American Foreign Policy Council

Italy

QUICK FACTS

Population: 61, 482, 297

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: Roman Catholic 90% (approximately; about one-third practicing), other 10% (includes mature Protestant and Jewish communities and a growing Muslim immigrant community)

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): $2.014 trillion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2013)

While Italy only recently began to experience Muslim immigration on a large scale, 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 Italy was safe from extremist attacks. The event sparked a lively public debate, but the Italian government so far has failed to respond 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 poor level of organization. This is 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, 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 a large number of 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 faces,

languages and smells 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 conquered 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 amongst themselves and with non-Islamist organizations for influence in the virgin territory that is Islam in Italy. The battle that takes place on a daily basis 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.

In addition, *jihadist* networks have existed in Italy since the late 1980s, though they seldom have they targeted the country. Italy historically has been used by various *jihadist* outfits as a logistical base ideal 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 *carabiniere* 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 they 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 comon in most European countries but that had not yet then appeared in Italy.

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 the 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 December 2006, there were 2,670,514 foreign citizens residing in Italy.[10] While no exact data on the number of Muslims living in Italy exists, most estimates put their number at around one million, corresponding to almost two percent of the population.[11]

Various features characterize Italy's Muslim community, starting with its significant ethnic diversity. The two countries that have contributed the largest number of Muslim immigrants to Italy are Morocco (28.5 percent) and Albania (20.5 percent).[12] Most other Muslims living in Italy come from Tunisia, Senegal, Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Algeria, Bosnia and Nigeria, contributing to the ethnically diverse community. Only in the sectarian aspect is Italy's Muslim community quite homogeneous—98 percent of Italy's Muslims are Sunni.[13] 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.[14]

Most Italian Muslims seem to adopt a moderate interpretation of Islam. According to polls, only five to ten percent of Muslims living in Italy regularly attend Friday prayers at a mosque.[15] Even though the percentage would probably be higher if there were more mosques throughout the territory, the

data square with the analysis of most sociologists, who believe that the majority of Muslims living in Italy are not practicing ones. Most of them fast for Ramadan and celebrate Eid al-Fitr but are not significantly more practicing than Italian Catholics.[16] On the other hand, Italy's lack of mature debate over Islamism and scarcity of integration policies represent conditions that could allow Islamist groups to increase their influence over the country's burgeoning Muslim population.

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. 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 mosques throughout Italy. According to a report of the security services, Italy had 351 mosques in 2000, 696 in 2006 and 735 in the first semester of 2007. The same report also indicates that 39 new mosques and Islamic organizations were set up just between January and May 2007, an average of one every four days.[17]

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. 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.[18]

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. 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.[19] 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 not yet apparent in the country.[20]

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 dealt with a case of homegrown terrorism of Islamist inspiration. On November 6th, Interior Minister Roberto Maroni publicly stated the Italian government's reassessment of the role of jihadist cells operating in the country. "Until the action in Milan," said the minister, "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."[21]

The Milan attack, while providing the blueprint for possible future terrorism

scenarios, also brought to the fore a more general debate over radical Islam in the country. Unlike most other European countries, which, since 9/11, have engaged in a more or less 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 or "honor killing") events appear on the radar, they generate a heated domestic debate that often becomes highly politicized and lacks nuance. Yet, as the dust from these events inevitably settles, the debate is not followed by any systematic governmental initiative seeking to address the many issues, whether related strictly to the security aspect or, more broadly, to integration and social cohesion, that arise from Islamism. Despite some notable exceptions, official attention to Islamism has tended to be sporadic, uninformed, and not conducive to the development of concrete policy.

To be fair, the violent aspects of Islamism in Italy by and large have 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.[22] The combination of experienced security services and law enforcement agencies, proactive investigative magistrates, and adequate legal framework 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.

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 or at least discussing plans to stem radicalization among their Muslim communities, Italy is severely lagging behind 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

[1] UCOII, "History of UCOII," n.d., http://www.islam-ucoii.it/artcomuni.htm.
[2] Stefano Allievi, "I musulmani in Italia: chi sono e come ci vedono [Muslims In Italy: Who They Are And How They See Us]," Limes, iss 3 (2004), 100.
[3] UCOII, "History of UCOII."
[4] Renzo Guolo, *Xenofobi e Xenofili*: *Gli Italiani e l'Islam* [Xenophobes And Xenophiles: Italians and Islam] (Bari: Laterza, 2003), 10.
[5] Ibid., 11.
[6] Guolo, *Xenofobi e Xenofili: Gli Italiani e l'Islam*, 5-6.
[7] 59th Report of CESIS (*Executive Committee for the Intelligence and Security Services*) to Parliament, January-May 2007, 71.
[8] Author's interviews with Italian government officials and Muslim community leaders, Rome, Italy, February and July 2007.
[9] "Pulsioni antimondialiste e vecchio antisemitismo [Anti-globalist Trends And Old Anti-Semitism]," SISDEGNOSIS Iss. 4 (2005).
[10] ISTAT population findings for the year 2006.
[11] Allievi, "I musulmani in Italia: chi sono e come ci vedono," 97. The 2007 annual report by Caritas/Migrantes puts the number at 1,202,052.
[12] Federico Di Leo, "Il nostro Islam in cifre [Our Islam In Numbers]," *Limes,* Iss. 3 (2004), 123.
[13] Stefano Allievi, "Islam in Italy," in Shireen T. Hunter, ed., Islam, Europe's Second Religion, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publisher, 2002), 82.
[14] Ibid., 79-80.
[15] Maurizio Stefanini, "Le forme degli Islam nostrani [The Forms Of Our Islam]," *Limes*, Iss. 3 (2004), 116.
[16] A local survey conducted by the Veneto Region revealed that 38 percent of Muslims polled considered themselves practicing, while 36 percent considered themselves believing but not practicing. Eighty-one percent of those surveyed said they fasted during Ramadan, and 84.5 percent celebrated Eid al Fitr. As detailed in Andrea Spreafico, "La Presenza islamica in Italia [The Islamic Presence in Italy]," Instrumenta 25 (January-April 2005),http://ssai.interno.it/pubblicazioni/instrumenta/25/09%20-%20spreafico.pdf.
[17] 59th Report of CESIS (Executive Committee for the Intelligence and Security Services) to Parliament, 71.
[18] Elena Dusi, "Il fantasma della Consulta," *Limes*, Iss. 4 (2007), 155.
[19] Bi-annual report of the security services to the Italian Senate, February 28, 2009. Pp. 56-7.
[20] Ibid., 58.

[21] "Maroni: In Italia cellule affiliate ad Al Qaeda [Maroni: In Italy Cells Linked To Al Qaeda]," *Apcom*, November 6, 2009.
[22] "Brescia, arrestato marocchino: progettava attentato alla sinagoga della Guastalla di Milano [Moroccan Arrested in Brescia: Planned Attack On The Synagogue of Guastalla in Milan]," *Il Sole 24 Ore*, March 15, 2012.
[23] "Terrorismo, arrestato 21enne: cercava obiettivi," *Corriere della Sera*, June 13, 2013.
[24] For an extensive analysis of jihadist networks in Italy, see Lorenzo Vidino, "Islam, Islamism and Jihadism in Italy," Current Trends in Islamist Ideology 7 (2008).