentators mocked the "fake" rights and freedoms for minorities in the West, maintaining that banning minarets was but another link in a chain of events of deliberate abuse and degradation of Muslim individuals and Islamic symbols in western countries (such as the banning of headscarves in France in 2004 and the controversial Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2006). Turkish editor Enis Berberoglu went even further, invoking the Holocaust in his criticism of Swiss democracy in the center-right daily *Hurriyet*, stating that

¹ Senior research fellow, Stephen Roth Institute and Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies. This brief, with minor changes, was published on January 25, 2010, by the Dayan Center in Tel Aviv Notes.

the minarets of Islam disturbed the comfort of the Swiss people, who sat unaffected on "the fortunes of the Jews who were burned by the Nazis."² Syrian Minister for Expatriate Affairs Buthayna Sha'ban, who defined the Swiss vote as "a blow of racist barbarism against Islam and Muslims," stressed, in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, the moral superiority of Islam as a religion of coexistence, in contrast to European civilization, which was "founded on the annihilation of indigenous people, settlement on their lands and expropriation of their wealth." However, despite her concern over the spread of islamophobia in the West, she also pointed to a parallel growth in "courageous voices," which deplored the phenomenon and were fighting it, and drew satisfaction from the fact that Muhammad was the second most popular name after John in Britain in 2008.³

Many Arab and Muslim commentators believe that the ban will bolster the argument of Islamic extremists who claim that Europe and the West are intrinsically hostile to Islam and Muslims, and mute when it comes to Israel's nefarious deeds against the Palestinians. Moreover, they say, democracy is manipulated not only to deny Muslim identity in Europe but to ensure their subjugation in Iraq and Afghanistan and to meddle in their internal affairs everywhere else. Rajab al-Banna in Egypt's *al-Ahram* saw the ban as proof of the notion of the clash of civilizations that prevails among Westerners, and accused the media of distorting the image of Islam and Muslims by highlighting terrorist attacks perpetrated by Muslims. Chief Editor of the Qatari daily *al-Raya* Salih bin 'Ufsan al-Kawari claimed that the attack on Muslims in Europe was deliberate and premeditated; if in the past islamophobia had been confined to political and media circles, recently it had reached the street. Like Rajab al-Banna, he foresaw its intensification in the near future, whereas Khayri Mansur in Jordan's Islamist weekly *al-Sabil* warned of its escalation into a war of religions.⁴

Not surprisingly, there was a Jewish aspect to the debate. No country would dare place limits on Jewish places of worship for fear of being accused of antisemitism, some argued, while others explicitly implicated Israel and Zionism as a driving force behind the ban. An article in Hizballah's *al-'Ahd al-Intiqad* contended that the Zionist-Israeli lobby was "the winner" in this affair, as part of "international Zionism"[s] strategy against Islam. Similarly, the Libyan daily *al-Sharq* published a cartoon titled "The Conspiracy," depicting a figure with a cross, symbolizing the Christian world, reaching out to a long arm with a Star of David sawing off a minaret. London-based Islamist Azzam Tamimi, who also believed Zionism was striving to destroy Muslim existence throughout Europe, accused the European Right of collaborating with Zionism "just like Hitler collaborated with Zionism until 1939."⁵

² *Hurriyet*, December 1, 2009.

³ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 7; *Tishrin*, December 21, 2009.

⁴ *Al-Raya*, December 2, *al-Sabil* December 16, *al-Ahram*, December 20, 2009.

⁵ Memri, Clip no. 2297, December 8, 2009; *Al-'Ahd al-Intiqad*, December 10, 2009.

While praising the pope for expressing his distaste for the vote and hence for not being afflicted with islamophobia, Salih al-Qallab, former Jordanian information minister viewed islamophobia, in *al-Ra'y*, as "a new Nazi and fascist phenomenon in the age of globalization and interlocking interests across the entire world," which posed a threat to Europeans as well, "some of whom are still suffering from the nightmares and atrocities of the Second World War." The extreme right, added Jihad al-Muhaysin in *al-Ghadd*, exploited Islam politically and exacerbated islamophobia.⁶

Yet, despite the many reactions in this vein, the referendum sparked off an unprecedented number of more introspective articles, attacking Islamist rhetoric and activities while trying to explain the roots of European islamophobia. A two-part article in *al-Ahram*, entitled "Islamophobia - An Attempt to Understand," explained that there was a deep-seated fear in the European subconscious of the Muslim presence in European societies, which was being politically exploited by the extreme right. This was exacerbated after September 11 and the terrorist attacks in Europe and was manifested in several incidents against Muslims. A number of factors played a role in inculcating this fear: the difficulties of social and cultural integration in Europe; external manifestations of Muslim identity, such as traditional clothes and food; the comparatively high birth rate among Muslim immigrants; and the escalation of the global economic crisis, the rise in unemployment and increased financial debts. The referendum exposed the fact that Muslims in Europe faced the same hatred that Jews encountered until the end of World War II.⁷ However, the European Right parties were not solely responsible for this situation, argued Muhammad Munir Mujahid in *al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*, a leftist Iraqi-Kurdish site in Denmark, and pointed the finger inward: "Our religious rhetoric exposed us frequently as unjustifiably hostile to the other," he asserted.⁸ Other writers enumerated the difficulties faced by Christians in various Arab countries, stating that Muslims were impervious to this problem, and calling upon Egyptian *ulama* (Muslim scholars trained in Islam and Islamic law) to express a clear stand on the right of Copts to freedom of religion, as well as on other issues such as female circumcision and the wearing of the *hijab* (veil), neither of which were tenets of Islam. Similarly, Turkish commentator Akif Beki wondered about the result if a referendum had been held in Turkey about church bells.⁹

Islamists were accused by fellow Muslims of the islamization of public space and of turning faith into ideology and mosques from places of worship into platforms for the

⁶ *Al-Ra'y*, December 3, *al-Ghadd*, December 15, 2009.

⁷ *Al-Ahram*, December 21, 2009, January 4, 2010.

⁸ *Al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*, December 22, 2009.

⁹ *Washington Post*, December 1, *Radikal*, December 2, *al-Bayan* (UAE), December 12, *Al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*, December 22, 2009.

dissemination of hatred toward western culture and the propagation of ideas that were leading Muslims toward a crisis of identity. Lebanese liberal intellectual Hazim Saghiyeh held Muslim immigrants responsible for creating the contradiction between their demand to develop an identity which opposed the foundations of modern western culture, and their calls for equality and rights. Worse, he charged, Islamists did not propagate Islam as a religion but as a jihadist project that encouraged its adversaries to confront it. Although Islamists were a small minority, they had become the predominant voice of Islam, overwriting any other.¹⁰ In the same vein, one Lebanese commentator pointed out that Islamist rhetoric harmed first and foremost Muslims living the West, and instead of finding ways to integrate into their new societies they learned hypocrisy, deceit and violence. Another observer even recommended that Muslims in Europe disassociate themselves from their countries of origin and particularly the Arab world, since this was the source of the ruin of their future identity. Before denouncing Europeans for islamophobia and racism, stated the writer, the Arab world should realize that its own Christians were quietly leaving the region. Muslims should start by improving their image; the image of Islam would then improve and save Europe's Muslims and Christians from civil wars.¹¹

Azzam Tamimi, on the other hand, had a different view of the relationship between Islam and European society. Europeans feared Islam, he said, because "they live in darkness," and "lead a life of stupidity." If they learned Islam, he asserted, they would understand that Islam liberated them and gave their life meaning. "No Muslim in Europe is trying to impose Islam on non-Muslims. All Muslims in Europe want... is to enjoy the fruits of democracy... while living their lives as Muslims."¹²

Arab and Muslim reactions were more restrained and milder compared to the response to previous events, such as the Danish cartoons. They did not burn flags, make threats, or take to the streets in violent demonstrations. The only popular demonstration was held in Senegal. Even Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who warned that the vote could have a decisively negative impact on the loyalty of Muslims in Switzerland, called upon Swiss Muslims to contest the referendum's results legally and politically.¹³

The absence of violent reactions to the Swiss referendum led 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, the general manager of al-'Arabiyya TV, to boast that despite losing the referendum the Muslims were the winners. Why," he asked, was the reaction peaceful this time? Was it because the issue was banning minarets, and not mosques or religious schools? Were the Muslims fed up with protests and demonstrations? Was it because the Muslim community in

¹⁰ *Al-Hayat*, December 5, 2009.

¹¹ *Al-Mustaqbal*, December 20, 2009.

¹² Memri, Clip no. 2297, December 8, 2009.

¹³ Islamonline.net, December 1, 2009.

Switzerland was the smallest in Europe? Or was it because Swiss Muslims were more aware of how politics work in that free country? While all this was true, he said, more importantly, "there is a growing awareness among the Muslim leadership that violent protest is counterproductive, and only succeeds in damaging the reputation of the entire Muslim community."¹⁴

Rashid's assessment might be too sweeping and optimistic. However, the response of the small Swiss Muslim community – about 400,000 (or 5 percent of the population), originating mostly from Bosnia, Kosovo and Turkey – was restrained, using legal and political tools against the referendum results. Its representatives filed a complaint to the EU Court for Human Rights, claiming that the ban violated the European convention on human rights, which guaranteed freedom of religion. This indeed reflects a realization that violent protest is counterproductive; yet it does not prove that this had become a common understanding, especially when considering the issue at stake: minaret construction is not one of Islam's basic tenets (*arkan*) and hence the ban did not arouse the emotional reaction ignited by the Muhammad cartoons or by Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.

¹⁴ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 3, 2009.