



Document #2111966

USDOS – US Department of State (Author)

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Switzerland

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution guarantees freedom of faith and conscience. Both the constitution and the penal code prohibit discrimination against any religion or its members. The constitution delegates regulation of the relationship between the government and religious groups to the 26 cantons. The constitution bans full facial coverings, including the burqa and niqab, in public spaces and imposes fines of up to 1,000 Swiss francs (\$1,200) as a penalty, but it provides some exceptions, including wearing full facial coverings inside religious institutions.

The cantonal government of Geneva continued to prohibit public baptisms in Lake Geneva by the Protestant free churches, and an appeal regarding two churches in Geneva remained pending at year's end. The cantonal government allowed only the three officially recognized religious institutions, the Reformed Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Christian Catholic Church, to conduct religious activities in public spaces. During the year, the government increased its annual funding for security improvements on facilities of minorities threatened by terrorism or violent extremism, from 500,000 francs (\$597,000) to 2.5 million francs (\$2.9 million). According to a November 8 article published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the president of the cantonal government and director of security for the canton of Zurich, Mario Fehr, expressed alarm concerning the rise of antisemitism in the country over the previous five weeks, calling it “rampant” and “unbearable.” He said Jewish friends reported abuse and hostility and he saw graffiti calling for “Death to the Jews.”

A report released during the year by the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities (SIG), the Foundation against Racism and Antisemitism (GRA), and the Intercommunity Coordination against Antisemitism and Defamation (CICAD) cited 1,472 antisemitic incidents in the country in 2022, compared with 1,024 in 2021. Most incidents involved postings online but also included public insults, graffiti, and property damage. Antisemitic rhetoric and incidents increased significantly following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel and Israel's military response in Gaza. According to SIG, there were seven antisemitic physical assaults in the two months following October 7, compared with prior years where such physical attacks were extremely rare. SIG registered more than 80 antisemitic incidents (not including online comments) in the German and Italian-speaking parts of the country in the weeks following the Hamas attacks on Israel. A June 2023 report by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) European Network against Racism, in collaboration with the Federal Commission against Racism, cited 44 incidents against Muslims in 2022, compared with 53 in 2021. Following the October 7 attacks, anti-Muslim threats and discriminatory incidents increased, according to the Federation of Islamic Umbrella Organizations Switzerland (FIDS), with wearing the hijab being considered a common trigger for discrimination. Many participants in the annual September antiabortion march for life in Oerlikon represented religious groups. A large police presence deterred violence against participants by counterdemonstrators, as occurred in previous years.

In October, U.S. embassy officials met with government officials to discuss the Hamas October 7 terrorist attacks on Israel, efforts to counter a rise in antisemitism, and to urge the government to designate Hamas as a terrorist organization. In January, at a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony, a senior embassy official underscored the moral importance of remembering the Holocaust given the country's Jewish communities remained the target of continued attacks. In November, a senior embassy official attended a Swiss government-hosted conference on the establishment of memorial sites for Holocaust victims. During the year, embassy staff also met with the leadership of various religious groups and associations, including FIDS, the Free Churches Association, SIG, CICAD, and with the Jewish synagogue in Bern. In each meeting, embassy staff discussed financial and social discrimination, government support for the country's religiously affiliated organizations, and other issues pertaining to religious freedom.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.8 million (midyear 2023). According to the most recent report of the Federal Statistical Office compiled between 2019 and 2021 for persons 15 and older, 33.7 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 21.8 percent

Reformed Protestant, 5.5 percent Muslim, 7.2 percent belong to other religious groups, 30.9 percent have no religious affiliation, and 0.9 percent is unknown. Census data show the number of persons with no religious affiliation has increased in the past decade, as has the number of adherents to non-Christian faiths.

Of the 7.2 percent of the population older than 15 belonging to other religious groups, the majority belongs to Christian groups: 2.6 percent are Orthodox Christian or Old-Oriental Christian, and 2.7 percent are other Protestant communities, including evangelical, Pentecostal, Apostolical, and Charismatic Christians. Those belonging to the other Protestant communities, also referred to as free churches, are organized in associations and belong to the Swiss Reformed Alliance. An additional 0.3 percent belong to other Christian communities, including 0.1 percent Christian Catholics. Hindus comprise 0.6 percent of the population, 0.5 percent are Buddhist, 0.2 percent are Jewish, and 0.2 percent belong to other religions. According to the World Jewish Congress, there are approximately 18,500 Jews, and more than 50 percent of Jewish households reside in Zurich, Geneva, and Basel. According to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), there are approximately 20,000 followers in the country, while the Evangelical Information Center for Churches, Sects, and Religions (Relinfo) estimates there are 9,000 followers of the Church of Jesus Christ.

According to 2018 statistics from the University of Zurich (the most recent available), 75 percent of the Muslim community is Sunni, 10 to 15 percent Alevi, and approximately 10 percent Shia or other Muslim, including Ahmadi. The largest percentages of Muslims live in the cities of Biel (11 percent of city population), Winterthur (10 percent), Basel (8.6 percent), Lausanne (8.4 percent), St. Gallen (8 percent), and Geneva (7 percent). The Muslim community consists mainly of second or third generation migrants from Turkey, Kosovo, and countries of the Maghreb.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

In its preamble, the constitution states it is adopted “in the name of God Almighty.” It guarantees freedom of faith and conscience, states each person has the right to choose his or her religion and to profess it alone or with others, and prohibits religious discrimination. It states the confederation and cantons may, within the scope of their powers, act to preserve peace among members of different religious communities.

The federal penal code prohibits any form of “debasement,” which the code does not specifically define, or discrimination against any religion or religious adherents. Inciting hatred or discrimination, including by

electronic means and based on religion, is punishable by up to three years' imprisonment and/or a fine. The law also penalizes anyone who refuses to provide a service because of someone's religion; organizes, promotes, or participates in propaganda aimed at degrading or defaming adherents of a religion; or "denies, justifies, or plays down genocide or other crimes against humanity."

A 2021 law enacted by referendum criminalizes recruiting, training, and travel for the purposes of terrorism. Under the law, individuals who are 12 or older, whom authorities believe may pose a threat but who are not subject to criminal proceedings, may be required to report periodically to a police station, prohibited from traveling abroad, and confined to specific areas. The Federal Office of Police may also place persons it deems dangerous under house confinement for up to six months, renewable once.

The constitution delegates the regulation of relations between the government and religious groups to the 26 cantons. The cantons offer legal recognition as public entities to religious communities that fulfill several prerequisites and whose applications for recognition are approved in a popular referendum. The necessary prerequisites include a statement acknowledging the right of religious freedom, the democratic organization of the religious community, respect for the cantonal and federal constitutions and rule of law, and financial transparency.

The canton of Geneva continues to follow a 2019 law on religious neutrality prohibiting all cantonal government officials from wearing visible religious symbols in the workplace, such as head scarves, kippahs, or crosses. Following a 2020 court decision, communal parliamentarians (local legislators) are exempt from the ban. Based on the same law the canton also restricts religious activities on public grounds, with a waiver granted only in exceptional circumstances.

The cantons of Basel, Zurich, and Vaud also offer religious communities legal recognition as private entities, which provides them the right to conduct religious education classes in public schools. Procedures for obtaining private legal recognition vary; for example, Basel requires approval of the Grand Council (the cantonal legislature).

There is no law requiring religious groups to register in a cantonal commercial registry, although religious foundations, characterized as institutions with a religious purpose that receive financial donations and maintain connections to a religious community, must register in the commercial registry. To register, the foundation must submit an official letter of application to relevant authorities that includes the organization's name, purpose, board members, and head office location as well as a memorandum of association based on local law, a trademark certification, and a copy of the foundation's organizational documents.

Tax-exempt status granted to religious groups varies from canton to canton. Most cantons automatically grant tax-exempt status to religious communities that receive cantonal financial support, while all other religious communities must generally establish that they are organized as nonprofit associations and submit an application for tax-exempt status to the cantonal government. The Roman Catholic Church, Christian Catholic Church, and Reformed Church, which are financially supported by some cantons, do not have the same obligation, and all donations to these groups are tax deductible.

All cantons, with the exception of Geneva, Neuchatel, Ticino, and Vaud, financially support at least one of four religious communities – Roman Catholic Church, Christian Catholic Church, Reformed Church, or Jewish community – that the cantons have recognized as public religious entities. Such public support is provided with funds collected through a mandatory church tax on registered church members and, in 18 of 26 cantons, an additional tax on businesses. The church tax on businesses is collected regardless of the religious affiliation of their owners. The funds collected are distributed proportionally among the religious communities recognized by cantons. Only religious groups recognized as state churches or public entities are eligible to receive funds collected through the church tax, and no canton has recognized any religious groups other than these four. Payment of the church tax is voluntary in the cantons of Ticino, Neuchatel, and Geneva, while in all other cantons any individual who elects not to pay the church tax is required to formally leave the religious institution. Church tax is generally tax deductible from the personal income tax. The canton of Vaud is the only canton that does not collect a church tax, but the Reformed Church and Roman Catholic Church are still subsidized directly through the canton's budget. In the cantons of Bern and Vaud, the government pays the salaries of priests and clergy of the Roman Catholic, Christian Catholic, and Reformed Churches. All other religious communities fund themselves solely through donations from their members or from abroad, which in most cases are only partially or not at all tax deductible. The Canton of Valais collects a tax regardless of religious affiliation from individuals and companies, which goes directly to the Reformed Church and the Catholic Church.

A 2021 constitutional amendment bans full facial coverings, including the burqa and niqab, in public spaces. A law approved by parliament in September mandates a fine of up to 1,000 francs (\$1,200) for violations, but with several exceptions, including wearing full facial coverings inside religious institutions, which are not considered public spaces.

A 2009 constitutional amendment approved through a referendum prohibits the construction of minarets. The prohibition does not apply to the four existing mosques with minarets established before 2009. The law allows the construction of new mosques without minarets.

A federal animal welfare law prohibits ritual slaughter of animals without prior anesthetization, effectively banning kosher and halal slaughter practices. Importation of traditionally slaughtered kosher and halal meat is legal.

The constitution sets education policy at the cantonal level, but municipal school authorities have some discretion in implementing cantonal guidelines. Most public cantonal schools offer religious education, except in Geneva and Neuchatel. Public schools normally offer classes in Roman Catholic or Protestant doctrines, with precise details varying from canton to canton and sometimes from school to school; a few schools provide instruction on other religions. Ten public schools offer religious classes in Islamic doctrine. In some cantons, religious classes are voluntary, while in others, such as in Zurich and Fribourg, they form part of the mandatory curriculum at the secondary school level, although schools routinely grant waivers for children whose parents request them. Children belonging to minority religious groups may attend classes of their own faith. Practices vary from canton to canton, but most often classes for minority religious groups are held outside of school premises and hours and are financed by the respective group. Parents may also send their children to private religious schools at their personal expense or homeschool their children. Most mosques and many free churches have religious education available for children.

Most cantons require general classes about religion and culture in addition to classes in Christian doctrine. There are no national guidelines for waivers on religious grounds from religion classes not covering doctrine, and practices vary.

The law exempts clerics from mandatory military service. The law defines clerics as members of a religious order living in a communal congregation bound by a religious oath and official duties or officials of a formally organized religious community with more than 2,000 members, who are older than 25, and have at least three years of religious education.

Religious groups of foreign origin are free to proselytize, but foreign missionaries from countries that are not members of the EU or the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) must obtain a religious-worker visa to work in the country. Visa requirements include proof a local citizen could not fill the position and the foreigner has completed formal theological training, speaks the local language, and will be financially supported by the host organization. Clergy of international churches catering to an English-speaking audience also must fulfill these requirements, while professionals in the private sector are not required to learn one of the local languages. Unrecognized religious groups must also demonstrate to cantonal governments that the number of their foreign religious workers is not out of proportion with the size of the community.

when compared with the relative number of religious workers of religious communities recognized by cantons.

Immigrant clerics, like all immigrants, must also comply with four integration requirements: respect for public safety, security and order, respect for the values of the constitution, local language skills, and participation in economic life or efforts to acquire an education. Cantons may approve the residence permit of an applicant lacking these four criteria by devising an "integration agreement" that sets certain goals for the applicant to meet, such as attending language courses. The host organization must also "recognize the country's legal norms" and pledge it will not tolerate abuse of the law by its members. If an applicant does not meet these requirements, the government may deny, shorten, or revoke residency and work permits.

The government may refuse residency and work permits if a background check reveals an individual has ties to religious groups deemed "radicalized" or that have engaged in "hate preaching," which is defined as publicly inciting hatred against a religious group, disseminating ideologies intended to defame members of a religious group, organizing defamatory propaganda campaigns, engaging in public discrimination, denying or trivializing genocide or other crimes against humanity, or refusing to provide service based on religion. The law authorizes immigration authorities to refuse residency permits to clerics the government considers "fundamentalists" if authorities deem internal security or public order is at risk.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In response to the 2021 constitutional amendment banning the wearing of facial coverings under certain circumstances, the Islamic Central Council of Switzerland continued to state it would cover any fines imposed on women who continued to wear facial coverings. Police said violators of the ban would first receive a warning, and police would impose fines only in cases of further noncompliance. There were no reports of fines for noncompliance since the effective date of the amendment.

During the year, the Free Churches Association highlighted the continuing financial disparity in government support and reported evidence of increased limits on Christians to freely exercise their faith in public. The association also reported that tax-exempt status was increasingly restrictively granted, and only for activities that were strictly nonreligious. In the canton of Bern, free church leaders reported that donations for social activities, such as visiting homes for the elderly, were no longer tax deductible, a policy pending judicial appeal by the free churches at the end of the year.

Citing the separation of church and state, the cantonal government of Geneva continued to prohibit public baptisms in Lake Geneva by two free churches. The government based its decision on a 2020 law allowing only the three officially recognized religious institutions – the Reformed Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Christian Catholic Church – to conduct religious activities in public spaces. A 2022 administrative appeal by the two groups directly affected by the policy remained pending at year's end.

Applications for government funds by various religious groups for the protection of minorities threatened by terrorism or violent extremism continued to exceed availability of funds. A 2019 Federal Council decree originally authorized a total of 500,000 francs (\$597,000) annually for the protection of minorities threatened by terrorism or violent extremism, increased for the year to 2.5 million francs (\$2.9 million). The funding was authorized only for technical or building security improvements, with a maximum funding of 50 percent of the cost of improvements. Although funds were not authorized for personnel or other expenses, police provided additional protection of synagogues at times of heightened tensions or during Jewish holidays. Cantons and cities with significant Jewish communities, among them Zurich, Winterthur, Basel-Stadt, Geneva, and Biel, provided additional public funding for protection. Islamic institutions also used such funds to improve building security.

The government continued to grant visas primarily to religious workers who would replace individuals serving in similar functions in the same religious community. The government required Turkish nationals applying for short- and long-term religious worker visas to document their association with the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs.

The government did not issue visas to missionaries or religious teachers coming from countries outside the EU and EFTA without a theological degree. This primarily affected the Church of Jesus Christ, most of whose missionaries do not typically hold theological degrees. The Church's missionaries from EU and EFTA countries, however, continued to enter legally and work without a religious visa.

The government funded six Muslim counselors to visit centers for asylum seekers to mediate conflicts and to offer pastoral care. Imams also received funds to provide counseling for Muslim inmates in prison.

The army continued to utilize military chaplains representing the free churches, based on a partnership agreement. The army required candidates to complete both an assessment and an army chaplaincy course. Chaplains were not allowed to proselytize members of the military. Jewish and Muslim chaplains continued offering services. The army also continued training of additional or new chaplains from three

traditional denominations, the Reformed Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Christian Catholic Church.

The Federal Service for Combating Racism, which is responsible for matters related to religious discrimination, provided 897,600 francs (\$1 million) to projects against racism, which included projects against antisemitism and Islamophobia.

In several cantons, among them Bern and Zurich, some parliamentarians supported efforts to abolish the mandatory church tax for companies, or at least give them the choice of which organizations to support. In Bern, one proposed popular initiative suggested that persons be given the choice to contribute their share of the mandatory church tax to religious organizations or nonreligious NGOs. According to Free Churches Association representatives, none of these initiatives were successful to date.

The cantons of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Land continued to distribute a booklet with guidance on how religious communities might quote religiously discriminatory texts in scriptures without infringing on the 2020 law prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. The booklet recommends adding a commentary when quoting such passages. Leaders of religious communities said quoting such a scriptural or religious passage without commentary could be perceived or interpreted as discriminatory and could therefore be considered a criminal offense. They expressed concern that following this guidance could lead to self-censorship. Free Churches Association officials stated that since passage of laws criminalizing discriminatory rhetoric based on sexual orientation, such topics covered under the amendments were rarely addressed in their public sermons, in part to avoid civil or criminal liability.

Although Holocaust education was not a requirement, most schools included it in the curriculum and participated in the annual Holocaust Day of Remembrance on January 27. Visits of Holocaust survivors to schools for presentations and discussions are specifically recommended in the Swiss educational strategy.

On January 27, members of the federal government and parliament, including National Council (lower house of parliament) President Martin Candinas, participated in an official Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony in Bern. In his remarks, Candinas emphasized the role of schools in preserving the memory of the Holocaust and the importance of finding new ways and methods to teach its remembrance.

During the year, Jewish organizations criticized the lack of a national strategy or a national action plan against antisemitism, which they said would have been helpful when antisemitic incidents dramatically rose after the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel.

On April 26, the Federal Council authorized 2.5 million francs (\$2.9 million) for construction of a national Holocaust memorial site in Bern.

According to a November 8 article published in *the Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, the president of the cantonal government and director of security for the canton of Zurich, Mario Fehr, expressed alarm over the rise of antisemitism in the country following October 7, calling it "rampant" and "unbearable." He said Jewish friends reported abuse and hostility and he saw graffiti calling for "Death to the Jews."

The country is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The *2022 Antisemitism Report*, published during the year and produced jointly by SIG, GRA, and with CICAD numbers included, reported 1,472 antisemitic incidents for all language regions in the country in 2022, compared with 1,024 incidents in 2021. All except 85 incidents were from postings online. The report found 42 percent of the reported incidents involved antisemitic conspiracy theories. There was at least one incident of violence, 16 incidents of public insults, and nine incidents of antisemitic graffiti. The report found 326 instances of Holocaust denial, compared with 116 in 2021. Following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's military response in Gaza, Switzerland saw the largest increase in antisemitic incidents in the last 15 years, primarily in the French speaking regions. According to SIG, there were seven physical assaults against Jews in the two months following the terrorist attacks. Prior to the Israel-Hamas conflict, such physical assaults typically occurred only once every two to three years. Not including online activity, SIG registered more than 80 antisemitic incidents in the German and Italian speaking parts of the country through the end of November, while there were 57 such incidents for all of 2022.

According to SIG, during the year, unknown persons physically attacked a Jewish couple in Zurich, and in Winterthur, unknown persons attacked two young adults wearing Star of David pendants. In October alone, SIG registered almost as many antisemitic incidents as in all of 2022.

According to media and NGO reports, antisemitic organizations such as the Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network (Samidoun), which is legal in the country, continued to be active, with support from the extreme left. After the German government outlawed Samidoun in November, some Samidoun members moved to Switzerland.

Reportedly, there were approximately 218 mosques and prayer rooms in the country. A 2023 report prepared by the Network against Racism, in

collaboration with the Federal Commission against Racism, cited 44 incidents against Muslims in 2022, compared with 53 in 2021. Many of the incidents involved discrimination against women wearing the hijab. Representatives of FIDS, the largest Muslim association, reported an increase in incidents of anti-Muslim discrimination after the October 7 Hamas attacks in Israel. A local Muslim politician in Lausanne reported experiencing an incident of hate speech to local police and said that police advised this was part of his being a public figure and did not investigate the claim. According to FIDS, it did not maintain an annual register of attacks against Muslims.

The NGO Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe and media outlets reported that in March, the public television station SRF required a reporter on camera to first remove her cross pendant.

At year's end, there were no reports of any pending criminal investigation of the December 2022 vandalism of the Catholic San Giorgio Church in Golino in the canton of Ticino by unidentified individuals who defaced the church with satanic and anarchist symbols.

Most Reformed Protestants and Roman Catholics inherited their church membership through their parents' affiliation and were baptized as children. Some renounced their membership when they turned 18, also the age when citizens who are church members are required to pay church tax. Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches reported a lower church service attendance rate among their members, in comparison to free church members, who are the second most active group in worship attendance and participation, following only Roman Catholics, despite the free church's lower number of members.

Along with the members of the Catholic Church, several free churches organized an annual march for life in Oerlikon calling for restrictions on abortion. The march historically faced strong opposition by prochoice groups. Media reported that a large police presence deterred and prevented any repeat of previous years' violence during the march.

During the year, the free churches expressed political activism in part through the conservative party EDU, represented in several cantonal governments and with two seats on the National Council.

Many NGOs and representatives of religious communities continued to coordinate interfaith events to promote tolerance locally and nationwide. The November 5-13 Week of Religions, a national annual event sponsored and attended by most religious communities, civil society groups, and cantons, featured both online and in-person interfaith events, including film screenings, roundtables, and panel discussions.

The independent Zurich Institute for Interreligious Dialogue continued to provide a platform to study the religious histories and cultures of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, as well as to discuss contemporary developments related to religion, by organizing educational courses, speeches, panel discussions, and excursions. The institute hosted courses on the history of religions and seminars, comparing religious texts from Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, as well as sponsoring a conference on Jewish prayers.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In October, U.S. embassy officials met with government officials to discuss the Hamas October 7 terrorist attacks on Israel, efforts to counter a rise in antisemitism, and to urge the government to designate Hamas as a terrorist organization.

During the year, embassy staff met with the leadership of various religious groups, including the Free Churches Association, FIDS, SIG, CICAD, and the Jewish Community of Bern. They discussed financial and social discrimination, government support for the country's religiously affiliated organizations, and other issues concerning religious freedom. Embassy officers also discussed the rise in antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents after the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel with Jewish and Muslim NGOs. Also in November, a senior embassy official attended a Swiss government-hosted conference on the establishment of memorial sites for Holocaust victims.

On January 27, embassy officials participated in a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony at a secondary school in Bern with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. In remarks, a senior embassy official underscored the moral importance of remembering the Holocaust given that the Jewish community remained the target of continued attacks.

ecoi.net description:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2023)

Country:

Switzerland

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#) (Author)

Published:

Original link:
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/switzerland/>

Document type:
Periodical Report

Language:
English

Available on ecoi.net since:
3 July 2024

Document ID:
2111966

Austrian Red Cross	Wiedner Hauptstraße	Contact
Austrian Centre for	32, 1041 Wien	Imprint & Disclaimer
Country of Origin and	T +43 1 589 00 583	F.A.Q.
Asylum Research and	F +43 1 589 00 589	Data Protection Notice
Documentation	info@ecoi.net	
(ACCORD)		

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

