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## U.S.-EUROPE ANALYSIS SERIES

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### **Knocking on Europe's Door: Islam in Italy**

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Shortly after the July 7, 2005 bombings in London, Italian interior minister Giuseppe Pisanu warned his compatriots that “terrorism is knocking at Italy’s door.” Pisanu’s remark seemed prescient when one of the failed copycat bombers fled London two weeks later and sought refuge with a brother-in-law in Rome. (It did not comfort the authorities that the terrorist had attended grade school in Italy and spoke passable Italian.) In fall 2005, Italian news media reported that the Jordanian insurgent leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had sent “an agent” to Italy to prepare attacks, at the same time reporting that hundreds of undocumented immigrants continued to arrive on the shores of Southern Italy. Combined with the riots in neighboring France, these developments have led the Italian government to move forward on an ambitious program creating new structures to include “moderate Muslims” in the apparatus of Italian state-society relations.

The Center-Right government under Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has had to balance objections to integrating Muslims from the *Lega Nord* party, while trying to defuse domestic opposition to Italian participation in the “war on terror.” The accidental killing of a top Italian intelligence official in Iraq and the alleged CIA rendition of a Milan imam to his native Egypt have been a source of embarrassment for the Berlusconi government. In mid-August, Berlusconi announced he would begin a planned withdrawal of 10% of Italy’s 3,000 troops one month earlier than the planned September date; defense minister Antonio Martino informed a parliamentary committee that the Italian military presence in Iraq would end by December 2006.

The Italian government has also gone to great lengths to signal that it is not capitulating to the threat of violence. A series of new measures have marked a definitive shift from the police and judiciary’s traditional focus on leftist radicals and mafia violence, towards the new exigencies of the state’s efforts against Islamic radicalism. After earlier delays, a new anti-terror law was quickly approved in August 2005 in the wake of the London attacks. The law gives the Interior ministry expanded powers, including expedited deportations of foreigners deemed to pose a national security threat or who are suspected of belonging to a terrorist organization. And, at the insistence of the *Lega Nord*, a junior partner in the governing coalition, heavy fines and jail time were introduced to punish anyone wearing a Burqa in public, updating existing legislation

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against face coverings. The first major antiterrorism exercises involving thousands of rescue workers and extras took place in Milan and Rome soon thereafter, simulating attacks on the airport, commuter rail and the city's subway. Prosecutors in Milan and Rome ordered dozens of raids in the aftermath of the London bombings, resulting in almost 200 arrests. Four expulsions of suspected Muslim extremists followed – including an imam, a vice-president of an Islamic institute in Como, and a suspected member of an armed Algerian fundamentalist group. But the heart of the government's program involves extending its hand to those it deems "moderate." After nearly three years of discussion, Pisanu announced in November 2005 that the government had completed preparations for a "Consultative Council for Islam" (*Consulta islamica*) with representatives from a range of civil society associations. One way of integrating Muslims, officials have come to believe, is by making a place for Islam amongst the recognized religions in Italian state-church relations. Pisanu also affirmed the government's faith in the national education system as a primary site of integration: "Muslim students should attend state schools and learn the Italian language... There is room for Muslim students in schools today, as there will be room for them tomorrow in the workplace, which they will have access to so long as they grow up in respect of our laws."

### **A New Immigration Society**

To understand why it has taken so long to formally engage leaders from immigrant communities, it is worth noting that until the late 1970s, Italy was still primarily an *exporter* of manual labor, not a country of immigration.<sup>2</sup> Italy was never a colonial power of great significance, and Muslims arrived in contemporary Italy via a haphazard (and frequently undocumented) labor migration of the 1980s and 1990s – a far cry from the planned recruitment and bilateral association agreements of the 1950s and 1960s in Germany and France. The early 1990s witnessed the emergence of the first Muslim umbrella organizations that regrouped the several hundred prayer spaces that opened up across Italy. Before their numbers doubled in the course of the 1990s (from 300,000 in early 1990s to more than 650,000 in 2000), public debate was still dominated by "first generation" issues – such as prayer space and prayer time during work. There was not much in the way of second-generation pressures (for example, Muslim students in schools.) One study found that only 10,000 of Italy's half-million legally resident Muslims in 2000 were Italian citizens (not including converts; children born to immigrants in Italy are eligible to apply for Italian citizenship at age 18).

But the first signs of significant demographic changes caused alarm bells to ring in government ministries. An internal Interior Ministry memorandum estimated the number of Muslims in Italy at roughly 1,000,000 in 2004, and it is thought that Muslim immigrants now account for 35-40% of all foreign residents. The number of foreigners in Italian jails nearly quadrupled (to 14,000) between 1990 and 2002.<sup>3</sup> Statistics showed the number of students of North African origin attending Italian schools nearly doubled from 10,312 to 19,044 from the 1996-97 to the 1998-99

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<sup>2</sup> Stefano Allievi, "Immagini di un Islam plurale," *Humanitas* 55 (6/2000), 858-873.

<sup>3</sup> "Clandestino & criminale: pregiudizi e realtà," *GNOSIS* no. 1, October-December 2004; see also Open Society Report on Islam in Italy (2004).

school years. In absolute terms, foreign students still account for less than 7% (and Muslims pupils, around 2%) of the general student population of 7.5 million. Moreover, the number of immigrant small business owners from Muslim countries has more than doubled since 2000, to 51,000.<sup>4</sup>

But it should be noted that Muslims in Italy constitute an unusually heterogeneous population, unlike French Muslims, who are predominantly of North African origin or Muslims in Germany, who are overwhelmingly Turkish. Muslims in Italy hail from thirty different countries: roughly a quarter are of Albanian origin, another quarter are of Moroccan origin followed by smaller Egyptian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, and finally, a small (but vocal) group of between 20,000 and 50,000 Italian converts.

Divisions amongst the center-right parties have prevented the government from being consistent in its efforts to reach out to Muslims. The *Lega's* inflammatory rhetoric has caused considerable tensions with Muslims, and deep divisions have also emerged concerning immigration policy between the *Lega* and Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* party. One issue at the center of debate is the proposal to give legal immigrants the right to vote in local elections: originally put forward by the left-wing opposition party it was embraced and re-launched by the leader of the right-wing *Alleanza Nazionale*, Gianfranco Fini, who is also foreign minister. Such a proposal remains anathema to the *Lega*.

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<sup>4</sup> Moroccan nationals made up a majority of these small business owners (61%), followed by Tunisians (15%), Egyptians (13%), Libyans (3%) and Algerians (2.5%). See "L'islam in Italia ha voglia di impresa," *Agenzia Internazionale Stampa Estero*, January 3, 2006.

<b>Official Number of Legally Resident Muslims<sup>5</sup></b>				
<b>Country</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2003</b>
Morocco	91,009	145,843	194,617	227,616
Albania	28,816	91,537	163,868	233,616
Tunisia	47,793	47,261	60,441	60,572
Senegal	28,041	35,897	39,708	47,762
Egypt	25,576	27,664	37,674	44,798
Pakistan	7,593	10,817*	17,693	30,506
Bangladesh	--	--	--	32,391
<b>Total</b>	<b>288,357</b>	<b>391,150</b>	<b>c.444,725</b>	<b>677,261</b>

#### **Muslims and other Legally Resident Immigrants in Italian Regions<sup>6</sup>**

	Muslims as % of immigrants in region  (1998)	As % of Muslim Population in Italy (1999)	As % of all Immigrants in Italy (2003)
North	38.3%	54.2%	57.9%
Center	26.7%	29.2%	28%
South	40.3%	11.8%	10.5%
Sicily/Sardegna	44.5%	6.8%	3.6%

<sup>5</sup> Based on citizenship in a Muslim-majority country of origin; Sources: Commissione per le politiche dell'Integrazione 2002; Caritas-Migrantes Dossier Statistico 2002 and 2004; 2001 data from ISTAT.

<sup>6</sup> Sources: For 2002, Zincone; For 2003 data, Caritas/Migrantes Immigrazione Dossier Statistico 2004; for 1999 data, - Ministero Evangelico *tra Arabi* (MEtA) at [www.meta.it](http://www.meta.it).

## Islam, Italian-Style: *La Consulta Islamica* (2003-2005)

The presence of a growing proportion of persons of Muslim origin in state institutions has raised a number of practical questions that require policy responses: from the issue of religious schools, to the creation of Muslim cemeteries, to the nomination of chaplains in prisons. The multiplication of Muslim prayer spaces in the last two decades—there are now around 450—also caught the attention of government officials who had little oversight of the provenance of mosque financing and imams in Italy. Beginning in 2003, the Center-Right government began to assume political responsibility for state-Islam relations. Interior Minister Pisanu declared that he would set out to find a moderate majority in order to marginalize the extremist minority: “Italian mosques must be liberated from preachers of violence, from the recruiters of holy war, and the agents of foreign interests.”<sup>7</sup>

Previous sluggishness in granting recognition to Muslim communities was intended to avoid the unknown consequences of ending the representative monopoly of the Saudi and Moroccan dominated *Centro Culturale Islamico d’Italia* (CCII) in Rome, which had served as a de facto representative for organized Islam since 1974. Chartered well before the settlement of any significant number of labor migrants, the CCII’s administrative council is made up mostly of ambassadors of most Muslim countries accredited with the Italian state and Vatican City. CCII boasts the largest mosque in Europe (5,000 person capacity including outdoor spaces), but counts only twenty-five other prayer spaces under its organizational umbrella. The government has been loath to jeopardize diplomatic relations with these international guardians of Islam, who oversaw the creation of prayer spaces for labor migrants in the 1970s and 1980s. Italian administrators shared the same anxieties as their counterparts in other European countries regarding the integration of a new religious community that outgrew the “Embassy Islam” that emanates from the guardian states. Several other umbrella organizations claiming to represent Islam in Italy have competed for government recognition since the 1990s. The largest is the Ancona-based *Unione delle Comunità ed Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia* UCOII (1990), which is associated with the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood. The UCOII claims to represent 200-300 Muslim associations and approximately 70-120 prayer spaces.

In a crucial change from previous models of consultation in Italy that relied almost exclusively on representatives of “Embassy Islam,” the new Consultative Council will include a representative of the UCOII along with “lay” civil society leaders and non-prayer associations in Italy. The UCOII secretary general, Mohamed Nour Dachan, had previously been snubbed in official meetings. But he has increasingly tried to burnish the UCOII’s image as a moderate organization, including organizing nation-wide demonstrations on September 11, 2004 “against war and terrorism.” Dachan also volunteered his aid in negotiations to free Italian hostages in Iraq and, more recently, Yemen. Pisanu said of his decision to include Dachan, “I took into account what the UCOII is today—not its past—and the efforts it has made for a positive evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood in the whole world.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *La Repubblica*, May 2003.

<sup>8</sup> “La Consulta islamica condanna,” *Libertà*, February 10, 2006.

The interior ministry has eliminated the earlier embargo on his political Islam federation's participation in the Consultative Council. But the Italian government is proceeding slowly, and crafting its response without rushing headlong into a final institutional arrangement. The Consultative Council will not, for now, benefit from the status of a recognized community body as outlined in the Italian constitution. Pisanu has argued that the Muslim population is not ripe for formal representation via the existing state-church mechanism, called an *Intesa*, used with assorted Christian and Jewish communities and which can only be signed with Italian citizens. Instead, the interior minister used a non-traditional formula to make individual appointments to the Consultative Council. In contrast with the French government's *Conseil Français du culte musulman*, which is explicitly aimed to represent the "6-7% of the mosque-going public," the Consultative Council targets those whom Pisanu calls the "95% of moderate Muslims who attend neither mosques, nor madrassas nor Islamic cultural centers and who only came to our countries to improve their living conditions and with the sincere intention to respect our law and order."<sup>9</sup>

The chosen participants are thus not restricted to religious leadership. The Consultative Council reflects the range of Muslim civil society in Italy without any pretense of "representing" Muslims in Italy. The 16 members named in November 2005 and approved by the government in February 2006, include an UCOII representative, a CCII/Muslim World League representative and a representative of the *Comunità religiosa islamica d'Italia* (COREIS) alongside three association leaders, three journalists, two health workers, an imam, a literature professor, a student leader, an author, and a charity worker. There are four women; one 22 year old student; twelve national origins are represented (only nine of the sixteen members are of Arab origin); and eight of the sixteen are Italian citizens (several have been naturalized). This is a sharp departure from the short-lived *Consiglio Islamico d'Italia* (Islamic Council of Italy, 1998-2001), which included just five leaders from religious federations, and which fell apart because of differences between representatives of the Muslim World League and the UCOII before it could present a common request for an *Intesa*.

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<sup>9</sup> Giuseppe Pisanu "La sfida delle religioni alla democrazia," ACLI Convegno nazionale di studi, Orvieto, September 11, 2004.

### Composition of the Islamic Consultative Council (November 2005)

	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	PROFESSION/ORGANIZATION
Yahya S.Y. Pallavicini	Italy	Imam/Italian Islamic Religious Community
Mario Scialoja	Italy	Muslim World League
Mohamed Nour Dachan	Syria	Union of Islamic Communities in Italy
Ejaz Ahmad	Pakistan	Journalist
Khalil Altoubat	Jordan	Physiotherapist
Rachid Amadia	Algeria	Imam (Salerno)
Kalthoum Bent Amor	Tunisia	Arabic professor (Univ. of Urbino)
Khalid Chaouki	Italy/Morocco	Student/Young Muslims of Italy
Zeinab Ahmed Dolal	Somalia	Health worker
Gulshan Jivraj Anivalle	Italy/Kenya	Ismaelite Community of Italy
Tantush Mansur	Libya	Islamic Union in the West
Mohamed Saady	Italy/Morocco	“Beyond Borders” association
Souad Sbai	Morocco	Journalist/ Moroccan Women’s Association
Roland Seiko	Albania	Journalist
Younis Tawfik	Italy/Iraq	Writer
Mahadou Siradio Thiam	Senegal	Charity worker

### Working Agenda – Islamic Consultative Council (February 2006)

- 1) Integration issues at home, school and the workplace;
- 2) Safeguarding the specificities of religion and Muslim traditions – men and womens’ rights; use of the veil; observance of Muslim holidays and precepts; ritual animal slaughter; Muslim cemeteries;
- 3) Italian-language sermons in mosques and the training of imams;
- 4) Registration of prayer spaces, to normalize ‘critical situations, e.g. in Conegliano, Gallarate, Colle Valdelsa);
- 5) Social conditions and rights of immigrants (asylum, humanitarian protection, residence permits, family reunification, citizenship);
- 6) Access of Muslim chaplains to prisons and hospitals

Because the Consultative Council has no representative ambitions, Pisanu has argued that it does not need to correspond to the balance of power amongst Muslim federations and prayer spaces in Italy. As Pisanu freely admits, the Consultative Council will be a loose organization at first: “The *Consulta Islamica* does not want to be and cannot ever be a place for effective representation of the Muslims of Italy...My project is only an organism of consultative character, composed of people of my trust whom I will choose among Muslims who speak Italian, are of sure democratic

faith and proven institutional loyalty.”<sup>10</sup> Pisanu has thus formulated this definitive (if slow-moving) overture to Islam in terms aimed to appeal both to the conservative Italian majority as well as the Muslim associations that are the object of this new policy instrument.

## Outlook for the future

In general, news of the Consultative Council has been welcomed by Muslim civil society leaders—including the representatives with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood—and greeted cautiously by leaders of “Embassy Islam” tied to diplomatic representatives.<sup>11</sup> In response to Pisanu’s announcement of plans for the Council, a number of prominent Muslims published a “Loyalty Pact to the Italian Republic” in May 2003. In addition to the Consultative Council, the Interior Minister has encouraged a complementary process of political integration at the level of local government, which some local administrators have started to explore (e.g. in Siena and Imperia). In a three-page memorandum on “Inter-religious Dialogue” sent to all Italian prefects, the Minister laid out instructions to the prefects to engage in informal consultations with the broad reality of associational life in Italian towns and cities. Quietly, a pragmatic solution is being put in place to make contact with Muslim representatives—including the UCOII—on the local level.

In their first meeting, the Consultative Council members condemned violent protests against caricatures of the prophet Muhammed, as well as the caricatures themselves: like their French counterparts, the UCOII has called for the application of laws against inciting racial hatred (*Legge Mancini*) against newspapers that reprinted the cartoons. The Danish embassy released a common declaration with UCOII. Pisanu commented: “anyone participating in this meeting would have understood that there is a moderate Islam in Italy.”<sup>12</sup>

The next few years will be decisive for the *Consulta*’s future; given its unofficial nature and reliance on the presence of Pisanu, it is conceivable that the *Consulta* will not survive the general election in April 2006. In some respects, it resembles the 1990 French Council for reflection on Islam in France (CORIF), a consultative body named by interior minister Pierre Joxe. Disagreements among participants and successive ministers’ abandonment of the project led to two more attempts before arriving at the formula of indirect CFCM elections held by Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy in spring 2003. But like the CORIF, the *Consulta*’s very existence reflects a new consensus among politicians in Italy regarding the importance of integrating Muslims and engaging in structured dialogue.

The efforts of the minister have won out over increasingly strident objections of the *Lega Nord*, some of whose leaders have insisted “there is no such thing as Muslim moderates.” The party’s newspaper, *La Padania*, has waged a print campaign against individual Consultative Council

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<sup>10</sup> Giuseppe Pisanu “La sfida delle religioni alla democrazia,” ACLI Convegno nazionale di studi, Orvieto, September 11, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Interview by the author with Abdallah Redouane, General Secretary of the CICI, January 2004.

<sup>12</sup> “La Consulta islamica condanna,” *Libertà*, February 10, 2006.



participants. Moderate Muslim environments “are the water in which fundamentalist fish swim,” said Roberto Castelli, the *Lega* minister of justice. He later said that he would have voted against the *Consulta* but had missed the cabinet meeting where it was approved: “it is a bad signal, typically Italian, that we are a weak country.”<sup>13</sup>

But both the Catholic Church and former Christian Democratic Party members within the governing coalition have demonstrated sympathy for the respect of religious customs and interdictions – from the creation of the Consultative Council to support for religious expression like the headscarf and caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed. In a country with more than 100,000 nuns, forbidding Muslim women from wearing a head covering has never been under serious consideration. Pisanu has said he could not imagine banning headscarves because his own mother “wore a Sardinian outfit, including a headscarf, and in wintertime she would cover herself up to the eyes with a heavy scarf.” Pope Benedict XVI, whose recent forays into domestic Italian politics have been noticeable, was thought to encourage the government’s consultation in a July 2005 speech calling for the search for “elements for dialogue within Islam.” Two important Catholic periodicals, *Famiglia Cristiana* and the *Osservatore Romano*, criticized the caricatures of the Prophet: “The intelligence of reason is sometimes forced to abdicate when faced with vulgarity and insult.”<sup>14</sup> Even after an Italian priest was killed in Turkey, apparently in connection with the caricature controversy, Pisanu stated that “If the symbols of my religion were offended, I would feel authorized to protest energetically.”

Although it includes representatives of political Islam, the Consultative Council still lacks the legitimacy of the French consultation process because no formal elections have been held. By including so many “lay” civil society representatives, the Italian state is freeing its state-Islam consultations from the strict constraints within the actual landscape of prayer rooms. A spokesman for the interior minister said in an interview “No European country has the correct solution at the ready. Every solution is the work of a tailor – there are no *prêt-à-porter* solutions. Since one must take measures to promote social integration, each state is looking for the right responses to a complex problem.”<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, a further sign of integration came about in February when the left-wing Margherita party announced it would present the sociology professor Khalid Fouad Allam as Italy’s first Arab Muslim senate candidate.

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<sup>13</sup> Gian Maria de Francesco, “Consulta islamica, la Lega si «dissocia» dal governo,” *Il Giornale*, February 11, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Francesco M. Valiante, “Progresso di libertà o arretramento di civiltà?” *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 6-7, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Luca Mantovani by the author, September 2004.