
FORMER SWISS OFFICER JOHAN COSAR ON TRIAL FOR FIGHTING IS

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Johan Cosar went to Syria not to fight for the Islamic State group, but against them. Now, the former Swiss army officer is facing a military tribunal back home.

He is charged with joining a foreign army and thus undermining Switzerland's neutrality and security.

Mr Cosar makes no attempt to hide his actions and remains proud of them.

"The law forbids fighting for a foreign force," an army spokeswoman said. "Who that force actually is, is irrelevant."

Mr Cosar was born in Switzerland, and is a Swiss citizen. But his grandparents have Syrian roots, and the Cosar family are members of the Syriac Christian community.

Now 37, he says he originally travelled to Syria to work as a freelance journalist, but when he saw that Islamist groups were advancing on Christian communities he felt he had no choice but to defend them.

He helped to found the Syriac Military Council, recruited for it, and readily shared the military skills he had learned in the Swiss army, among them weapons training and setting up checkpoints. At the height of the fighting, he was in charge of more than 500 men.

Violation of Swiss neutrality

When he returned to Switzerland, he was arrested. Joining a foreign army without the explicit permission of the government is forbidden under Switzerland's military penal code.

There are good historic reasons for this law: for centuries young Swiss men left their then-poor country to fight abroad. Swiss mercenaries were recruited by Napoleon, by Spain, the Netherlands, and even the British. But once Switzerland established itself as a neutral country, its government decided it could be awkward to have Swiss men fighting on multiple sides of Europe's wars, and forbade the practice.

Today just one vestige of the Swiss mercenary tradition remains: the Swiss Papal Guard in Rome.

So now Mr Cosar is sitting in a military court, being tried by the Swiss army's top lawyers. The

opening of the trial was greeted by a small demonstration of his friends and family, carrying banners proclaiming "fighting Islamic State is not a crime."

Mr Cosar himself has suggested he deserves a medal, not a trial, because he was "fighting terrorism" and protecting Christian minorities in Syria from, he believes, certain death.

Relaxed atmosphere

There are signs the court may be lenient. The atmosphere inside the courtroom on the first day of the trial is said to be relaxed, even humorous.

Mr Cosar, who faces a maximum sentence of three years in prison, may be hoping the judges will be persuaded that his motives were honourable, that he was "fighting the good fight".

But Switzerland's government does not want to send a signal that fighting in foreign wars will be tolerated in any circumstances at all, however "honourable".

Dozens of Swiss citizens have travelled to Syria to fight for Islamic State, or to marry the group's soldiers. A few are already back and in prison.

Others are still in northern Syria, together with thousands of other foreign fighters, detained in camps run by Syrian opposition groups. Like countries across Europe, Switzerland is agonising over what to do about them.

Fighting for a banned group like IS carries a much stiffer prison sentence than the one facing Johan Cosar - up to 20 years. Switzerland's justice minister said this week she would like Swiss foreign fighters to be tried "on the spot" in Syria rather than back in Switzerland.

No-one, however, seems quite sure how that would work.

The Swiss government is due to announce its policy on foreign fighters next week. Johan Cosar, meanwhile, can expect his verdict as early as Friday.

Kaynak/Source: