



## **OSCE Permanent Council No.785**

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### **Statement by the Swiss Delegation on Minarets in Switzerland**

In a referendum on 29 November 2009, the citizens of Switzerland voted in favour of a popular initiative which bans the construction of minarets in the future. The Swiss government will implement this democratic decision even though, in the referendum campaign, both the federal government (Federal Council) and a majority of the federal parliament explicitly recommended to the electorate to reject the proposal of the initiative.

The Swiss federal constitution guarantees the freedom of religion. The ban on the construction of new minarets, not new mosques, will not limit the freedom of religious expression. Muslims in Switzerland will continue to have the freedom to profess their faith in Islam and to practise their religion. The freedom of religious expression remains guaranteed for all religions.

Currently, there are about 400,000 Muslims living in Switzerland, i.e. approximately 5% of the population. In general, they are well integrated in Swiss society. There are more than 200 Muslim places of prayer in Switzerland. The latter are not affected by the ban. New mosques and prayer houses may be built and used as before. The Swiss government confirms its respect for the Muslim community in Switzerland, for the Islamic faith, and for Muslims worldwide.

As the Swiss Foreign Minister explained on 1 December 2009 to the Ministerial Council in Athens, we are disconcerted by this decision of the voters. It is an expression of a defensive attitude towards a globalised world experiencing economic crisis and growing unemployment. Twenty-two percent of Switzerland's population are foreigners, making it the country with the second-highest proportion of foreigners in Europe after Luxembourg.

During the campaign, fears and prejudices were perceived. They should be openly addressed. The Swiss government is seeking an active dialogue with all sections of Swiss society, especially with the Muslim community. The aim of this dialogue is to promote mutual understanding between different population groups and to ensure religious freedom.

In its foreign policy too, Switzerland will strengthen its efforts to intensify the dialogue. The result of the referendum is a clear exhortation to the Swiss government to nurture and deepen its diverse relations with all Muslim countries. From this perspective, we will pursue an open encounter and a partnership with the Muslim world. Only those who speak with each other and remain in dialogue are able to understand each other.

To conclude, one last remark: In Switzerland we are aware of the fact that the ban on minarets could lead to a problem with respect to international law governing the ban on discrimination – as enshrined both in the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Covenant on Political and Civil Rights. If, in particular, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg should come to the conclusion that a fundamental right of the European Convention on Human Rights has been violated, Switzerland would be obliged to study the consequences of such a judgement very carefully.