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The Structure of Islam in Switzerland and the Effects of the Swiss Minaret Ban

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In November 2009, the Swiss public voted to ban the construction of minarets across the country. Minarets are tower-like structures attached to mosques from which the call to prayer is projected five times a day. However, in non-Muslim majority nations, the minaret is not used to project the call to prayer, and is, instead, an architectural symbol akin to a church steeple. As only four minarets stand in Switzerland and none project the call to prayer, it is not self-evident why they pose a problem for the Swiss. This research examines the rise and the organization of Islam in Switzerland to understand the social and political structures which led to the minaret ban, and the effects of the ban on the Muslim community.

By examining the history of Muslim immigration into Switzerland and the demographics of the Swiss Muslim community, I have found that the Muslim population has immigrated from a number of different countries. As religion is intertwined with regional culture, a variety of different “Islams” exist within Switzerland, making it difficult for the Swiss government to understand how to incorporate this new population into their idea of “Swiss culture.”

I have found that these variations on Islam in Switzerland have led Muslims to organize according to country of origin. However, through a number of personal interviews I conducted with scholars, politicians, and Muslim practitioners, I found that Muslims have begun to congregate as Muslims instead of according to nationality, due to the way in which the minaret ban set Muslims apart. This shift in Muslim organization may lead Muslims to gain political agency, but it may also lead to “Muslim versus Swiss” sentiments across the nation.