

# **The Swiss Experience: Neutrality As a Symbol of Entity and a Strategy of National Protection**

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Switzerland, this deeply-rooted European country, has remarkably preserved its entity amidst the numerous changes that rocked the world and Europe in particular. More crucially, Europe itself has changed with the establishment of the European Union and the adoption of the common currency. Over the past few years too, the American neocons dominated the world, labeling Europe as the Old Continent.

Hence, it is not by sheer coincidence that we embark on a new reading of the leading Swiss experience in its 350-years-old neutrality. To this end, we can not but delve into the historical and geo-political depth of this experience. The crucial feature of this experience lies in the enlightenment and awareness of the Swiss people, who, despite all obstacles and difficulties, did manage to lay solid foundations of internal democracy without any foreign assistance, foundations that rested on thought, modernity, and freedom, as confirm the people's lifelong struggle, cooperation, and solidarity. As such, the Swiss experience is mostly characterized by the unwavering attempts to maintain neutrality.

Hence comes the following question: How does this experience relate to Lebanon? Before attempting an answer, we can not deny the feelings of joy that overwhelm the Lebanese when they describe Lebanon as "the Switzerland of the Middle East," – a motto that was once convincing when serious slogans were brandished, all calling to neutralize Lebanon and distance it from the so-called Arab-Israeli conflict. But in economy, things take a different turn. Lebanon embraced the Swiss principle of banking secrecy, and Beirut stood out for a while as an important financial hub in the region. Yet Lebanon was not neutralized in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the

regional crises. On the contrary, the Lebanese arena turned into a gateway to military and political crises, especially in the aftermath of the 1975 civil war.

In an attempt to review the Swiss experience in comparison to Lebanon, a series of questions surface nowadays. Can Switzerland maintain its foreign policy neutrality in the midst of the ongoing international developments and European changes? Can it stick to its defense policy after the establishment of the EU?

In a serious attempt to answer these questions that crucially relate to the survival of this State's neutrality and the future of its experience in contemporary international relations, we can not but examine important historical, geo-political and military stages, which indirectly helps us as Lebanese learn from the Swiss experience when outlining a defense policy that consecrates national unity and civil peace.

### **What Is a Neutral State?**

Switzerland is dubbed the “neutral state” – with neutrality representing a guiding principle of its foreign policy. The famous 1515 Battle of Marignan represents a historical turning point, as King Francis I inflicted a military defeat on the Swiss.

Switzerland embraced neutrality in 1516, i.e. one year after its resounding defeat at the hands of the French army during the famous Battle of Marignan, also known as the Battle of Marignano. Having learnt the lesson the hard way, the Swiss strived to preserve their gains, relying on their democratic awareness to lay solid foundations of neutrality, foundations that are still firm to date. As such, the Swiss took the lead at the European level in instituting neutrality, distancing themselves from military and political alliances. In the same vein, Switzerland signed a permanent peace treaty with its biggest neighbor, one perceived as the first pillar of Switzerland's neutrality.

Switzerland snatched internal recognition of its neutrality in the 1647 treaty, whereby all parties pledged to consecrate and maintain armed neutrality, which still represents to date the cornerstone of the Swiss foreign policy. In the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, the European countries at war showed respect of Switzerland's desire for neutrality. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, the

Swiss society flourished as neutrality was paying off economically. Perhaps one of the major reasons behind this economic growth lies in Switzerland managing to shy away from Europe's political and military struggles. In the same era, Switzerland's intellectual movement enjoyed international and humanitarian openness marked by the birth of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, thinker and author of *The Social Contract*, who influenced the French Revolution.

For more than 200 years after the conclusion of the treaty, Switzerland has followed a reserved foreign policy. It even resorted to arbitration to settle problems that arose every now and again. But when the French troops invaded the country in 1789, neutrality was shelved for a while. Europe changed after Napoleon's fall, and the Treaty of Vienna was concluded in 1815. In that same year, major European signatories to the treaty recognized Switzerland's neutrality. France, Austria, Britain, Portugal, Byelorussia, Russia, and Sweden recognized Switzerland's right to stay on the sidelines in any future armed conflict, pledging at the same time not to attack Swiss territories.

### **Principles of International Law on Neutrality**

Neutrality is one of the complicated concepts in public international law. Concluded during the Second Hague Conference, the Conventions of October 17, 1907 spelled out for the first time the rights and obligations of neutral states. One of the articles, for instance, prohibits a neutral state from directly partaking in any armed conflict or assisting any party to the conflict with weapons and men. Even though neutrality occupied a prominent place in international law, with the international community recognizing Switzerland's exceptional standing and neutrality, it came across different challenges: the evolution of the public international law as the interests of people and nations intertwined further. The Swiss neutrality equally came under fire in WWI in light of the different crimes against humanity that were perpetrated. Switzerland never slackened in heeding neutrality, which took on different forms with time. Against the backdrop of the recurring international conflicts, the same question surfaces: What is the best political stance to be adopted? Some even wonder: What do positive and armed neutrality mean in practical terms?

The Swiss federal constitution does not perceive neutrality as an end per se but rather as a means to protect the country's independence. From this perspective, the constitution prods the government and the bicameral federal parliament to uphold this principle and to safeguard Switzerland's foreign security, independence and choices. At the end of WWI, Switzerland joined the League of Nations and expressed its readiness to impose economic sanctions at the onset of WWII. It also dispatched troops to protect its borders, thus reconfirming its neutrality.

Accordingly, unarmed neutrality is mere ink on paper – a fact that Switzerland has come to realize with time. Switzerland realized that neutrality, as a symbol of its entity, must be complemented by armed forces that embrace one defense strategy and protect its neutrality and independence.

### **International Relations**

International relations, as a direct means to outline political relations, pique our interest in all aspects of social life, most notably in light of the interaction between internal phenomena and international realities. In this sense, social phenomena, regardless of their nature, source or content, become an international matter when they trespass state boundaries. For social relations to be at the core of international relations, they must represent a solid tenet of the international community concept. For this reason, researches on international relations have increasingly centered on political, military, cultural, and even religious relations. The Swiss experience may be a leading one in its approach to the concept of the State, international neutrality and national defense. Remarkable in this experience are the Swiss democracy and social awareness in such a way that the people, democracy and the army are identified as one.

This reality prompts us as Lebanese to ask the following question: How can the State dare keep weapons in the hands of its citizens? Isn't such a step likely to undermine national unity? In the case of Switzerland, the State wagered first on democracy and second on social awareness that was built through social education, politics and patriotism. Patriotism became part of the people's military traditions and heritage. Hence, military defense took on a civilian character inseparable from daily life. The army and the people are

one in standing up for the same common political and social goals in Switzerland.

In this respect, French social writer, thinker, and philosopher Montesquieu ruled out that any given state, with an eye on implementing a policy, would venture or dare arm all its citizens. But Switzerland, confident about its democracy and people's awareness, did take the risk. First construed as a form of isolationism, neutrality evolved with time to encompass international cooperation and friendship with other peoples and countries. Hence came the headline: Switzerland with all, a step away from isolation and seclusion.

### **International Solidarity**

In the aftermath of World War II, neutrality was linked to the concept of international solidarity, which allows for peacekeeping missions across the world. Within this framework comes the Swiss monitoring role of the 1953 ceasefire on the demarcation line separating North and South Korea.

At the end of the Cold War in 1990, Switzerland had to reconsider its neutrality and, by way of consequence, adapt it to changes in foreign policy and security worldwide with international cooperation increasingly gaining momentum. Following these global developments that ensued the demise of the Soviet Union and Communism, Switzerland endeavored to cement its historical standing in a two-pronged approach that could be adopted as a potential solution. First, its geographical location forced it into cooperating with other European countries in its milieu, landlocked as it was, deprived of international waterways. Second, thanks to its permanent neutrality, it emerged as an outstanding venue for international organizations, particularly the United Nations.

In theory, European-Swiss cooperation was decisive, as Switzerland maintained its neutrality despite the post-WWII developments. Standing on the sidelines during the Cold War too, it neither joined the NATO nor the Warsaw Pact, not even the European Economic Community. It only acceded to the OECD, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, and the European Council in 1963. Despite its cooperation with the UN and its specialized agencies, Switzerland still refuses to join this international body,

lest it loses its neutrality or gets embroiled in international conflicts that would force it into stances inconsistent with its voiced neutrality.

Even though Switzerland is not a permanent member of the UN General Assembly, it effectively takes part in some UN organizations and activities, such as the International Criminal Court. Headquartered in the Hague, the ICC rules on matters that fall within the jurisdiction of the public international law deemed of paramount importance in Switzerland. Paradoxically though, many neutral states, such as Austria and Sweden, have not seen their neutrality falter after their accession to the UN and the EU.

Perhaps the future is a major cause of concern for the Swiss people. The Swiss government has come to realize that embracing the NATO's Partnership for Peace Initiative does not undermine its neutrality. Cooperation does not entail accession or a commitment to military participation in potential conflicts.

In the same vein, the Swiss government no longer perceives accession to the EU as a step inconsistent with the principle of neutrality. In this sense, such a step seems feasible so long as the EU does not force its members into mutual military cooperation. To Switzerland, neutrality is an option that could be easily renounced, a stance which, far from being constant, is likely to change and evolve. In parallel, others express the view that such a step would herald cooperation between Switzerland and the NATO. For in the past, the Swiss army did conduct large maneuvers inside the small country. Such project may also pave the way for the Swiss troops to assume missions abroad in times of the annual military service for the young men. In parallel, political circles, NGOs, and the federal government are increasingly debating this issue. So will Switzerland manage to factor in the economic, political, and social changes that marked Europe and the world?

### **Where Does Lebanon Stand from the Swiss Experience?**

It is no wonder for the Lebanese to hold the Swiss experience in awe, especially as our national dialogue still revolves around defense strategy. In addition, a few Lebanese intellectuals are advancing positive neutrality in the clash of cultures and religions. The truth is that Switzerland managed to preserve the military defense strategy as a prelude to safeguarding its neutrality. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Switzerland must examine its international

– more particularly European – role in fostering economic, military, and political integration with its neighbors, immune as it is to military dangers.

In Lebanon, on the contrary, neutrality has bumped across many impediments. Lebanon is now more than ever at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, devising a defense strategy that consecrates cooperation among the resistance, the army and the people may be a feasible step towards preserving national unity. With no doubt, Lebanon and Switzerland are tied by more than broad headlines. Switzerland's success story has rested on democracy, progress, and evolution in an enlightened society that has defended its neutrality – and still does. Lebanon, for its part, can not but learn from this experience.