



# ITALY

## Quick Facts

Population: 62,137,802 (July 2017 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)

Government Type: Parliamentary republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$1.921 trillion (2017 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated April 2018)*

## INTRODUCTION

*While Italy has experienced a surge in Muslim immigration over the past three years as a result of the Syrian civil war and a parallel wave of African migration, Islam in both its moderate and radical forms was 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 primarily a logistical base until 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 begun to strengthen anti-terrorism and surveillance laws in an effort to respond more effectively to Islamism as a political and social force.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Italy's Muslim community is extremely diverse and fragmented.<sup>1</sup> The overwhelming majority of the country's Muslim residents are Sunni. They are predominantly first-generation immigrants, hailing from various countries. This diversity, combined with Sunni Islam's intrinsic lack of clerical hierarchy, has resulted in a low level of organization throughout the whole of the Italian Muslim community. Consequently, the community has chronically lacked cohesive leadership. More than twenty years after the first significant wave of Muslim immigration, Italy's Muslim community has a wide variety of organizations, none of which represent more than a small fraction of the population. Relationships among these organizations are often marred by sharp disagreements and even personal rivalries, further eroding the possibility of cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> The union originated in the Union of Muslim Students in Italy (USMI), a small organization of Muslim students that was created in Perugia and other university cities in the early 1970s. Comprised mostly of Jordanian, Syrian, and Palestinian students, the USMI's ideology was closely related to the positions of the Muslim Brotherhood,<sup>4</sup> the well-known transnational Islamist movement founded in Egypt in the 1920s. By the late 1980s, when the

first notable wave of North African immigrants appeared 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.<sup>5</sup>

Since its founding, the UCOII has been active on the political scene, attempting to become the primary Muslim liaison 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. Its claim to control 85 percent of Italy's mosques is difficult to verify independently, but 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.<sup>6</sup>

While today the organization has no formal ties to the Muslim Brotherhood or any affiliated outfit in the Middle East, in many respects its worldview is still inspired by the group's ideology.<sup>7</sup> Like most other Brotherhood-inspired organizations throughout Europe, the UCOII aims at swaying the Muslim population of Italy to its interpretation of Islam through its far-ranging network of mosques. For many Muslim immigrants far from home, mosques provide social support and community engagement. The UCOII seeks to use its dominant position on mosques and Islamic associations<sup>8</sup> to spread its ideology and exercise what Italian expert on Islam Renzo Guolo defined as a "diffuse cultural hegemony" over the country's Muslim community.<sup>9</sup> Taking advantage of the community's considerable fragmentation, the UCOII has become the most visible, vocal, and well-run organization within Italy's Muslim community. UCOII, an active minority, has assumed control of representation of Italian Muslims, prevailing easily over an unorganized silent majority.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> The Moroccan movement Justice and Charity also has a significant influence on several mosques in northern Italy.<sup>12</sup> Finally, at least two Shi'a organizations, Naples-based Ahl al-Bayt and its Rome-based spin-off, Imam Mahdi, 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 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 (COREIS), 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.<sup>14</sup>

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 established a Council of Relations with Italian Muslims, in an advisory capacity, with the goal of helping the Muslim population integrate smoothly into Italian society. This Council is made up of Islamic religion and culture experts.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of the Council's work, in February 2017 community groups representing around 70 percent of Italy's Muslims signed the "National Pact for Italian Islam" with the Interior Minister. They committed to reject all forms of violence and pledged to hold Friday prayers in their mosques in Italian, or at least have them translated.<sup>16</sup>

With regard to jihadism, extremist networks have existed in Italy since the late 1980s, though seldom have they targeted the country. Various jihadist outfits have historically used Italy 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 explosive 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 soldier who tried to stop him.

The ensuing investigation revealed that Game had recently become radicalized. 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 from 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 was 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 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.<sup>17</sup>

However, the growing number of immigrants and refugees arriving in Italy over the past few years has put some strain on multicultural co-existence. In general, Muslims in Italy assimilate more seamlessly than in other countries such as France, for example, which has historically lead to less radicalization and therefore less attacks. Nonetheless, with almost hundreds of thousands of 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 political, social, economic and security implications of the migrants. Additionally, recent attacks in France and other European countries have heightened the potential threat posed by radicalized individuals who had arrived in Italy by boat.<sup>18</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Historically a source of immigrants to other countries, Italy only began to attract small numbers of new residents in the 1970s, with the majority coming from the Philippines and Latin America. The Muslim population consisted of diplomatic staff from Muslim countries, a few businessmen, and some students. Those numbers began to climb in the 1980s, when immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa began to choose Italy as their first or final stop in their journeys to Europe.<sup>19</sup> Immigration has climbed since the mid-1990s, and, according to Italy's official census bureau (ISTAT), as of January 2017, there were 5,047,028 foreign citizens residing in Italy.<sup>20</sup> While no exact data on the number of Muslims living in Italy exists, most estimates put the number at between 1.6 and 2.6 million, corresponding to not more than 4 percent of the population.<sup>21</sup>

Various features characterize Italy's Muslim community, starting with its significant ethnic diversity. Morocco and Albania have historically provided the largest portion of Muslim immigrants to Italy, with 30.1 percent coming from Morocco and 16.2 percent from Albania.<sup>22</sup> The majority of the rest come from Bangladesh, Tunisia, Egypt, Pakistan, Senegal, Macedonia, Kosovo, Algeria, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkey. This ethnic diversity increased even further as a result of the 181,000 migrants who arrived in Italy by boat in 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 and Sudan.<sup>23</sup>

Despite this ethnic heterogeneity, more than 95 percent of Italy's Muslims are Sunni.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

If there is one certainty about the future of Islam in Italy, it is that its presence will continue to grow. The influx of immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East seems to be virtually

unstoppable, given migration patterns and socio-economic conditions in the countries of departure. Italy received about 154,000 migrants in 2015, 181,000 in 2016 and is projected to receive around 125,000 refugees by the end of 2017,<sup>26</sup> with most coming from Africa.

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 through 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 substantial 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.<sup>27</sup> In 2016, the Italian Ministry of the Interior officially identified 1,205 “Islamic structures”: 4 mosques, 858 places of worship and 343 cultural associations.<sup>28</sup>

The UCOII’s significant impact on the relationship between the Italian state and the Muslim community and the legal recognition of Islam both remain a font of political tension. Article 19 of the Italian Constitution grants 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. In order to be recognized and receive legal and financial benefits, all other religions (except Catholicism, which received these benefits by default) 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

Conversely, the Italian state has experienced the opposite problem with 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 controversial nature and reputation (for example, the organization is often branded as anti-Semitic)<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> Given these dynamics, Islam is not recognized as an official religion, a situation that creates practical difficulties and can generate the perception among many Italian Muslims that authorities discriminate against Islam.

### ISLAMISM AND THE STATE:

Even though small clusters of jihadist groups planned attacks against targets in Milan, Cremona, Bologna, Rome and other cities 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. There were no indications of networks planning attacks in Italy or from Italy against other countries. In 2009, Mohammad Game's terrorist attack in Milan changed that view. The episode came as a sort of shock to Italian authorities, who for the first time were forced to deal with a case of homegrown Islamist terrorism.

Since around 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 of the penal code, which criminalizes any facilitation of terrorist training and provides precedent for prosecuting cases where materials are exchanged online.<sup>33</sup>

Two notable cases of homegrown radicalization occurred in the province of Brescia, not far from Milan. 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.<sup>34</sup>

The other Brescia case concerns 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 in June 2013, 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 and released him.<sup>35</sup> A few months later, El Abboubi travelled to Syria, via Turkey, where he became a fighter of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (now the Islamic State).<sup>36</sup>

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.

Overall, today Italy has a jihadist scene that increasingly resembles that of other European countries in its homegrown characteristics but that is, for the time being, substantially smaller in size. For example, according to recent data from 2017 by the Italian Interior Ministry, 125 individuals with ties to Italy (but only a minority of them Italian citizens) have left the country to join various jihadist groups (mostly the so-called Islamic State) in Syria, Iraq and other Middle Eastern conflict zones. The number of 125 is extremely low when compared to recent estimates for other large European countries, such as France (around 1,700 foreign fighters), Germany (around 900), the UK (at least 850); and even compared to less populous countries such as Belgium (470), Austria (300) and Sweden (300).<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, various incidents that have taken place in 2016–2017 have increased the concerns of Italian counterterrorism officials because of Italian links to attacks abroad or because they indicate the growth of a homegrown scene. At least four cases are worthy of mention.<sup>38</sup> First, Anis Amri, the Tunisian failed asylum seeker responsible for the December 2016 Christmas market attack in Berlin, in the name of the so-called Islamic State (IS), reportedly started his radicalization process in Italian prisons. After the massacre, he returned in Italy, where he was killed in a shootout with police.

Second, Ismail Tommaso Hosni, a homeless Italian citizen born in 1996 to a Tunisian father and an Italian mother, stabbed a policeman and two soldiers with two kitchen knives after they asked to see his identity papers at Milan's central train station, on May 18, 2017. Italian authorities found that the young man was an Islamic State sympathizer and was placed under investigation for suspected terrorism. However, at this stage Italian authorities are still investigating whether a genuine terrorist motive drove Hosni.

Third, Youssef Zaghba, one of the three members of the cell that launched the London Bridge attack on

June 3, 2017, was born in Morocco to an Italian mother and had dual citizenship. In March 2016, he had been stopped at Bologna airport while attempting to travel to Turkey and possibly Syria.

Lastly, Ahmed Hanachi, the Tunisian man who stabbed two women to death in Marseille on October 1, 2017, had lived in Aprilia, near Rome, for many years. His brother Anis, who had fought in Syria with IS in 2014–2016 and allegedly had indoctrinated Ahmed, was arrested in northern Italy six days later.

This evolution worries counterterrorism practitioners, who realize that in tackling the nascent homegrown threat they will not be able to extensively rely on administrative deportations, arguably one of the main legal tools used by Italian authorities in their fight against jihadism, especially since 2015.<sup>39</sup> But many 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 relative 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 campaigns and conflicts in other countries) and domestic (the occasional arrest or deportation 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 Penal 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. This provision (subsequently converted into law, with some changes: Law No. 43 of April 17, 2015) strengthens the surveillance powers of police, and outlines new reforms for criminal punishments for those persons or groups 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.<sup>40</sup>

To be fair, Italian authorities have for the most part extensively and effectively monitored the violent aspects of Islamism in Italy since the early 1990s. Over the last 20 years, dozens of complex investigations have brought to light jihadist networks throughout the peninsula.<sup>41</sup> 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 authorities to be among the most aggressive and successful in Europe in dismantling jihadist 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.<sup>42</sup>

Things are quite different, however, when the focus shifts from traditional counterterrorism measures to a broader frame of analysis. While many European countries have been implementing plans to stem radicalization among their Muslim communities, Italy is severely lagging in approaching the issue. Only in the summer of 2017 did Italy's Lower House pass its first bill introducing measures for the prevention of jihadist radicalization and extremism. As of this writing, this important provision awaits final approval from the Upper House.

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 still to be only occasional in nature and in many respects, less mature in its content.

## ENDNOTES

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