Italy

Quick Facts

Population: 62,402,659 (July 2020 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): $1.939 trillion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated June 2020)

Introduction

While Italy has experienced a surge in Muslim immigration over the past several years as a result of the Syrian civil war and a parallel wave of African migration, Islam - both radical and moderate – was already a significant presence in the country beforehand. 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. Italy remained primarily a logistical base for jihadist activities until 2009, when an attempted bombing by a Libyan radical in Milan shattered the popular belief 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 radical Islamism.

Islamist Activity

Italy's Muslim community is extremely diverse and fragmented.[1] 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 or cohesive leadership throughout the whole of the Italian Muslim community. Even twenty-five years after the first significant wave of Muslim immigration into Italy, the wide variety of Muslim organizations still each only represent a fraction of the population. Relationships among these organizations are often marred by sharp disagreements and even personal rivalries, further eroding the possibility of cooperation.[2]

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 (UCOII).[3] The union originated in the Union of Muslim Students in Italy (USMI), a small organization of Muslim students 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.[4] When the first notable wave of North African immigrants came to Italy in the late 1980s, a student organization

like 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.[5]

Since its founding, the UCOII has been politically active, attempting to become the primary Muslim liaison of Italy. The UCOII has achieved 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; however, the varied, yet still dominant, role of the UCOII in Italy's Islamic communities is undeniable.[6]

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 that group's ideology.[7] Like most other Brotherhood-inspired organizations in Europe, the UCOII aims at swaying the Italy's Muslim population 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 institutional position to spread its view and ideology,[8] exercising what Italian expert Renzo Guolo has defined as a "diffuse cultural hegemony" over the country's Muslim community.[9] Taking advantage of the community's considerable fragmentation, the UCOII has become the most visible, vocal, and well-run Muslim organization in the country, despite representing a relative minority within Italy's Muslim community.[10] UCOII's authoritative status was further bolstered in 2017, when it signed a formal memorandum of understanding with the Italian Ministry of Justice to provide Imams for Muslims in Italian prisons.[11]

Aside from the UCOII, Islamist outfits operating in the country include, albeit only marginally, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the transnational pan-Islamist Sunni movement, and Tablighi Jamaat, a global Islamic missionary movement that multiple intelligence agencies suspect has been infiltrated by radicals.[12] The Moroccan movement Justice and Charity also has a significant influence over several mosques in northern Italy.[13]

Finally, at least two Shi'a organizations, the Naples-based Ahl al-Bayt and its Rome-based spin-off, Imam Mahdi, have attracted the attention of authorities due to their radical positions. Also, many of their members are Italian nationals with past associations to militant right-wing groups.[14]

All of these groups and movements operate with various degrees of sophistication and success, competing amongst themselves (and non-Islamist organizations) for influence in Islam in Italy.

The decentralized nature of Italy's Muslim community has led to recent rifts among those hoping to secure the Italian government's endorsement to represent Islam. For example, in May 2016, the Italian Islamic Confederation (CII), a Rome-based group with roots in the Moroccan immigrant community, moved forward in requesting formal recognition from the state as the main Muslim representative despite UCOII's consistent opposition. The CII was promoted across the country in 2012 by the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy (CCII), which has historically been tied with Morocco and Saudi Arabia. The "top-down Islam" represented by the CCII, linked to the official authorities of Arab States, has traditionally been a rival of the "bottom-up Islam" of the UCOII and its network of mosques.[15] Another group, the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS), based in Milan and characterized by a high proportion of Italian converts, has also made several unsuccessful requests to represent the Italian Muslim community and to gain state recognition for Islam more broadly.[16]

The battle for 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 recognized this dissonance; in early 2016, Italian Interior Minister Angelino Alfano established a Council of Relations made up of experts in Islamic religion and culture to advise Italian Muslims on integrating smoothly into society.[17] Because of the Council's work, community groups representing around 70 percent of Italy's Muslims signed the "National Pact for Italian Islam" with the Interior Minister in February 2017. They committed to rejecting all forms of violence and pledged to hold Friday prayers in their mosques in Italian, or at least to have them translated.[18]

Extremist networks have existed in Italy since the late 1980s, though they have seldom targeted the country. Various *jihadist* outfits have historically used Italy as a logistical base for acquiring false documents, obtaining weapons, and raising funds.[19] However, this relatively typical use of Italian territory appeared to change on October 12, 2009, when Mohammad Game, a legal immigrant from Libya, detonated a hidden explosive device 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 frequently stated that Italian troops should have left Afghanistan, framing his diatribes in increasingly religious terms. Game reportedly made similar remarks to ambulance personnel who 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), which 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. Their characteristics, from their sudden radicalization to the lack of sophistication of their *modus operandi*, resemble homegrown networks common in most other European countries.[20]

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, the success of migrant assimilation into Italian culture and life is mixed; while migrants can boast a higher employment rate than native-born Italians, their home ownership and naturalization rates are low compared to other European countries.[21] Nonetheless, with hundreds of thousands of migrants from Muslim-majority countries in Africa and the broader Middle East, and the influx of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, Italian citizens and politicians alike are growing concerned about the resulting political, social, economic and security implications. Additionally, recent attacks in Europe have heightened the potential threat posed by radicalized individuals who arrived in Italy.[22]

Islamism and Society

Historically a source of emigrants 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 rose in the 1980s, when immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa began to choose Italy as the first or final stop in their journeys to Europe.[23] Immigration has climbed since the mid-1990s, and, according to Italy's official census bureau (ISTAT), there were over five million foreign citizens residing in Italy as of January 1, 2018.[24] While no exact data on the number of Muslims living in Italy exists, various estimates put the number at around 2.87 million, corresponding to roughly 4.8 percent of the population.[25]

Various features characterize Italy's Muslim community, starting with its significant ethnic diversity. The largest immigrant population arriving in Italy comes from Morocco, a country wherein 99% of all people are Muslim.[26] Immigrants also come from other Muslim majority countries, like Egypt, Pakistan, and Albania.[27] This ethnic diversity increased even further after around 119,000 migrants arrived in Italy by boat in 2017 (with around 19,000 from Nigeria, around 9,000 from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Bangladesh, 7,000 from Mali and Eritrea, 6,000 from Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco and Senegal).[28]

Italy's Muslim population is distinct in its high number of non-citizens and illegal immigrants, high percentage of males, and high level of geographic dispersion.[29] The influx of immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa and the broader Middle East seems difficult to stymie, given migration patterns and socio-economic conditions in the countries of departure. Nonetheless, the migratory flow has considerably

decreased since July 2017. In fact, Italy received about 154,000 migrants in 2015, 181,000 in 2016, 119,000 in 2017 and only 23,370 people by the end of 2018, with most coming from Africa.[30]

Like most other European countries, Italy has recently started to see second-generation Muslim immigrants. Many of them will hold Italian citizenship, and the number of Muslims carrying Italian passports will further increase as a result of marriages and conversions.

It seems clear that Islam is destined to have a more visible and stable presence in Italy, something which is already evident in the substantial increase of Islamic cultural centers throughout the country. According to Maria Bombardieri, the author of *Mosques of Italy*, Italy only has eight official mosques "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 and to hold cultural or educational meetings.[31] In 2016, the Italian Ministry of the Interior officially identified 1,205 "Islamic structures": 4 mosques, 858 places of worship and 343 cultural associations.[32]

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 source 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. However Islam, which is *de facto* the country's second largest religion, has not yet been formally recognized as a faith by the Italian state.[33] While the recognition process has been interrupted by the opposition of some political forces, the main reason for this seemingly paradoxical situation is 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 entertaining cordial relationships with the Italian state have been turned down, as no applicants were able to legitimately claim to represent the majority of Italian Muslims.[34]

Conversely, the Italian state has experienced the opposite problem with proposals of *Intesa* submitted by the UCOII since 1990. The UCOII appears to be the most qualified organization to represent the Muslim population due to its large following and organizational characteristics. Yet its *Intesa* drafts have been rejected because authorities are skeptical of the UCOII's controversial nature and reputation (for example, the organization is sometimes branded as anti-Semitic).[35] The drafts were deemed "too ambitious" in asking for state recognition of Islamic festivities, Islamic education in public schools, legal recognition of Muslim weddings and Muslim representation in Italian television.[36] The situation 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 planned attacks against targets in Milan, Cremona, Bologna, Rome and other cities in the past, Italian authorities were clear that, as of early 2009, the activity of radical Islamic groups in Italy has been primarily logistical in nature. At the time, there were no indications of planned attacks in Italy or from Italy. Mohammad Game's 2009 terrorist attack in Milan changed that view. The episode shocked Italian authorities, who were forced to deal with a case of homegrown Islamist

terrorism for the first time.

Since around 2013, authorities have observed a growth in homegrown networks in Italy. Increased online activities by *jihadist* networks caused Italian authorities to crack down on active members of such groups and punish them under Article 270 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes terrorist training facilitation and provides precedent for prosecuting cases where materials are exchanged online.[37]

Two notable cases of homegrown radicalization occurred in the province of Brescia, not far from Milan. Mohamed Jarmoune, a Moroccan-born man living in Niardo, 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 targeted Milan's largest synagogue for a potential attack. Jarmoune was sentenced to over five years in prison in 2013 for disseminating terrorist propaganda.[38]

The other Brescia case concerns Anas El Abboubi, another active participant in jihadist networks online. El Abboubi learned how to start an Italy-based extremist group by virtue of his connections with other jihadist sympathizers, which he eventually attempted with his blog, Sharia4Italy. El Abboubi was arrested in June 2013, after Italian authorities noticed his militant online presence and his searches for apparent targets around Brescia. However, the court ruled that he had not violated Article 270 and released him.[39] 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).[40] In September 2016, the U.S. Department of State designated El Abboubi as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT).[41]

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 seemingly 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 for building explosives and using weapons. The profiles 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 which is, for the time being, substantially smaller in size and less structured. For example, according to government data from February 2019, 138 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, or IS) in Syria, Iraq and other Middle Eastern conflict zones.[42] The figure of 138 is low when compared to recent estimates for other large European countries, such as France (around 1,900 foreign fighters), Germany (over 900), the UK (at least 850), Belgium (around 500), Sweden (over 300) and Austria (around 250).[43]

Nonetheless, between 2016-2018 the concerns of Italian counterterrorism officials have increased because of Italian links to attacks abroad. At least three cases are worthy of mention.[44]

First, Anis Amri, the failed Tunisian asylum seeker responsible for the December 2016 Christmas market attack in Berlin in the name of IS reportedly started his radicalization process in Italian prisons. After the massacre, he returned to Italy where he was killed in a shootout with police.

Second, 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 was 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.

Furthermore, 2018 was characterized by important counter-terrorism operations across the country. In January of that year, the father of a *jihadist* foreign fighter in Northern Italy was arrested while his son was fighting in Syria for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Interestingly, the father himself had been a *mujahid* in Bosnia with al-Qaeda in his youth. Then, in March, the police dismantled a cell involved in falsifying documents

and with links to Anis Amri. In Foggia, an Egyptian radical imam was arrested the same month. He had indoctrinated young children, teaching them about armed jihad and using "educational" IS material. In April, near Naples, the police arrested a Gambian citizen who had arrived from Libya on suspicion of planning an attack. He possessed a video where he swore allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The man had reportedly been sent to recruit, train and carry out attacks in Europe. In November, a "NOCS" police tactical unit in Milan captured a 22-year-old Egyptian national who was allegedly ready to carry out terrorist attacks, perhaps in France. The same month, in Sardinia, "NOCS" captured a 38-year-old Palestinian national who was reportedly trying to carry out a poison or chemical attack. The man's cousin had been arrested in Lebanon for a similar chemical plot on Lebanese army barracks.

This quickening pace has worried counterterrorism practitioners, who realize that in tackling the nascent homegrown threat they will not be able to extensively rely on administrative deportations. With over 350 expulsions from January 2015 to December 2018, this has been arguably one of the main legal tools used by Italian authorities in their fight against *jihadism* to date.[45]

In general, however, authorities and the Italian public have both been slow to grasp the evolution of the phenomenon. As disparate international and domestic events appear on the radar, they generate a heated debate in Italy regarding Islam and Islamism – one that often becomes highly politicized and lacks nuance, as compared to the debates that have taken place since September 11th in most other Western European countries.

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) 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. Finally, the law gives the Ministry of the Interior the right to maintain a running list of websites and forums that could be used for extremist activities.[46]

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.[47] 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 or long sentences once the cases went to trial, it is fair to say that Italian authorities have been quite efficient in keeping violent Islamist networks in check.[48]

Things are quite different, however, when the focus shifts from traditional counterterrorism measures to a broader frame of analysis. While many Western European countries have been implementing plans to stem radicalization among their Muslim communities, Italy is severely lagging in its approach to the issue. In the summer of 2017, Italy's Lower House did pass an important draft law introducing "measures for the prevention of *jihadist* radicalization and extremism" for the first time. However, this legislative proposal was not formally adopted by the Upper House before the dissolution of Parliament in December 2017.[49] Thus, "soft" counter- and de-radicalization measures that should complement Italy's counterterrorism instruments still do not do so.

The Italian debate over forms of non-violent Islamism has shifted, with some notable exceptions, between schizophrenic overreaction, naïve whitewashing, and, most commonly, lack of interest. In most other Western European countries, excesses on both sides of the debate 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 and measured.

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