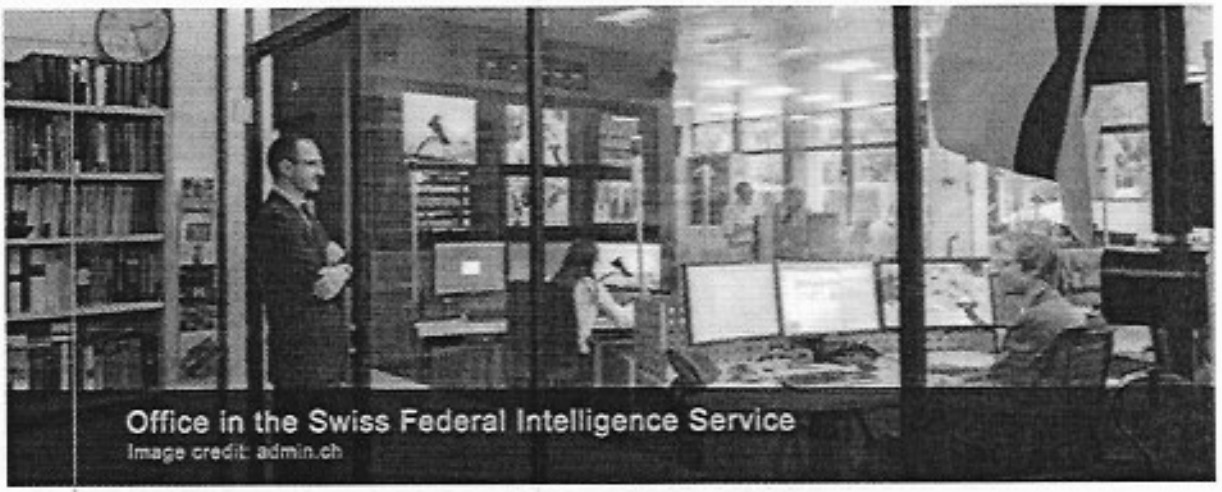
Swiss trying to change image as Europe's spy hub, say officials

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Office in the Swiss Federal Intelligence Service
Image credit: admin.ch

BY **IAN ALLEN** | EDITOR | **intel**News.org

Officials in Switzerland say new laws enacted in recent months will help them change their country's image as one of Europe's most active spy venues. For decades, the small alpine country has been a destination of choice for intelligence officers from all over the world, who use it as a place to meet assets from third countries. For example, a case officer from Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) will travel to Switzerland to meet her Algerian agent. She will exchange money and documents with him before she returns to Britain and he to Algeria, presumably after depositing his earnings into a Swiss bank account.

There are multiple reasons that explain Switzerland's preferred status as a meeting place for spies and their handlers. The country is suitably located in the center of Europe and is a member of the European Union's Schengen Treaty, which means that a passport is not required to enter it when arriving there from European Union member-states. Additionally, the country features an efficient transportation and telecommunication infrastructure, and its stable political system offers predictability and security, despite the limited size and strength of its law enforcement and security agencies. Perhaps most important of all, the Swiss have learned not to ask questions of visitors, many of whom flock to the country to entrust their cash to its privacy-conscious banking sector.

But, according to the Swiss Federal Intelligence Service (FIS), foreign spies and their handlers should find another venue to meet in secret. Speaking to the Sunday edition of Switzerland's *NZZ* newspaper, FIS spokeswoman Isabelle Graber said she and her colleagues were aware that their country is a venue for meetings between intelligence operatives from third countries. Such meetings have "continued to rise in the last few years" and include "everyone from security agency employees to freelancers", as "the market in trading secrets has exploded", she said. That trend, added Graber, has led to a corresponding rise in meetings aimed at exchanging information for money. Many such meetings take place throughout Switzerland, she noted, and are "in violation of Swiss sovereignty and can lead to operations against the interests of the nation".

In the past, said Graber, FIS was unable to prevent such activities on Swiss soil, due to pro-privacy legislation, which meant that the agency's ability to combat foreign espionage in Switzerland was "far more limited than in other countries". However, said the intelligence agency spokeswoman, the law recently changed to permit FIS to break into homes and hotels, hack into computers, wiretap

phones, and implement surveillance on individuals believed to be spies or intelligence officers of foreign countries. Armed with the new legislation, the FIS is now "working hard to clear up third-country meetings [and] to prevent these from happening or at least disrupt them", said Graber. Several times this year alone, FIS had forward information about "third-country meetings" to judicial authorities in Switzerland, she said.