Switzerland

National Affairs

Under the presidency of Micheline Calmy-Rey, a Social Democrat from Geneva who also served as foreign minister, Switzerland pursued a policy of "active neutrality" on the international stage. "Switzerland is not a political dwarf," she explained, and claimed that the country used its neutrality to promote peace as well as safeguard its own interests. This statement, along with four federal reports about Swiss foreign policy, was released to counter criticism of Calmy-Rey's clear antipathy toward Israeli actions during the 2006 Lebanon war. "Switzerland does not have a secret agenda; rather, it builds bridges," she said.

While Switzerland was engaged on various diplomatic fronts, the internal political situation became unexpectedly agitated. The campaign that preceded the October parliamentary elections was marked by an aggressive tone and fierce anti-immigrant slogans. Rallies and counter-rallies of left- and right-wing militants sometimes culminated in violent clashes, and police had to intervene.

The largest political party, the Swiss People's Party (SPP), appealed to patriotic sentiment through the use of xenophobic rhetoric suggesting that foreigners, who comprised a quarter of the country's 7.5 million people, threatened the security of Switzerland. One of the SPP posters, for example, showed three white sheep standing on the Swiss flag as one of them kicked a single black sheep away, "to create security," the caption read. One of the party's television ads, "Heaven or Hell," showed negative images of Muslims and young foreigners. The ad was withdrawn by court order.

Despite the street violence for which it was largely responsible, the SPP won the election with a plurality of 29 percent against a divided opposition; this was its fifth consecutive victory. The result was generally attributed to the SPP's formidable financial resources and to its charismatic leader, Justice Minister Christoph Blocher. Nevertheless, Blocher was in for a surprise when parliament convened in December to elect a new seven-member cabinet, according to a prearranged party ratio. Even though all seven of the incumbents wanted to stay in office, which would have made the election a formality, mainstream conservatives joined
forces with the left to oust Blocher from the cabinet and in his stead elect a more moderate SPP representative, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, minister of justice. Although not a declared candidate, she accepted the post.

Another sign that the Swiss were less than enthusiastic about xenophobic policies was a decision by parliament to end the practice of granting naturalization by popular vote of the residents of the locality the foreigner lived in, a procedure supported by the SPP. There had been many complaints that basing citizenship on such votes bred arbitrariness and discrimination.

If the number of foreigners living in Switzerland was on the rise, so was the number of Swiss living abroad. In 2007, 645,000 Swiss nationals were living outside the country, an 11-percent increase since 2000. They resided mostly in the European Union, the U.S., Canada, Australia, Brazil, Israel, and South Africa. At the same time, about 500 foreign firms and independent billionaires settled in Switzerland, drawn by the flat-rate taxation system and the banking secrecy laws. But Swiss banking institutions were hard hit by the U.S. sub-prime mortgage crisis. UBS and Credit Suisse both reported major losses in the fourth quarter, and were considering significant layoffs.

Israel and the Middle East

Switzerland increased its involvement in the Middle East, both unilaterally and through international organizations. In February 2007 the Swiss government adopted UN Security Council Resolution 1737, passed the previous December, imposing sanctions on Iran, blocking the import or export of sensitive nuclear materiel and equipment, and freezing the financial assets of persons or entities supporting its nuclear programs.

The Swiss government authorized the export of 100 Tommy guns and ammunition to Saudi Arabia for use by the royal family's "national VIP protection team." This arms relationship had started in 2006, when Switzerland exported assault rifles and antiaircraft systems to that country. Switzerland also signed an agreement with Syria for reciprocal promotion and protection of investments; it already had this type of agreement with 120 other countries.

Switzerland was not invited to the Annapolis conference on the Middle East in November, despite the country's sponsorship of the Geneva Initiative, designed to facilitate a deal between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Among the reasons given were that Switzerland was less generous to the Palestinians than other donor countries, pledging only $80
million for 2008–10, and that it maintained a relationship with Hamas, which the U.S. and the EU were seeking to isolate.

Switzerland supported the reappointment of Jean Ziegler as UN special rapporteur on the right to food, even though he had repeatedly expressed anti-Israel bias. At the same time Switzerland was involved in mediation efforts with Iran on behalf of the U.S., and secretly brokered negotiations between Israel and Syria. Switzerland acted as an unofficial mediator between Lebanese factions, hosting two meetings of Lebanese politicians and intellectuals representing all the parties. Soon after Israel's war in Lebanon ended, the Swiss government provided Lebanon with $18 million in aid.

Only months after its foundation, a new Geneva-based UN agency, the Human Rights Council, proved to be a caricature of itself, hardly better than its predecessor, the Human Rights Commission. With the Islamic bloc controlling 17 of the 47 seats as well as two of the five vice presidencies, it focused mainly on targeting Israel, to which it devoted three special sessions and against which it adopted nine resolutions. In its first year of existence the council condemned only one country, Israel. Not only did it leave the human-rights abuses of China, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Muslim countries, and others unexamined, but also, on the strength of solid Muslim opposition, it canceled a Western-sponsored item on violations in Iran and Uzbekistan. Switzerland, which was a member, abstained.

The Swiss-based International Committee of the Red Cross adopted a new emblem in 2007, a red crystal. Ultimately it would replace the red cross and red crescent to protect humanitarian workers, but the new symbol would have to be introduced gradually since it was not yet well known enough to serve the purpose of protecting those working in conflict zones. The red crystal was adopted so that the Israeli rescue society Magen David Adom could join the international organization without using the Christian or Muslim icons.

**Anti-Semitism and Extremism**

An opinion survey conducted by the Bern-based GFS Institute showed that 10 percent of the Swiss could be classified as anti-Semites and that another 30 percent expressed such feelings occasionally. These numbers were in line with earlier surveys conducted over the previous ten years. Responses to specific questions showed that old stereotypes were still alive, such as vastly overestimating the Jewish population and the influ-
ence of Jews in international finance. Twelve years after the national debate over Switzerland's attitude during World War II took place, 43 percent of Swiss thought Jews maintained Holocaust memory for their own profit, and 25 percent believed that Switzerland was being blackmailed by Jewish organizations. The survey also demonstrated strongly negative views of Israel, with 50 percent of respondents agreeing that "Israel is waging a war of extermination against the Palestinians" and that the state was led by religious fanatics, and 58 percent convinced that Israel was an arm of the U.S. in the Middle East. Two out of every five people asserted that Israel had too much influence in the world and bore a responsibility for global terrorism. A similar survey was sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League in six European countries, including Switzerland, and its Swiss data were similar to the GFS findings.

The year saw a considerable increase in extremist violence. According to the Federal Police, there was, on average, one violent incident a day involving right-wing extremists. The far right, which had been actively recruiting for some time, counted about 1,800 members in the country, ten times more than in the early 1990s. In 2007, five people were the targets of booby-trapped packages prepared by neo-Nazis.

As had been the case for several years, the neo-Nazis were most visible and active on August 1, when the country annually celebrated Swiss National Day on Grütli meadow, considered the birthplace of Switzerland. In light of the incidents that had taken place there in the past, the government and the cantons bordering the site were reluctant to hold official commemorations there this year. Nevertheless, President Calmy-Rey insisted that the event take place, with a discrete but efficient police presence and a screening of ticket-holders. Since the federal and canton governments refused to fund additional security forces, two private sponsors stepped forward, Nicolas Hayek, founder and CEO of Swatch, and Johann Schneider Ammann, a member of parliament and CEO of a family-owned construction and machinery business. Despite the presence of a handful of nationalist militants, the commemoration attracted a larger audience and received a warmer reception than in previous years. No major incidents were reported except for a fire cracker buried a few feet from the stage that, remotely controlled, went off shortly after the ceremony without causing any harm.

Soccer hooliganism was a major problem. While this was the case in many European countries, it presented a particular challenge in Switzerland since the European soccer championship was to be contested there in 2008. In preparation, the Federal Police centralized information about
known hooligans in an electronic database. Beginning in 2007, they had the authority to do a number of things: forbid such people from coming close to soccer stadiums; ban them from entering the country; or force them to check in with a police precinct, which, in turn, could keep them in custody for 24 hours. But the police were instructed to begin by engaging in dialogue and to resort to coercive measures only as a last resort.

Far-right militants attempted to infiltrate into mainstream institutions, and succeeded doing so in the army. For the first time in its history, the Swiss army in 2007 denied promotion to one if its members because he was a defendant in a case of racial discrimination. This reflected the application of a new “zero tolerance” policy toward extremism in the military, under which four soldiers had already been convicted for racial slurs or for giving the Nazi salute while on active duty.

Neo-Nazi parties struggled to maintain themselves. Five members of the Party of the Nationalist Swiss (PNOS) were fined for racist comments in their publications. A new women’s group, the Combat Association of Female Nationalist Activists, associated with the PNOS, was founded in 2007 in the Solothurn canton. Its self-described purpose was to “fight against rotting society, radical feminism, and gender egalitarianism.” According to police, who closely monitored its activities, the organization had 100–200 members. The increased visibility and violent activity of far-right groups worried not only the police but the government as well. President Calmy-Rey said that Switzerland’s traditional image of generating dialogue and building bridges had been tarnished internationally by public violence. She expressed concern for the country’s security, especially during the upcoming 2008 soccer championship.

Federal Police continued to treat Islamic fundamentalism as a serious threat. The first trial against people accused of ties to Al Qaeda opened in the Ticino canton. The seven defendants had been arrested in connection with terror attacks in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 2003; they were also accused of belonging to a criminal organization, as well as forgery, fraud, corruption, concealment, and illegal residence. After a two-month trial, all seven were acquitted.

In another case, the Federal Criminal Court declared a couple guilty of supporting radical Islamic organizations via the Internet. The accused stood trial in Bellinzona for allegedly letting groups linked to Al Qaeda promote racially motivated crimes, publicize claims of responsibility for attacks and threats against Western countries, and broadcast images of Islamist attacks and executions. The man, a Tunisian, was sentenced to
six months in prison plus an additional 18 months suspended, while his Belgian wife was given a six-month suspended sentence for aiding and abetting him. This was the first time a Swiss court had convicted anyone for supporting an Islamic terror group.

The Department of Foreign Affairs denied entry into Switzerland to a Saudi sheikh. An Al Qaeda supporter, he wanted to participate in a meeting of Swiss Muslims.

The Swiss People's Party filed a motion in the Bern canton requiring that the building of any new minaret, temple, or other religious building be submitted to popular vote. The government of Bern rejected the motion, arguing that refusal of permission to build a house of worship had to be justified by some consideration, and this would be absent in the case of a popular vote. Bern was the third canton to reject this SPP proposal. The party, determined to curb the number of mosques and minarets in Switzerland, also launched a national initiative “forbidding minarets in Switzerland.” Its promoters had until November 2008 to collect 100,000 signatures of Swiss citizens so that the matter could be put to popular referendum. There were, at the time, two minarets in the country, one in Zurich and the other in Geneva.

Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss scholar of Islamic law, lost his lawsuit against the U.S. government after he was denied a work visa to teach at Notre Dame University. The Federal District Court in Manhattan ruled that the visa denial was not based on provisions of the Patriot Act, but rather on Ramadan's donation of $1,336 to a Swiss charity later designated by the U.S. as a terrorist group supporting Hamas. During the year Ramadan was also declared persona non grata by the Free University of Brussels. He had been invited to a conference there sponsored by an organization of European Arab students, but was denied the opportunity to speak.

Of all the minorities living in Switzerland, Jews were the group most likely to make use of the antiracism law, according to a study by the Federal Commission against Racism. Between its introduction in 1995 and 2004, 277 lawsuits were filed under the law, about half of them leading to court rulings. In these cases, 81 percent of defendants were found guilty of racism, and a majority of these involved anti-Semitism. The law also contained a provision outlawing the denial of any genocide, and in 2007 the first suit was filed against someone denying a genocide other than the Holocaust: a Turkish political leader, Dogu Perincek, was convicted after he claimed at a public rally that the Armenian genocide was “an international lie.”
Nationalist parties had repeatedly attempted to amend the antiracism law or annul it altogether. Cristoph Blocher, the former justice minister, made another try in 2007 to limit the implementation of the law in relation to genocide denial, but the government rejected his proposal. Two small right-wing parties, the Swiss Democrats and the Freedom Party, filed an initiative “for freedom of speech—no to muzzles!” that aimed at repealing the law entirely. They had until February 2009 to collect 100,000 signatures of Swiss citizens to bring the matter to a national referendum.

Holocaust-Related Matters

The parliamentary commission for the rehabilitation of persons who had been convicted of helping refugees—mostly Jewish—enter Switzerland illegally during World War II finished its work. Beginning in 2004, it rehabilitated 119 people. In dissolving itself, the commission recommended that the individual cantons continue to pursue the task on a regional basis.

The International Committee of the Red Cross admitted that it had been misled in issuing a traveling document to Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann on June 1, 1950, which enabled him to escape from Europe and immigrate to Argentina. The document, which bore Eichmann’s pseudonym, Ricardo Klement, was recently discovered in the archive of a Buenos Aires tribunal.

Jewish Community

The Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities and the American Jewish Committee signed a cooperation agreement to develop joint projects in the areas of Jewish identity, defense of the Jewish people, and research and analysis.

The Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities requested a financial audit of the World Jewish Congress, of which it was a European affiliate. The audit revealed an undocumented sum of $5 million, including $1.2 million transferred to a Swiss bank account for Israel Singer, the WJC’s secretary general. The investigation also raised questions about payments for Singer’s expenses, which suggested that the organization’s finances were inadequately controlled. Singer was dismissed from his WJC position, which was what the Swiss Federation had requested when the scandal first broke (see above, p. 148).
A fire gravely damaged two Geneva synagogues, the Sephardi synagogue and Hekhal Haness, the largest in the city, during the night of Shavuot. A police investigation could not determined if the cause was arson or a short circuit, and, if the former, whether there was an anti-Semitic motive. The structures were rebuilt.

A new stage in the recognition of Jewish culture in Switzerland was reached with the creation of a chair in Jewish studies at the University of Bern. Several new publications on Jews in Switzerland appeared: Anne Vaïa Fouradoulas’s *La Communauté juive de Fribourg et son environnement cantonal (1895–2000)*, about the Fribourg community; Stefan Mächler’s *Le Grand Déchirement*, about the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities and the Holocaust; Brigitte Sion’s *L'Aventure du judaïsme liberal à Genève*, a history of Reform Judaism in Geneva; and *Suvivre et Temoigner. Rescapés de la Shoah en Suisse*, Holocaust testimonies published by the Geneva School of Social Work.

Philippe Schwed, one of the most knowledgeable historians of Swiss Jewry, died in 2007. He wrote a number of seminal works on Swiss anti-Semitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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