

Switzerland – Preliminary Antisemitism Report 2019

Simon Erlanger

This short report is preliminary and based on personal impressions since the two official annual reports on Antisemitism will be only be published by April 2019. However, it already can be assumed that – while the overall situation seems stable – the threat level remains high with antisemitic incidents of all kind still occurring frequently.

The last available Data

The 2018 Report on Antisemitism published by the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities (SIG) and the Foundation against Racism and Anti-Semitism (GRA) counted 42 anti-Semitic incidents This number is almost the same as in 2017. SIG and GRA only collect data for the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The French-speaking part of the country is covered by the Geneva-based “Coordination Intercommunautaire Contre l’Antisemitisme et la Diffamation” (CICAD), which publishes its report separately. It counted 174 anti-Semitic incidents in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The higher number provided by CICAD derives from the fact that CICAD adds antisemitic comments and talkbacks on the Internet to the overall number of incidents. SIG and GRA recorded Internet-related cases separately. In addition to the 42 incidents in the real-world SIG and GRA counted 535 antisemitic incidents on the internet committed by Swiss users.

The young are increasingly targeted

Since the publication of the above reports the magazine “Beobachter” has published in November 2019 an inquiry of the experiences of young Jews at work, at school, and at the university (see: <https://www.beobachter.ch/gesellschaft/antisemitismus-wie-junge-juden-der-schweiz-gemobbt-werden>) It turned out, that a majority of young Jews has experienced antisemitism on a regular basis. Most of the incidents went unreported. In an interview to the magazine SIG-president Herbert Winter stated, that the general atmosphere has indeed worsened. He identified the internet a major culprit.

Not stable

Therefore, the impression that in the middle of the massive resurgence of antisemitism in Europe, neutral Switzerland is an island is deceptive. The situation seems only to be stable in comparison to 2017. But by that year antisemitic acts in Switzerland had already reached a record high not seen since the 1930s. During 2017 the number of antisemitic incidents in Switzerland had increased by 52% thereby ending years when antisemitism was seen to be on retreat.

Due to methodological and political problems most antisemitic acts still go unreported, despite an effort by the SIG and the GRA to collect the relevant data. For example: There were four reported attacks in Basel on the local kosher butchery between September and October 2018, which resulted in massive and highly visible property damage. There were many further attacks on people and property in the same neighborhood by the same perpetrator who was apprehended in Summer 2019 and has been put to trial since. None of the attacks were publicly reported on. In Zurich it was the Charedi communities which were increasingly targeted in 2019. Again, one notices that most incidents go unreported. This was pointed out by the Swiss Federation of Jewish communities already last year.

A major issue are the talkbacks and postings on the internet and Social media. Some new and improved methods have already been employed by SIG and GRA. It is however clear that with many millions of daily postings in social media and tens of thousands of talkbacks every 24 hours the 535 recorded antisemitic posting are just the mall tip of a gigantic iceberg.

Still no new study in sight

As stated in every report in the last years, there is still no new study on Swiss antisemitism. It seems that there also isn't any study planned the near future. As a non-member of the EU, Switzerland was also not included in the "Second Survey on Discrimination and Hate Crime against Jews in the EU - Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism." There are a few older and contradicting studies: In a general survey on coexistence, integration and prejudice the Federal Bureau of Statistics (Bundesamt für Statistik) found in 2017 12% of Swiss to be antisemitic. In contrast the "ADL Global 100" study into worldwide antisemitism by the American Anti Defamation League ADL found in 2014 the very high number of 1,7 Million Swiss or 26% of the Swiss harboring antisemitic attitudes. This would make Switzerland one of the most antijewish countries on the continent. In order to get an adequate picture, a more localized study based on a larger local sample should be conducted.

The only reliable sources on Swiss attitudes toward the Jews are outdated: In 2000 the "gfs" Research Institute in Berne found that 16 percent of the Swiss harbored intense anti-Semitic feelings. Although this was about European average at the time, the number constituted double the percentage older polls had found. The 2000 findings were topped by a 2006 study by the University of Geneva's Department of Sociology, which found 20 percent of the Swiss being "affected by anti-Semitism." The gfs Research Institute responded with a new study in 2007. While it found only 10% of respondents to be openly antisemitic, some 53% of respondents were highly critical of Israel. 50% were thinking at the time that Israel was leading a "war of annihilation" against the Palestinians. 13% of respondents stated that Israel has no right to exist. The older studies do not take into account recent developments.

IHRA Definition not yet fully accepted

Antisemitism und Anti-Israelism as defined by the IHRA definition of Antisemitism have certainly increased in 2019, emanating from all sides, from the left, the Greens, the religious right, the extreme right, the Islamists and even from mainstream liberals. While Switzerland is one of the 31 members of the IHRA, which accepted the EU Working definition as binding in 2016, the definition still has not been accepted fully by the Swiss parliament. In June 2019 the Upper Chamber, the Ständerat accepted a resolution by the social-democratic MP Paul Rechsteiner, asking the government to prepare a report on the IHRA-definition which will then hopefully be discussed and accepted by both houses of parliament.

Security cost

As reported in past years the Swiss confederacy and the cantons had since 2015 refused to contribute to Jewish security, as they would have been obliged to do by the Swiss constitution. Since then security costs have soared and turned out to be a very heavy burden for the Jewish communities, which brought some of them to the brink of financial collapse. It is only in 2018, after years of controversy, that the Swiss Confederacy has finally agreed to provide limited funds for "training and prevention".

The money is not supposed to be used for actual security cost. Communities will have to come up with a so-called prevention course. All in all, a mere half a million Swiss Francs is

made available to the 16 Jewish communities which are members of the Swiss Federation of Jewish communities SIG. Besides the Jewish communities all mosques, several hundred muslim communities and so-called "threatened groups" such can apply for the funds. While obviously of little practical use the modest financial contribution of the Swiss Confederation is also intended to serve as an incentive to the cantons to provide themselves funds for the security of the Jewish communities. In Zurich the canton is indeed about to provide funds to the Jewish communities recognized by the state. In Basel Jewish security has already been taken over by the canton, thereby alleviating the financial burden of its 214 year old community.

What lies ahead?

The coming major challenge for Swiss Jewry will not be about security. It will be the attempt to prohibit through parliament the import of Kosher meat. While Shechita has been outlawed since 1893 (the ban was part of a backlash against the emancipation of Swiss Jews between 1866 and 1879 which was forced on Switzerland by the US and France), so far the import of Kosher meat was always possible under a heavy quota and customs system. Now this might well be changed, in an act, which would constitute an attack on the continuity of organized jewish life in Switzerland. While this has been an issue for while battle lines are not yet drawn and the public debate has not yet started. But this could well happen in 2020.