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## **The Swiss Referendum in Arab Discourse**

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The referendum which took place in Switzerland on November 29, 2009, in which 57.7 percent of the voters favored a ban on the construction of minarets, triggered strong responses among Arab and Muslim commentators and officials. For example, Egypt's Grand Mufti, 'Ali Gom'a, called the ban as "an attack on freedom of belief and an attempt to insult the feelings of the Muslim community in and outside Switzerland." The 57-member Islamic Conference Organization denounced it as xenophobic, prejudiced, discriminatory and against universal human rights values.

Overlooking the state of freedoms in Arab countries, several Arab commentators mocked the "fake" rights and freedoms for minorities in the West, and insisted that the banning of minarets is but another link in a chain of events of deliberate abuse and degradation of Muslim individuals and Islamic symbols in western countries (e.g. the banning of headscarves in France in 2004 and the controversial Danish newspaper cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2006). Turkish editor Enis Berberoglu, of the center-right daily *Hurriyet*, went even further, invoking the Holocaust in his criticism of Swiss democracy, saying that the minarets of Islam disturb the Swiss people's comfort, while they sit comfortably on "the fortunes of the

Jews who were burned by the Nazis." [1] Syrian Minister for Expatriate Affairs Buthayna Sha'ban defined the Swiss vote as "a blow of racist barbarism against Islam and Muslims", and emphasized the moral superiority of Islam as a religion of coexistence, in contrast to the European civilization "founded on the annihilation of indigenous peoples, settlement in 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 deplore the phenomenon and fight it, and drew satisfaction from the fact that Muhammad was the second most popular name after John in Britain in 2008. [2]

Many Arab and Muslim commentators believe that the banning 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 to deny not only Muslims' identity in Europe but to ensure their subjugation in Iraq and in Afghanistan, as well as the meddling in their internal affairs everywhere else. [3]

Not surprisingly, there was a Jewish aspect to this debate. No country would have dared to put limits on places of Jewish worship for fear of being accused of anti-semitism, some argued, while others explicitly implicated Israel and Zionism as being a driving force behind the scenes of the minaret construction banning. An article in Hizballah's *al-Ahd al-Intiqad* contended that the Zionist-Israeli lobby is "the winner" in this affair, which is probably in the realm of "international Zionism"'s strategy against Islam. In a similar vein, 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 considered Zionism as striving to destroy

Muslim existence throughout Europe, accused the European Right of collaborating with Zionism "just like Hitler collaborated with Zionism until 1939." [4]

At the same time, the referendum also sparked off an unprecedented number of introspective articles, many of which attacked 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 is a deep-seated fear in the European subconscious of the Muslim presence in European societies, which is 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. Several factors play a role in inculcating this fear: the difficulties in Muslims' social and cultural integration in Europe; the external manifestations of Muslim identity, such as traditional clothes and food; the comparatively high birth rate among Muslim immigrants; the escalation of the economic crisis, the rise of unemployment and increased financial debts. The referendum exposed the fact that Muslims in Europe face the same hatred that Jews encountered up through the end of the Second World War. [5] A writer for a leftist Iraqi-Kurdish site in Denmark pointed the finger inward: "Our religious rhetoric exposed us most of the times as unjustifiably hostile to the Other," he asserted. [6] Other writers enumerated the difficulties faced by Christians in various Arab countries, saying that Muslims are impervious to recognition of this problem, and calling upon Egyptian 'ulama' to express a clear stand on the right of the Copts for freedom of religion and on other issues such as female circumcision and the wearing of the veil (hijab), neither of which are tenets of Islam. Similarly, the Turkish commentator Akif Beki wondered what would have been the result if such a referendum had been held in Turkey about church bells. [7]

Lebanese liberal intellectual Hazim Saghiyeh blamed Muslim immigrants for overlooking the contradiction between their demand to develop an identity which opposes the foundations of modern Western culture, and their demands for equality and rights. Worse than that, he charged, the Islamists do not propagate Islam as a religion but as a Jihadist project that encourage its adversaries to confront it. Despite the fact that Islamists are a small minority, they became the most conspicuous voice of Islam, overriding any other voice.[8] In that same vein, one Lebanese commentator declared that Islamist rhetoric harms first and foremost Muslims living in the West, and instead of finding ways to learn and integrate in their new societies they learn hypocrisy, deceit and violence. Another one even recommended that Muslims in Europe disassociate themselves from their countries of origin and particularly the Arab world, since it is the source of what ruins their future identity. Before denouncing Europeans for Islamophobia and racism, stated the writer, the Arab world should realize that its own Christians are quietly leaving the region. Muslims should start by improving their image and then the image of Islam would improve and save Europe's Muslims and Christians from civil wars.[9]

Not surprisingly, Azzam Tamimi had a different view of the relationship between Islam and European society. Europeans fear 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 liberates them and gives their life a meaning. "No Muslim in Europe is trying to impose Islam on non-Muslims. All the Muslims in Europe want...is to enjoy the fruits of democracy...while living their lives as Muslims.[10]

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 winners. "Why," he wondered, "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 Switzerland is the smallest in Europe? Or was it because Swiss Muslims are more aware of how politics works in this free country?" While all 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." [11]

Rashid's assessment might be too sweeping and optimistic. The response of the small Swiss Muslim community – about 400,000 (or 5% of the population), originating mostly from Bosnia, Kosovo and Turkey – was indeed restrained. Its representatives filed a complaint to the EU Court for Human Rights asserting that the ban violates the European convention for human rights, which guarantees freedom of religion. This reflects a realization that violent protest is counterproductive, yet it does not prove that this had become a common understanding among Muslims, 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 Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

## Notes:

[1] *Hurriyet*, December 1, 2009.

[2] *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 7 2009; *Tishrin*, December 21, 2009.

[3] Rajab al-Banna in *al-Ahram* (December 20, 2009) saw the ban as a proof that the clash of civilizations theory prevails among Westerners, and blamed the media for 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 is deliberate and

premeditated, and if Islamophobia was in the past confined to political and media circles, it has now reached the street (December 2, 2009). Khayri Mansur in the Jordanian Islamist weekly *al-Sabil* warned of its escalation into a war of religions (December 16, 2009).

[4] MEMRI, Clip no. 2297, December 8, 2009 - [www.memritv.org/content/en/all\\_clips/0/60/0/0/0/index.htm](http://www.memritv.org/content/en/all_clips/0/60/0/0/0/index.htm); *Al-'Ahd al-Intiqad*, December 10, 2009.

[5] *Al-Ahram*, December 21, 2009, January 4, 2010.

[6] Al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin, December 22, 2009 - [www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=196210](http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=196210).

[7] *Washington Post*, December 1, *Radikal*, December 2, *al-Bayan* (UAE), December 12, Al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin, December 22, 2009 - [www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=196210](http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=196210).

[8] *Al-Hayat*, December 5, 2009.

[9] *Al-Mustaqbal*, December 20, 2009.

[10] MEMRI, Clip no. 2297, December 8, 2009 - [www.memritv.org/content/en/all\\_clips/0/60/0/0/0/index.htm](http://www.memritv.org/content/en/all_clips/0/60/0/0/0/index.htm).

[11] *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 3, 2009.

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