

American Foreign Policy Council

ITALY

QUICK FACTS

Population: 62,007,540 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 301, 340 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Italian (includes small clusters of German-, French-, and Slovene-Italians in the north and Albanian-Italians and Greek-Italians in the south)

Religions: Christian 80% (overwhelming Roman Catholic with very small groups of Jehova Witnesses and Protestants), Muslims (about 700,000 but growing), Atheists and Agnostics 20%

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$1.816 trillion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (December 16, 2016)

OVERVIEW

While Italy has experienced a surge in Muslim immigration over the past two years as a result of the Syrian civil war and a wave of African migration, Islam in both its moderate and radical forms is already a significant presence in the country. The Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations of Italy (UCOII) has been at the forefront of the debate for the representation of the highly fragmented Italian Muslim community. With regard to jihadist activities, Italy remained simply a logistical base until October 2009, when an attempted bombing by a Libyan radical in Milan shattered popular illusions that the country was safe from extremist attacks. The event sparked significant public debate and the Italian government has slowly begun to strengthen anti-terrorism and surveillance laws in an effort to respond more effectively to Islamism as a political and societal force.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Italy's Muslim community is extremely diverse and fragmented. Those characteristics, combined with Sunni Islam's intrinsic lack of clerical hierarchy, cause it to suffer from weak internal cohesion and a low level of organization. These characteristics are reflected in the community's chronic inability to produce a unified leadership. Twenty years after the first significant wave of Muslim immigration, Italy's Muslim community is characterized by the presence of many organizations, none of which can legitimately claim to represent more than a fraction of it. Moreover, the relationships among these organizations are often characterized by sharp disagreements and even personal hatreds, leaving the country's Muslims deprived of a unified leadership.

The Italian Islamist panorama, while not as sophisticated as that of many northern European countries, is quite heterogeneous. The one group that has repeatedly made a claim to the leadership of the country's Muslim community is the Union of the Islamic Communities and Organizations of Italy, or UCOII. The union traces its origins to the Union of Muslim Students in Italy (USMI), a small organization of Muslim students that was created in Perugia and other university cities at the end of the 1960s.¹ Comprised mostly of Jordanian, Syrian and Palestinian students, the USMI's ideology was close to the positions of the Muslim Brotherhood.² By the second half of the 1980s, when the first notable wave of North African immigrants arrived in Italy, a student organization such as the USMI could no longer satisfy the needs of the new, large Muslim population. In January 1990, representatives of USMI, six mosques from six Italian cities, and 32 individuals formed the UCOII.

Since its founding, the UCOII has been extremely active on the political scene, attempting to become the main, if not the only, Muslim interlocutor of the Italian state. The UCOII has managed to achieve an important position within the Muslim community, thanks to the significant degree of control it exercises over Italian mosques. While its claim to control 85 percent of Italy's mosques is difficult to verify independently, it is undeniable that the UCOII plays a predominant role in the life of Italy's practicing Muslim community and that many mosques are, to varying degrees, linked to it.³

While today the organization has no formal ties to the Muslim Brotherhood or any affiliated outfit in the Middle East, its worldview is still inspired by the group's ideology.⁴ Like most other Brotherhood-inspired organizations throughout Europe, the UCOII aims at swaying the Muslim population of Italy to its interpretation of Islam through the activities of its capillary network of mosques. Given the lack of other social structures on Italian territory, many Muslim immigrants seeking the comfort of familiar communities congregate in its mosques, which are often seen more as community centers than simply places of worship. The UCOII seeks to use its virtual monopoly over mosques to spread its ideology and exercise what Italian expert on Islam Renzo Guolo has defined as a "diffuse cultural hegemony" over the country's Muslim

community.⁵ Taking advantage of the community's considerable fragmentation, the UCOII has become the most visible, vocal and organized voice of Italy's Muslims. In terms of representation to the outside world, it can be said that control of the Italian Muslim community has been assumed by an active minority, which has prevailed easily over an unorganized silent majority.⁶

Aside from the UCOII, other Islamist outfits operating in the country, albeit only marginally, are *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, the transnational pan-Islamist Sunni movement, and *Tablighi Jamaat*, the Islamic missionary movement that intelligence agencies worldwide suspect of having been infiltrated by radicals.⁷ The Moroccan movement Justice and Charity also has a significant influence on several mosques in northern Italy.⁸ Finally, two Shi'a organizations, Naples-based *Ahl al-Bayt* and its Rome-based spin-off, *Imam Mahdi*, have attracted the attention of authorities because of their radical positions and because many of their members are Italian converts with a past association to militant right wing groups.⁹ All of these groups and movements operate with various degrees of sophistication and success, competing among themselves and with non-Islamist organizations for influence in the virgin territory that is Islam in Italy.

Due to its activism and association with Italy's mosques, UCOII acts as the main representative for Italy's Muslims. However, the decentralized nature of Italy's Muslim community has led to recent rifts in representation of Islam to the Italian government. For example, in May 2016 the Italian Islamic Confederation, a Rome-based group of most Moroccan immigrants, moved forward in requesting formal recognition from the state as the main Muslim representative despite UCOII's consistent –although unsuccessful–requests. Another group, the Italian Islamic Religious Community, based in Milan, has also made several unsuccessful requests for recognition but has also failed in both representing the Italian Muslim community as well as gaining state recognition for the religion in general.¹⁰

The battle that takes place for the control of Islamic places of worship and, more generally, for influence over Italian Muslims, is something that Italian authorities can only watch from afar. Authorities have recently realized this dissonance and in early 2016, Italian interior Minister Angelino Alfano announced he was establishing a council of relations with for Italian Muslims, with the goal of establishing an “Italian Islam.” This council will be made up of Islamic religion and culture experts with the state goal of improving integration of Italy's Muslims into the larger Italian cultural community.¹¹

In addition, *jihadi* networks have existed in Italy since the late 1980s, though seldom have they targeted the country. Italy historically has been used by various *jihadi* outfits as a logistical base for acquiring false documents, obtaining weapons, and raising funds. This traditional use of Italian territory appeared to change on October 12, 2009, when Mohammad Game, a legal immigrant from Libya, detonated an ex-

plosive device hidden on his person at the gates of the Santa Barbara military base in Milan. The attack seriously injured him and lightly injured the *carabiniere* (a member of the Italian paramilitary police) who tried to stop him.

The ensuing investigation revealed that Game had recently become more religious and political. Acquaintances described how he had frequently stated that Italian troops should have left Afghanistan, framing his diatribes in increasingly religious terms. Game reportedly made similar remarks to the ambulance personnel that transported him to the hospital after the attack. Within a few days, authorities arrested two men, an Egyptian and a Libyan, who reportedly had helped Game in his plan. Forty kilograms of the same chemical substances used by Game in the attack were also retrieved in a basement to which the men had access.

Prior to October 12th, Game and his accomplices had begun to attend services at Milan's Islamic Cultural Institute (Viale Jenner mosque), a place that has been at the center of terrorism investigations for almost 20 years. Yet the men did not appear to have acted under the direction of, or even in remote cooperation with, any established group. To the contrary, their characteristics, from their sudden radicalization to the lack of sophistication of their *modus operandi*, resemble that of the homegrown networks that have become common in most European countries but that had not yet then appeared in Italy.

However, the growing number of immigrants and refugees arriving in Italy over the past few years have put some strain on multicultural co-existence, or *coesistenza*. Muslims in Italy are not isolated and assimilate more seamlessly than in France, for example, which has historically led to less radicalization and therefore less attacks. Nonetheless, with almost 200,000 migrants from predominantly Muslim countries such as Libya, and Egypt, and the expected influx of Syrian and Iraqi refugees as the EU works with Turkey to discourage arrivals into Greece, Italian citizens and politicians alike are growing concerned about the fiscal and security implications of the migrants. Recent attacks in Paris, Brussels and Germany have only heightened the concerns that radicalized individuals who arrive in Italy may choose to stay.¹²

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Traditionally a country of emigration rather than immigration, Italy only began to attract small numbers of immigrants in the 1970s, with the majority coming from the Philippines and Latin America. The Muslim presence was limited to diplomatic personnel from Muslim countries, a few businessmen and some students. Those numbers increased significantly in the 1980s, when immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa began to choose Italy as their initial or final destination in their migration to Europe. Immigration has peaked since the mid-1990s, and, according to Italy's official census bureau (ISTAT), as of January 2016, there were 5,026,153

foreign citizens residing in Italy.¹³ While no exact data on the number of Muslims living in Italy exists, most estimates put the number between one and two million, corresponding to about 2.5 percent of the population.¹⁴

Various features characterize Italy's Muslim community, starting with its significant ethnic diversity. The two countries that have consistently contributed the largest number of Muslim immigrants to Italy are Morocco (28.5 percent) and Albania (20.5 percent).¹⁵ Most other Muslims living in Italy come from Tunisia, Senegal, Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Algeria, Bosnia and Nigeria, contributing to the ethnically diverse community. This ethnic diversity will only grow due to the almost 200,000 migrants who arrived in Italy between January and November 2016, with 21 percent coming from Nigeria, 12 percent from Eritrea, 7 percent from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and The Gambia, 6 percent from Senegal, 5 percent from Mali, Sudan, Bangladesh and 4 percent from Somalia.¹⁶

Only in the sectarian aspect is Italy's Muslim community quite homogeneous—more than 95 percent of Italy's Muslims are Sunni.¹⁷ Other distinctive characteristics of Italy's Muslim population when compared to other European Muslim communities are its higher number of non-citizens and illegal immigrants, higher percentage of males, and higher level of geographic dispersion.¹⁸

If there is one certainty about the future of Islam in Italy, it is that its presence will only grow. The influx of immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan African seems to be virtually unstoppable, given migration patterns and socio-economic conditions in Africa. Italy received about 154,000 refugees in 2015 and is projected to receive 170,000 refugees by the end of 2016, 85% of whom come from Africa.¹⁹ Moreover, in the next few years, Italy will start to see second-generation Muslim immigrants, like most other European countries already have. Many of them will hold Italian citizenship and, furthermore, the number of Muslims carrying an Italian passport will also increase through marriages and conversions.

It seems clear that Islam is destined to have a more visible and stable presence in the country and this is already evident in the impressive increase of Islamic cultural centers throughout Italy. According to Maria Bombardieri, the author of *Mosques of Italy*, Italy only has eight official mosques that are “intended as standalone structures... but there are about 800 cultural centers and musalla, which are informal prayer rooms, often housed in garages, basements, and warehouses.” These cultural centers serve as proxies for mosques and provide Muslims in Italy with a place to worship as well as serve as a place to hold cultural and educational meetings.²⁰

The predominance of the UCOII at the organizational level has strong repercussions on the relationship between the Italian state and the Muslim community and the legal recognition of Islam, a source of major political controversies. The Italian Constitution (Article 19) gives all citizens the right to freely practice and proselytize for any religion (unless its rites are deemed to be against morality). All religions are free

to organize themselves and, according to Article 8, their relationship with the state is regulated by law, based on agreements signed by the state with the representatives of each religious community. The Catholic religion enjoys a separate and privileged treatment, which was negotiated by the Vatican and the Italian state in 1929 and then incorporated in the republican Constitution of 1948. In order to be recognized and receive legal and financial benefits similar to those of the Catholic religion, all other religions have to sign an agreement (known in Italian as *intesa*) with the government, which regulates mutual rights and obligations.

Over the last 25 years, various religious communities have done so. Islam, which is *de facto* the country's second largest religion, has not yet been recognized by the Italian state as a religion.²¹ While the opposition of some political forces to the recognition of Islam has in some cases interfered with the process, the main reason for this seemingly paradoxical situation is to be found in the lack of a unified leadership in the Italian Muslim community. In order to sign the *intesa* the Italian government needs to find a representative of the Muslim community, something the Italian Muslim community so far has been unable to produce. *Intesa* proposals submitted over the years by various groups that entertain cordial relationships with the Italian state have been turned down, as none of the applicants were deemed able to legitimately claim to represent the majority of Italian Muslims.²²

Conversely, the Italian state has experienced the opposite problems when dealing with the proposals of *intesa* submitted by the UCOII since 1990. The UCOII seems to be, *prima facie*, the Muslim organization with the largest following and with characteristics that make it the closest of all Italian Muslim organizations to the notion of representation that Italian authorities are looking for. Yet its *intesa* drafts have been turned down because authorities are skeptical of the UCOII's nature and also deemed the draft to be "too ambitious" in asking for state recognition of Islamic festivities, Islamic education in public schools, legal recognition of Muslim weddings celebrated as well as room for Muslims in Italian television.²³ Given these dynamics, Islam is not recognized as an official religion, a situation that creates practical difficulties and generates the perception among many Italian Muslims that authorities discriminate against Islam.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Even though small clusters of *jihadist* groups made plans for attacks against targets in Milan, Cremona, Bologna and Rome in the past, Italian authorities were clear in stating, as of early 2009, that the primary use of Italian soil for radical Islamists has been logistical in nature and that there were no indications of networks planning attacks in Italy or from Italy against other countries.²⁴ An intelligence report submitted to the Italian Parliament in February 2009 cautioned that the threat in Italy was "multifaceted, volatile, and prone to sudden shifts," but the homegrown threat was then not yet apparent in the country.²⁵ Italy remains a logistical base for extremist groups,

as evidenced by Italian Naval intercepting over 20 ships containing drugs and money intended for territories claimed by ISIS over the period of 2013 to 2015.²⁶ Furthermore, the suspect of the 2016 Christmas Market attack in Germany, Anis Amri, is rumored to have been radicalized in and Italian prison yet did not carry out his attack there. In a recent interview, terrorist expert Marco Lombardi identified areas around Milan, such as Bergamo and Brescia, where Amri was found and killed, as Islamist hotspots. Lombardi noted that while Italy has relatively few radicalized people because the country has not yet reached a third generation of immigrants, where most radicalization has occurred in countries such as France, and credited Italian intelligence for recognizing early signs of radicalization.²⁷

Mohammad Game's homegrown terrorist attack in Milan changed that view. The episode came as a shock to Italian authorities, who for the first time were forced to deal with a case of homegrown Islamist terrorism. In 2009, Former Interior Minister Roberto Maroni publicly stated the Italian government's reassessment of the role of *jihadist* cells operating in the country. He said:

Until the action in Milan, the cells identified in Italy were involved in fundraising and recruitment. We now believe that there are cells that form, fundraise and train to carry out attacks in Italy. We are not yet at the 'homegrown terrorism' we have seen in the United Kingdom and Spain, but we are very close to it.²⁸

Since 2013, authorities have seen a relative growth in homegrown networks in Italy. Growth in online activities by *jihadist* networks caused Italian authorities to crack down on any active members of such groups and punish them under article 270 *quinquies* of the penal code, which criminalizes any facilitation of terrorist training and provides precedent for prosecuting cases where materials are exchanged online.²⁹ Two notable cases of homegrown radicalization occurred in the province of Brescia. The first case is that of Mohamed Jarmoune, a Moroccan-born man living in Niardo, who spent his time on the internet disseminating *jihadist* materials and networking with *jihadist* sympathizers. Italian authorities monitored Jarmoune for months and finally arrested him in March 2012 after he had narrowed in on Milan's largest synagogue as a potential target. His arrest resulted in a prison sentence of over five years, starting in May 2013, for disseminating terrorist propaganda.³⁰

The other Brescia case did not result in a prison sentence. The Jarmoune case led authorities to Anas El Abboubi, another active participant in *jihadist* networks online. Connecting with other *jihadist* sympathizers allowed El Abboubi to learn how to start an Italy-based extremist group, which he eventually tried to do with his blog called Sharia4Italy. El Abboubi was eventually arrested after Italian authorities noticed his militant online presence as well as his searches for apparent targets around the Brescia province. However, the court ruled that he had not violated article 270 *quinquies* and released him.³¹ Finally, the previously mentioned 2016 Germany Christmas market

attacker, Anis Amri, is said to have been radicalized in Italy. Of Tunisian descent, Amri came to Italy without any identification in 2011 and, after serving 4 years in prison for damaging state property, was kicked out of the Italy in 2015. After Amri was shot and killed in Milan, a video emerged of Amri pledging allegiance to ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.³²

Unlike the majority of individuals who have been involved in radical activities in Italy before, both Jarmoune and El Abboubi grew up in Italy and were, by all standards, well integrated into Italian society. Both also ran a series of websites and Facebook pages where they shared *jihadist* propaganda and instructions to build explosives and use weapons. The profile of the accused and the dynamics of their networks are quintessentially homegrown, arguably signifying a shift in the *jihadist* threat to Italy.

This evolution worries counterterrorism practitioners, who realize that in tackling the nascent homegrown threat they will not be able to extensively rely on deportations, arguably one of the main legal tools used by Italian authorities in their twenty-year fight against *jihadism*. But most policymakers and the public at large have, for the most part, not yet conceptualized the idea that *jihadism* is not just an external threat but, increasingly, an internal one.

This slowness in grasping the evolution of the phenomenon is not surprising. Unlike most other European countries, which, since 9/11, have engaged in a sustained debate about Islam and Islamism, Italy has followed a different trajectory. As disparate international (terrorist attacks in other countries, global crises) and domestic (the occasional arrest of *jihadist* militants) events appear on the radar, they generate a heated domestic debate that often becomes highly politicized and lacks nuance. In response to these events, the Italian government has begun to strengthen legislation, particularly the Criminal Code, in order to more effectively monitor potential militant or extremist activity. On February 18, 2015 Decree-Law No. 7 entered into effect, calling for stronger legislative and regulatory means for Italian police and armed forces to better anticipate and prevent extremist acts. The law strengthens the surveillance powers of police, and outlines new reforms for criminal punishments for those persons of group of persons identified as terrorists. The law also recognizes the criminality of foreign fighters, those individuals who support a terrorist organization and participate in conflicts abroad. Finally, the law gives the Ministry of the Interior the right to maintain a running list of websites and forums that may be used for recruitment for extremist activities.³³

To be fair, the violent aspects of Islamism in Italy have, for the most part, been extensively and effectively monitored by Italian authorities since the early 1990s. Over the last 15 years, dozens of complex investigations have brought to light *jihadist* networks throughout the peninsula.³⁴ The combination of experienced security services and law enforcement agencies, proactive investigative magistrates, and adequate legal framework, such as the 2015 legislation mentioned above, have allowed Italian au-

thorities to be among the most aggressive and successful in Europe in dismantling *ji-hadist* networks, uncovering extensive links spanning throughout Europe and the Middle East. While these successes have not always been followed by convictions and long sentences once the cases went to trial, it is fair to say that Italian authorities have been quite efficient in keeping in check violent Islamist networks.

Things are quite different, however, when the focus shifts from traditional counter-terrorism measures to a broader frame of analysis. While many European countries have been implementing or at least discussing plans to stem radicalization among their Muslim communities, Italy is severely lagging in even rationally approaching the issue. Moreover, the Italian debate over forms of non-violent Islamism has often shifted, with some notable exceptions, between schizophrenic overreaction, naïve whitewashing, and, most commonly, utter lack of interest. In most other Western European countries, excesses on both sides of the debate, from conflating Islamism with Islam to labeling as racist any question raised over aspects of Islamism, have slowly been replaced by more nuanced and balanced positions. Italy's public debate on the issue, on the other hand, seems to be only occasional and far less mature.

ENDNOTES

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