

Strasbourg Papers of the EMU



The Situation of Muslims in Italy

Authored by the European Muslim Union (EMU)

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A pressing need: Italian Muslims would like to build more and more appropriate mosques. An issue which has been controversially debated.

More than one million Muslims live today in Italy, around 2 per cent of the Italian population. The Muslim religion has thus become the second largest confession after Catholicism.

1. History of Islam in Italy

a.) The first phase of Islamic history in Italy

The history of Islam in Italy began in the 9th century with the Muslim conquest of Sicily and the subsequent penetration into many parts of the southern Italian coast. After the Norman victory in Sicily in 1091, a Muslim minority remained on the island until 1239, after which the Muslims were deported to Puglia where they would then be exterminated in 1300, after having refused to pay obedience to Charles of Anjou.

Since the middle of the 14th century, Italians had contact with the highly organised and militarised Ottoman Empire. Apart from minor episodic raids in the southern Italian coast conducted by the North African Saracens, it was the Republic of Venice, in particular, historically turned to the Orient, who built up a narrow web of relationships with the Ottomans – which, depending on the circumstances, were friendly or otherwise. Beside a resident ambassador, the Serenissima maintained a flourishing Venetian community in Istanbul and in other towns of the Middle East. The architecture, art and culture of Venice and of most of the Adriatic Italy would be unthinkable without those prolonged contacts with the Ottoman Empire. Even today, the most popular family names in these regions of Italy are “Saraceno”, “Turco”, “Moro”, “Albanese”, etc., evidence of close human relations with the Ottomans during many centuries.

b.) After the Second World War

The second part of the history of Islam in Italy started in the 1960's when, together with embassy employees and businessmen, the first Muslim university students began to arrive in some Italian cities.

The Muslim presence was still very limited compared to some other European countries. Indeed, in the first three decades after the Second World War when several European countries became an immigration destination for immigrants coming from outside Europe, Italy remained mainly a country of emigration.

The first real wave of Muslim immigration from North Africa, especially Morocco, began in the 1970s and went on during the 1980s.

But it was in the 1990's that the flow of Muslim immigrants grew considerably with the arrival of large numbers of Albanian immigrants and Moroccans. The more recent immigration however comes from Tunisia, Senegal, Egypt, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Currently, the highest numbers of Muslim immigrants in Italy are Moroccan (31.2 per cent) and Albanian (22.6 per cent).

2. Structure of the Muslim population in Italy

a.) Major characteristics

The Muslim population in Italy reveals some specific characteristics in comparison with those of other European countries. In most cases European countries have been subject to a migration coming from regions with colonial ties, as in the case of North Africans in France or Pakistani and Indian Muslims in Britain. This phenomenon did not occur in Italy as only a small percentage of Muslim residents come from Libya, Somalia and Eritrea, the former Italian colonies.

The second feature which can be highlighted is that the Muslim community is not homogeneous. As a matter of fact, in addition to the high percentage of Moroccans and Albanians, many Muslim immigrants come from a large number of different countries such as Tunisia, Senegal, Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Nigeria, Serbia-Montenegro, Turkey, Ghana ...

Another difference is that only a small proportion of immigrants have acquired Italian citizenship. This is due to the fact that citizenship laws in Italy are quite strict. Immigrants can only apply for Italian citizenship after ten years of regular residence without any interruption in the country.

Moreover, there is a high percentage of immigrants living illegally in the country and working illegally in the Italian large submerged economy.

Typical of the Italian situation is also the high geographic dispersion. Indeed, the Muslim presence is not concentrated in certain areas, which means that, with some exceptions, there are no Muslim suburbs in Italy as in many French cities.

Finally, the presence of men is more than double than that of women because the laws on family reunification are quite recent in Italy.

b.) Conversions

Converts to Islam in Italy are around 10,000. As in other European countries, conversions are determined by a relational or a rational approach. Most of the converts are of course former Catholics but there are also many



Great Mosque in Rome: The Islamic centre in the Italian capital is one of the biggest in Western Europe.

political activists among them. Converts come from a right political perspective and seem to be mostly attracted by Islamic traditionalism; some of them have a connection to Guénon's experience. Converts belonging to the left are attracted by the profound egalitarianism, the fight for the poor, the defense of developing countries against the "rich and violent West", the criticism of capitalism, the attraction of some historical political causes such as Palestine, Bosnia, Chechnya ... and the attraction of being part of a world community.

In Italian universities, where matters relating to Islam and to Arabic are studied there is a significant presence of converts. Very important is also the role of mediation between the Muslim world of immigration and Italian institutions, as well as the converts' participation in cultural activities (translations of the Qur'an, publication of magazines, creation of websites, etc.).

3. Muslim associations

Because of all the features mentioned above the internal cohesion of the Muslim community in Italy is rather weak. Many Muslim organizations exist but none of them really represents all the Muslim residents. This lack of leadership has negative consequences when dealing with the Italian state.

The first Muslim Association, USMI (Muslim Student Union of Italy) was constituted in Perugia in 1971. The association was close to the position of the Muslim Brotherhood.

After the strong immigration wave in the 1980's it became clear that the USMI could not represent the Muslim community as a whole and so, in 1990, some USMI representatives, six mosques and some other individuals formed another organization called UCOII (the Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations of Italy): the UCOII is a very active institution and a large number of mosques are linked to it. For this reason, the UCOII has always attempted to become the main interlocutor of the Italian state.

Another old organization is the CCII (the Islamic Cultural Center of Italy), which was constituted in Rome in the seventies with the involvement of ambassadors to Italy and to the Vatican. In 1974, the CCII began the project for the construction of the Rome's Grand Mosque, one of the largest in Europe, which was completed in 1995. Saudi Arabia and Morocco were the two major donors and the key role between the Grand Mosque and the Italian state was played by Marco Scialoja, a former Italian ambassador to Saudi Arabia.

The COREIS (Islamic Religious Community) and the AMI (Italian Muslim Association) are two smaller organizations. The UMI (Italian Muslim Union) is another small organisation but its leader Adel Smith often attracted the attention of the media for his provocative comments.

Mention should also be made of the World Muslim League (under Saudi-Arabian influence), the cultural mission of the Embassy of Morocco, linked to several independent mosques; the Mosque of Palermo, managed directly by the Tunisian government; the Unione Islamica in Occidente (representing the World Islamic Call Society in Italy) supported by Libya and the Islamic Cultural Institute supported by Egypt.

Finally the Muslim minority groups should be mentioned:

- The Tabligh movement.
- The Sufi brotherhoods, in particular the Muridiyya which brings together nearly two-thirds of Senegalese living in Italy.
- The Turkish movement of the Nur Jamaat (Turkey), which counts few members but is very active in intercultural dialogue.

With respect to the number of mosques, one may note that in 2000 Italy had 351 mosques, 696 in 2006, 735 in 2007 and 749 in 2009.

4. The search for an agreement with the Italian state

As provided by Article 8 of the Italian constitution, the representatives of each religious community can sign an agreement with the Italian state in order to regulate their mutual relations. The Catholic Church has a privileged position that dates from the agreement signed in 1929 which was then incorporated into the Italian constitution. Religions that wish to be recognized and obtain legal and financial benefits must sign an agreement with the government. Many of the religious communities were recognized during the last three decades – such as the Jewish, the Protestant and the Buddhist communities but also the Adventists and the Assemblies of God. Unlike other religions Islam, the second religion of the country, does not have an agreement with the Italian state. The main reason for this situation is the lack of a unified leadership representing the majority of Muslims in Italy.

Various groups have submitted an agreement draft over the years but none of them has been considered by the Italian state as a representative body of the Italian Muslim community. The agreement draft submitted by the UCOII which seems to be the organisation with the largest following, was considered by the Italian government to be too ambitious as it applied for recognition of Islamic festivities, the introduction of Islamic education in public schools, the legal recognition of weddings celebrated in the mosques and the creation of some spaces for Muslims in Italian television. Furthermore, the government was of the opinion that signing an agreement with this organization would have given to it a position of supremacy in comparison with the other Muslim organizations.



Diversity of different backgrounds: unlike other European nations, the Muslims in Italy have multi-faceted ethnical & lingual roots.

In 2005, the Interior Minister constituted the Consulta, an advisory body composed of 16 members of the Muslim community selected by the government and not elected through a voting process within the Muslim community as was the case regarding the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman created by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2003. The Minister explained this in the following manner: “I could have followed the path of the French Council. However, French Islam is more consolidated, it has more than one hundred years of life. The Italian reality is still, very fragmented and undefined. Islam is much more pluralistic and different than what we think and it does not have hierarchies – so it is difficult to find interlocutors. For this reason I say: ‘Let us first try to get to know it, then let us find a way to make it express itself in the most democratic fashion possible.’”

The Consulta is a body where the Muslim leaders can discuss major issues of relevance to the Muslim community and advise the Italian government in order to develop a mutual dialogue. Unfortunately, deep disagreements among the Muslim representatives paralysed the Consulta activities so that it has been mostly inactive since 2006.

5. Integration problems and discrimination of the Muslim population

According to the “Monitoring Report of minority protection in the European Union: the situation of Muslims in Italy”, published by the Open Society Institute in 2002, a series of discriminatory situations is affecting the Muslim population residing in Italy.

a.) Employment

Concerning access to public employment, often the existing legislation provides that recruitment in the public sector requires the possession of Italian or EU citizenship, and the immigration law 286/1998 authorises this type of discrimination.

In the private sector, the lack of adequate education relegates the Muslims to the less skilled and poorly paid

jobs. Moreover, there is a high presence of irregular immigrants working without any social protection.

In various regions, Muslims were able to negotiate agreements with employers that allowed them to observe their rituals, such as the use of spaces dedicated to prayer, the observance of religious holidays and the availability of halal food.

Several cooperation agreements were also concluded with the trade unions of the countries with the greater migratorian flows, notably Morocco, Tunisia and Senegal.

The presence of Muslim trade unionists is yet not proportional to the presence of Muslim workers.

b.) Schools

The number of Muslims students in Italian schools is increasing every year although the level of immigrant students is rather low compared to their average Italian peers. In high schools for instance, as many of 22 per cent of foreign children are rejected. The biggest problem is obviously represented by their insufficient knowledge of the Italian language but also the poor intercultural context is an obstacle to the integration of young people in schools. The curricula do not offer courses on the native language nor on the culture of the countries of origin. Moreover, according to various members of the Muslim world, the representation of Islam in the textbooks is not accurate, if not distorted.

c.) Housing

The Muslims immigrants in Italy are also encountering some problems and abuses in the housing sector. The housing conditions are in fact extremely precarious as a result of the immigrants limited financial resources but also because of some aspects of discrimination concerning the house renting market.

In Milan, the increase in house prices, which has occurred in recent years throughout city, did not affect the area next to the Islamic Cultural Institute. This is a clear indication of the mistrust if not the fear in investing in an area with a strong Muslim presence, and which is reported as being a possible refuge for individuals linked to fundamentalist organizations. Nevertheless, the OSI report mentions also positive situations such as the example of cohabitation in Mazara del Vallo in Sicily where the Tunisian community employed in the fisheries sector is an example of successful integration.

Of course, the working problems are closely linked to the housing difficulties. Immigrants often have to request a bank guarantee as security for the payment of the rents and they must accept poor living conditions. Very often different families have to share the same apartment because of the high rent.

In the past years, some restrictions have still remained in the public housing sector concerning immigrants. A local law of the municipality of Milan for instance provided preferential treatment in favour of Italians concerning access to housing. The Milan court judged that the local law did not respect the provisions contained in Law 286/1998 (which prohibits any kind of discrimination based on religious reasons, and racial or ethnic origin) and decided the city of Milan must indemnify the financial and moral damage.

Of course, it is more difficult to prove discrimination in the private sector where very often the owners refuse to rent their houses to non-European immigrants, including Muslims.

d.) The situation of Muslims in Italian prisons

Regarding the situation of Muslim prisoners in Italy, the OSI report highlights that among the 10 national groups

most represented in Italian prisons more than half come from Muslim countries. The prison administration has financed the translation of the prison regulation and informative texts on the rights of prisoners into the languages most used by immigrants. Moreover, in 2000 an integrational prison regulation governing the observance of religious practices in prison was adopted. This text stipulates that the religious rules must be taken into account as far as possible in the preparation of food for prisoners, that adequate space should be available for worship and that the visits of religious representatives should be allowed at the request of the prisoner.

e.) Mass media

Finally, the OSI report highlights that many prejudices against Muslims are generated by the stereotypes presented by the mass media. The media interest about Islamic extremist groups is disproportionate to their importance and often the Muslim religion of an individual is mentioned without any justified context in the news.

It should also be remembered that the party of the Lega del Nord, participating in the present governing coalition rules a large number of municipalities in the rich North Italy where most immigrants reside. The islamophobic statements of this party have also greatly contributed to the spread of prejudices and distrust towards Muslim immigrants.

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