Switzerland's Choice of Friends

Given Europe's bloody history of conflict, Switzerland can perhaps be proud that it arouses no particularly intense emotions. Certainly no one hates it with the passion generally reserved for the Americans or the Jews—but then again, no one really adores it, either. For the most part, criticism of Switzerland goes no further than noting that its contribution to humanity has been fairly modest and that the country is, well, rather boring. Even the sharpest tongues have found little in Switzerland to infuriate: "I don't like Switzerland," declared Oscar Wilde. "It has produced nothing but theologians and waiters." Dorothy Parker, the wisecracking poet and journalist, once wrote that "the Swiss are a neat and industrious people, none of whom is under seventy-five years of age. They make cheeses, milk chocolate, and watches, all of which, when you come right down to it, are fairly unnecessary." And who can forget the words of the great film director Orson Welles in *The Third Man*? "In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love. They had five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock."

The Swiss have earned their reputation for blandness: For centuries, they distanced themselves from the turmoil of world politics, as well as from the wars that tore neighboring European countries to pieces. With few exceptions, they refrained from joining any league or alliance that might obligate them to take a political, military, or economic stand. And although Switzerland is home to numerous international organizations, it held off joining the United Nations until 2002 and is still not a member

of the European Union. Yet this calculated aloofness, far from exasperating the world, seems instead to have played to its advantage: Even now, after the echoes of Europe's most recent wars have died down, Switzerland is still viewed by many as an island of calm, stability, and sanity.

What a pity, then, that Switzerland's pastoral image has come at the price of ignoring many of the basic values that any enlightened nation is duty-bound to uphold. In recent months, a series of controversial diplomatic moves have reflected a disturbing eagerness on the part of the Swiss government to appease some of the world's greatest despots and terrorists, casting doubt (and not for the first time) on the public integrity and political insight of those who advocate a policy of neutrality. Indeed, these actions illustrate the vast moral chasm facing those who may be tempted to follow the Swiss example—a temptation with dangerous implications both for the future of the West and for freedom-loving peoples everywhere.

In late April of this year, Switzerland played host to the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, generally known as Durban II. Though the UN took care to bill the gathering as a prestigious event, several leading Western democracies boycotted it, for reasons self-evident to anyone who recalled Durban I. Although the previous conference, held in South Africa in 2001, purported to promote tolerance, enlightenment, and love of mankind, it quickly dissolved into a grotesque festival of Israel-bashing. As signs increased that the ugly spectacle was set to repeat itself this year, the United States and Israel—along with Canada, Germany, Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Australia—announced their intention to stay home.

Their decision was vindicated on the conference's opening day, when Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—a Holocaust denier who openly calls for Israel's annihilation—addressed those assembled on the subject of the Jewish state's "barbaric racism." Dozens of European Union representatives, in an act of public protest, walked out on his speech. Switzerland,

however, took a different tack: Its president, Hans-Rudolf Merz, was all smiles and warm handshakes, even meeting with Ahmadinejad for several hours that same day. To be sure, the pair had good reason for this mutual show of affection. Only one year earlier, the Swiss energy company EGL had contracted to import 5.5 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Iran annually between 2011 and 2035 at a price of close to $40 billion—a move, it should be noted, that undermined American efforts to put economic pressure on the Islamic regime in an attempt to slow its push toward nuclear armament. Faced with international criticism for his country's affability toward Iran, Merz fell back on its old, foolproof motto: "Switzerland," he declared, "is neutral."

Less than two months later, it was Hamas's turn to enjoy Swiss hospitality. A delegation headed by one of the organization's leaders, Mahmoud al-Zahar, visited Geneva at the invitation of a local research institute. Both the United States and the European Union consider Hamas a terrorist group, and forbid its members to set foot on their soil. This, however, did not dissuade high-ranking Swiss diplomats from meeting with its emissaries. When the international media learned of the visit, Switzerland's Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey rushed to justify her government's conduct by declaring that "Hamas is a major player in the Middle East, and one cannot ignore it."

This ostentatious display of tolerance—dare we say, friendliness?—shown by the Swiss government toward Palestinian terrorists will not surprise those who have followed the exploits of Swiss activist Jean Ziegler, a member of the Advisory Committee to the UN Human Rights Council. Ziegler, who was elected to the post in March 2008 following a particularly vigorous lobbying campaign on the part of the Swiss government, is an ardent critic of both Israel and the United States—and a vigorous defender of terrorist organizations and dictators. (He is, for example, one of the founders of the Libyan-funded Al-Gaddafi International Prize for Human Rights, of which he himself was a recipient in 2002.) In recent years, Ziegler has repeatedly accused Israel of "war crimes," labeled Gaza an "immense

concentration camp," and accused IDF soldiers of acting like "concentration camp guards." In the same spirit, Ziegler declared in 2006 that Hezbollah is not a terrorist organization but a "national resistance movement." In light of its recent behavior, it is only fitting that the Swiss government regards this homegrown radical as an eminent public figure, and his work a source of pride. Who better, after all, to represent a state so anxious to prove it is not an ally of Western democracies? (For a comprehensive review of Jean Ziegler's exploits, see Hillel Neuer's "Ziegler's Follies," Azure 32, Spring 2008.)

It might be tempting to chalk Swiss diplomacy up to a case of ovezealous neutrality. Yet it hardly cuts both ways: In July of this year, the official Swiss news agency reported that Ahmadinejad's congenial hosts had decided to exhibit a more reserved attitude toward the Dalai Lama. Although the exiled Tibetan leader has been a lifelong proponent of nonviolent resistance—in stark contrast, for example, to Mahmoud al-Zahar—the Swiss government decided to shun him during his visit to Lausanne in early August. Given that Switzerland is now in advanced negotiations with China over a free-trade agreement, it seems reasonable to conclude that the decision to sidestep the 74-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner was the result of pressure from Beijing. In a radio interview, Foreign Minister Calmy-Rey reluctantly admitted as much. "It's not a good time, it's a difficult period, it's impossible for me, for my colleagues too," she said.

By contrast, the Swiss have been particularly obsequious toward Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. In July 2008, Gaddafi's son Hannibal and his wife Aline were arrested in Geneva after beating two domestic employees. After posting half a million Swiss francs in bail, the couple was released two days later. The Libyans were nonetheless outraged: Gaddafi the elder immediately slapped a series of sanctions on Switzerland—which he called a "mafia state" at the yearly G8 meeting—including the halting of all oil exports, the cancellation of all flights between the two countries, and the withdrawal of some $5 billion in Libyan assets from Swiss banks. For the Swiss, this was all too much to bear. During an August 2009 visit to Libya,

the Swiss president publicly groveled before his hosts, apologizing for Hannibal's "unjust arrest."

The Swiss people are noted for several praiseworthy national traits, such as seriousness and precision. Unfortunately, as their leaders' recent actions and the not-so-distant past demonstrate, they are sorely lacking in one crucial quality: shame.

In truth, the Swiss flirtation with political evil is not new; it dates back seven decades: Although Switzerland ostensibly remained neutral throughout World War II, even readying itself for the very real possibility of a German invasion, it did not shy away from active financial collaboration with the Nazi regime. The Swiss National Bank served as chief money-changer for the Third Reich, allowing the Germans to deposit enormous amounts of gold—some $400 million at wartime exchange rates—looted from their Jewish victims and occupied countries. It then converted roughly one quarter of it into hard currency, which Germany used to buy products and raw materials from other neutral countries. Under pressure from the Allies, these states reduced the extent of their trade with the Axis powers; only Switzerland declined to forgo its profitable cooperation with its northern neighbor. It continued to do business with the Nazis until the final weeks of the war, thus oiling the German military machine long after the bell had tolled for Hitler's empire.

Switzerland's conduct toward persecuted European Jews was equally deplorable. Until 1943, it refused entry to Jewish refugees, claiming its doors were open only to those persecuted on political grounds. Tens of thousands of individuals in mortal danger on account of their ethnic or religious origins were thus considered unfit to enjoy the protection of an ostensibly neutral state. In 1938, worried by the influx of unwanted elements, the Swiss authorities—most notably Dr. Heinrich Rothmund, Swiss chief of police—convinced the German government to stamp the Jews' passports with the letter "J" so they could be more easily

identified, and thus prevented from entering Switzerland. In total, the Swiss deported more than 30,000 Jewish refugees, most of whom were subsequently murdered by the Nazis. Those allowed to remain in Switzerland were held in detention camps so as to keep from taking up permanent residence, and shortly after the war, most were forced to leave. According to Swiss historian Edgar Bonjour, the responsibility for his country's callous and exploitative policy during the Holocaust does not lie solely with functionaries or politicians. "The whole generation failed and shares the guilt," he emphasized.

Nor did later generations do their best to make amends. For decades, Holocaust survivors and their families who sought to reclaim capital they had deposited in Swiss banks before and during the war were met with outright refusal. Only in 1998, following a lengthy public campaign and persistent legal struggle, did the banks consent to set up a fund of $1.25 billion to compensate the heirs of the original depositors: the Jewish refugees Switzerland turned away during the war and those it used as slave labor. Stuart Eizenstat, the United States ambassador to the European Union at the time, who played a major role in exposing Swiss injustice and forcing restitution, explains in his book *Imperfect Justice: Looted Assets, Slave Labor, and the Unfinished Business of World War II* (2003) that

> The story of the Swiss reparations process is not a story of easy successes or idyllic justice. The Swiss banks were at best insensitive and at worst antagonistic.… The Swiss government was not cooperative. Only through the diplomatic efforts of the U.S. government, threats of sanctions and boycotts by lawyers and Jewish organizations, class-action lawsuits, and heated negotiations did my colleagues and I help produce results far beyond anyone's expectations.

Eizenstat further notes that the difficult negotiations he conducted with both the banks and the government in Bern led to an outbreak of vicious antisemitism in Switzerland. He mentions, by way of example, a cartoon

published in a local newspaper at the time: "Under the caption *Helvetia under Drunk* ('Switzerland under pressure') is a Jew holding a press, crushing Mother Switzerland into disgorging gold."

Undoubtedly, Switzerland's dark past only inflamed the anger felt by many Jews and Israelis over its recent decision to befriend some of their worst enemies. In the wake of the meeting between presidents Merz and Ahmadinejad, Israel recalled its ambassador to Switzerland for consultations, and President Shimon Peres declared, "There must be a limit, even to the neutrality of Switzerland." But with diplomatic protests falling on deaf ears, some have suggested a different course of action. In a fuming, sardonic piece in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*, journalist Nadav Eyal reasoned:

> Money talks. Maybe ours can, too. Israeli businessmen who are shareholders in Swiss banks could sell their shares. Just like that! The Finance Ministry could encourage them to do so, in its own mysterious way. The Knesset, for its part, could take several painful measures affecting Switzerland's leading export industry—the banking secrecy that it offers to those who have something to hide. Incidentally, it's safe to assume—and this is only a wild guess—that the Swiss banks have one or two Jewish customers. Perhaps they could be persuaded to deposit their money in other banks whose countries are not so eager to give out Toblerone to dictators and terrorists with a special interest in killing Jews.

Eyal's resentment is certainly justified, and some of his suggestions indeed make sense. But it would be a mistake to think that the problem begins and ends with Switzerland. Ultimately, Swiss policies are but an extreme example of a much wider phenomenon, and reflect an approach that appeals to many in Europe and beyond. Put simply, it holds that in a world where armed rivals are engaged in a game of life and death, the smartest thing to do is to watch from the sidelines.

In the past, this assumption might have made sense: When Switzerland first adopted its policy of neutrality in the sixteenth century, it did so because it had no choice. Home to various cultural and linguistic groups living side by side, it was forced to contend not only with the danger of foreign conquest, but also internal schism. Under the circumstances, neutrality was the only viable option. It was also, and perhaps more importantly, not morally problematic: In the power struggles between Europe's various monarchs and, later, nation-states, no side held a fundamental moral advantage over its rivals.

In the twentieth century, however, the picture changed dramatically. World War II and the ensuing confrontation between the West and the Soviet bloc were not merely geopolitical conflicts between morally equivalent parties. Rather, they were clashes between worldviews, each of which sought to propel mankind in an opposing direction. These battles set open societies against closed ones, democracies against dictatorships, and value systems that promote pluralism and tolerance (albeit often begrudgingly honored) against ideologies that sought to obliterate the "other." The battle being waged today between the West and radical Islam is no different. The atrocities carried out by extremist Muslims in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Algeria, and Israel—and let us not forget New York—have made it clear that, now as then, the forces of freedom are up against unconstrained evil.

In such a conflict, there is no place for neutrality—or passivity, indifference, and weakness. The reality of our world demands total commitment to one or the other side. Sadly, Switzerland is not the only state that has chosen to be one of what Dante called "the sad souls… who lived without blame and without praise." Even among those nations that have proclaimed their willingness to fight to protect their freedoms, many too frequently prefer to avoid decisive action, thus enabling their enemies to gather strength and prepare for the next round. Thus, for example, is Israel obliged to sit back and watch while Iran's nuclear project, which poses an apocalyptic threat to its existence, moves forward, while in America and Europe—not to mention China and Russia—statesmen talk incessantly of "diplomatic channels"

and warn against "burning bridges" with the Muslim world. And when the president of the United States asserts, in his initial response to the presidential election fraud in Iran and the subsequent suppression of popular protest, that "it's not productive" for his country to intervene, his words recall the advice of Switzerland's fifteenth-century patron saint, Nicholas of Flüe, who counseled his flock: "Don't get involved in other people's affairs."

History shows that at times there is simply no escaping involvement in other people's affairs—lest we wish them to become our own. Winston Churchill once said, "An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last." If we seek to avert disaster, we cannot suffice with not feeding the crocodile. We must also confront those who do.

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