



NDC Research Report

Research Division

NATO Defense College

05/15 – October 2015

“WE WILL CONQUER YOUR ROME:”

ITALY AND THE THREAT OF JIHADI TERRORISM

by Andreas Jacobs and Lorenzo Salvati¹

In November 2014 the so-called “Islamic State” (ISIL) published the fourth issue of its online magazine “Dabiq.” The cover showed St Peter’s Square with the “Islamic Caliphate” flag hoisted above it, the “conquest of Rome” being declared as one of ISIL’s ultimate goals. As a result, the Italian authorities slightly increased the national alert state and advised public institutions in the Italian capital to amend and upgrade their security procedures. These measures proved timely. In April 2015, Italian security forces rounded up members of a jihadi terrorist cell from Sardinia: 18 individuals of Afghani and Pakistani origin, suspected of being in close contact with al-Qaida, were arrested. At the same time, ISIL leaders openly threatened to infiltrate illegal migrant flows to Italy and the rest of Europe with jihadi fighters.²

These developments put a new perspective on the widespread perception of Italy being less exposed to the jihadi threat than other major European states. Like them, Italy has now become a target for international and homegrown jihadi terrorist activities. This paper analyses the history and current state of the jihadist threat in Italy, evaluates how the country features in international jihadi narratives, and describes the counter-measures taken by the Italian authorities.

The history of Jihadism in Italy

Compared to other major European countries, such as France, Britain and Germany, radical Islamism in Italy is a relatively small and recent phenomenon. This can at least partly be explained by the Italian history of immigration. Historically, Italy has been a country of emigration. Only in the late 1980s did larger numbers of migrants from the Islamic world begin to move into the country. This means that the following generation, made up of Muslims who were born or have grown up in Italy, has only recently reached adulthood.³ It is this second, or third, generation that is usually more open to the misuse of religion for radical political purposes. As in other European countries, the Muslim immigrant community in Italy is not homogeneous. It mainly consists of immigrants from Morocco, but also includes larger groups of Albanian, Egyptian, Tunisian, Senegalese, Somali, Pakistani, and Bengali nationals.

Irrespective of the root causes of Islamism and jihadism,⁴ radicalization usually spreads along migratory routes, particularly from North Africa.⁵ The first jihadist movements in Italy were identified by the Italian police in the 1990s, almost exclusively in the north of Italy.⁶ During that period, Milan became the undisputed capital of the ideological

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² Corriere della Sera, May 12, 2015.

³ Lorenzo Vidino, “Il jihadismo autoctono in Italia, nascita, sviluppo e dinamiche di radicalizzazione,” *ISPI*, 2014, p. 8.

⁴ “Islamism” is defined as the political ideology that (mis-)uses the religion of Islam. “Jihadism” is defined as a violent political ideology that (mis-)uses the Islamic concept of “Jihad.”

⁵ Monica Fornari and Lorenzo Salvati, “L’evoluzione del fenomeno terroristico internazionale. Quale ruolo per la NATO?” in *Il nodo di gordio. Masters of Terror/Il signore del terrore*, No. 7, January 2015, p. 42.

⁶ Southern regions are less exposed to the dissemination of jihadist networks. This might be explained by higher levels of traditional social

and strategic development of Italian jihadism. The main driving institution behind this development was the Islamic Cultural Institute (ICI), a former garage turned into a mosque, located in Viale Jenner.

The ICI was established in 1988 by supporters of the Egyptian Gamaa Al-Islamiyya group. Under its imam, Anwar Shaaban, it quickly attracted radicals from Egypt, North Africa, and other parts of the Muslim world, united in their desire to topple the ruling regimes in their home countries.⁷ With the outbreak of the Bosnian war, the ICI quickly became one of the main support centres and logistics hubs for Jihadists conducting operations in Bosnia.⁸ Based on the network established at that time, Shaaban extended his geographic focus by reaching out to jihadist groups in Algeria and Afghanistan.⁹ In parallel, the ICI extended its foothold in Italy by subsequently gaining control over other Islamist-influenced mosques and institutions in Northern Italy. By the mid-1990s, the ICI network consisted of cells, training camps and mosques in cities such as Como, Gallarate, Varese, and Cremona. This network was highly efficient in planning and organizing a number of terrorist activities all over the world. Mostly unnoticed by the Italian public, the Italy-based network at that time served as the main logistics hub for channeling European funds and recruits into global jihadism. A 2001 report by the US Treasury Department actually defined the ICI as the main al-Qaida base in Europe.¹⁰

Increasing awareness of the problem among police and intelligence services in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks led to a decline of the ICI network. “By the mid-2000s, several aggressive security investigations that led to the dismantling of dozens of cells and the voluntary departure from Italy of many hardened jihadists caused a significant decrease in jihadist activity.”¹¹ Italian jihadists moved to other places and no further involvement in terrorist activities was recorded by the Italian authorities. In spring 2013, Shaaban’s successor as the ICI imam, Abu Imad, was expelled from Italy after having served a prison term for criminal conspiracy with the aggravating circumstance of terrorism.

Jihadism in Italy: the current situation

After the destruction of the ICI network, radical jihadism in Italy became more individual, more flexible and more virtual. Some mosques and so-called “cultural centres,” such as the Ostia Mosque near Rome, allegedly still play a role in recruitment of jihadists. But Italian intelligence sources now mainly identify three other sources of radicalization: internet,¹² TV shows,¹³ and prisons. The new generation of Italian Islamists are mostly isolated individuals, having little if any contact with terrorist cells or networks. Some of these individuals have visited Muslim countries and war zones, becoming acquainted with foreign extremists. The majority of Italian jihadists are, by choice, supporters of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaida, ISIL or the Taliban. They are not actively recruited by these groups, but seek to be recognized by them through internet activities and transnational networking.¹⁴ Two interrelated elements seem to be important factors in understanding the current jihadist scene in Italy: first, the country’s geographical proximity to North Africa and the Balkans; and second, the interest this creates in using the country as a logistical and ideological hub.

Both elements can be detected in most jihadist activities in Italy. In 2002, four Moroccan citizens were arrested in Rome after police had found them in possession of explosives allegedly ready for use near the U.S. Embassy.¹⁵ In 2006, the Italian authorities found evidence of jihadist terrorist threats against the 2006 Winter Olympic Games in Turin. In 2008, Italian special police units for the first time dismantled an actual terrorist cell operating in the country. The cell consisted of two Moroccans, who considered themselves agents of al-Qaida and who were trying to recruit other militants for suicide attacks in northern Italy.¹⁶ The first actual attack happened in October 2009, when a Libyan citizen named Mohamed Game, who was later linked to the ICI, detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) in an Italian Army barracks in Milan. The attempted suicide bombing failed due to the poor construction of the IED, but

control and the stronger influence of organized crime, which makes the South less accessible to extremists and terrorists than the other Italian regions.

⁷ Vidino, “Il jihadismo autoctono,” p. 31.

⁸ Stefano Maria Torelli, “The Jihadist Threat in Italy” in *Terrorism Monitor*, Issue 11, Vol. 13, May 29, 2015.

⁹ Vidino, “Il jihadismo autoctono,” p. 32.

¹⁰ Cit. after The Washington Post, October 13, 2001.

¹¹ Lorenzo Vidino, “The Evolution of Jihadism in Italy: Rise in homegrown radicals,” *CTC-Sentinel*, No. 6, November 2013, pp. 17-20.

¹² Vidino, “Il jihadismo autoctono,” p. 80.

¹³ “Come si divento terrorista, la rete e le rotte,” *ANSA*, January 10, 2015.

¹⁴ Lorenzo Attianese, “Jihad, Italia. Come si diventa terroristi,” *ANSA-Magazine* No 47, January 22, 2015.

¹⁵ Federico Bordonaro, “The October 2009 Terrorist Attack in Italy and its Wider Implications,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 2, Issue 10, October 2009.

¹⁶ Ibid.

severely injured Game.¹⁷

With the war in Syria and Iraq and the ongoing military success of the Islamist terrorist organization ISIL, Italy has increasingly faced the problem of foreign fighters. In June 2013, Italian police in Brescia arrested Anas El-Abboubi, an Italian citizen of Moroccan descent who translated jihadist material into Italian and published it on extremist websites. After his release from prison, he went to Syria, where he is allegedly fighting for ISIL.¹⁸ Based on the investigations concerning El-Abboubi, in March 2012 police in Brescia arrested two Albanians and an Italian national of Moroccan origin, charged with recruiting people for terrorist purposes and incitement to terrorism through the social media. The Italian, 20-year old Madi El-Halili, had translated ISIL propaganda documents. According to investigators, these documents had been intended for second-generation residents who, from their eighteenth birthday, would become Italian citizens. The three recruiters were in contact with an Italian foreign fighter in Syria, and were planning to send other Italian fighters to Syria and Iraq.¹⁹

Another notable case is that of Giuliano Ibrahim Delnevo from Genoa. Delnevo, a convert to Islam, went through a self-radicalization process and finally tried to get in touch with other Italian jihadists. After several failed attempts (probably due to the fact that they considered him an unreliable outsider), Delnevo moved to Syria, where he fought against the Syrian army and met his death. Delnevo's case is representative of a growing trend in Italy (and other European countries). Many of the individuals concerned are not connected to larger network or cells in the country; stimulated by social media and online sources, they follow a path of self-radicalization and then join one of the terrorist organizations. A recent study also points to the role played by Italian extremists in providing logistical support to Europeans intending to join ISIL forces in Syria and Iraq.²⁰

This recruitment and financial networking of jihadists in Italy also became evident in the April 2015 operation described above. Of the 18 jihadists arrested on that occasion, two were found to have direct ties with al-Qaida- affiliated groups, while others were involved with the Peshawar market attacks in October 2009.²¹ The operation which led to the arrests had been in progress for several years, uncovering a network of jihadist activities throughout Central and Southern Italy as well as in Pakistan. The operation also showed that such organizations had not only planned attacks within Italy, but also organized to have additional recruits brought into Italy with political refugee status. In addition, phone tapping revealed that financial support for the organization largely came from Pakistani and Afghani communities in Italy.

But Italy has not only become a hub for financial support and recruitment, it has also become a centre for jihadist ideology and propaganda. Remarkably, one of the most influential online preachers and jihadist motivators is an Australian of Italian origin, Musa Cerantonio. A study conducted in early 2014 found that one in four foreign fighters followed Cerantonio's Twitter account and that his Facebook page is the third-most "liked" among jihadists.²² Although most of his posts are in English, sometimes he writes in Italian. Many Italian jihadists and Islamists are proud of Cerantonio's Italian roots and gave him a warm welcome when he travelled to Italy in autumn 2012.

“The conquest of Rome” in jihadi narratives

The fact that Cerantonio's Facebook profile used to show his picture in St Peter's Square is emblematic of jihadist narratives. In his Facebook and YouTube posts, Cerantonio states: “Take pride [in] your Islam and fly the flag of Islam with pride, in the Vatican or wherever you may be ... We will conquer Rome, exactly as the Prophet of Allah said.”²³ This quote exemplifies the particular role that the Eternal City and the Vatican play in jihadist ambitions. According to widespread narratives used by jihadists all over the world, “Rome” is used as a metaphor for “infidel invaders” or “crusaders,” historically opposing Islam. The fourth issue of ISIL's propaganda magazine “Daqib,” mentioned at the beginning of this article, deals extensively with this topos. It refers to an alleged “prophecies” regarding “Roman Crusaders,” according to which “the Muslims will fight a war against the Christians of Rome to win the final Crusade

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Vidino, “Il jhadismo autoctono,” p. 8.

¹⁹ “Three arrested in Italy, Albania as ISIS recruitment cell busted,” *ANSA*, March 25, 2015.

²⁰ Marco Lombardi, “IS 2.0 e molto altro: il progetto di comunicazione del califfato,” in Monica Maggioni and Paolo Magri (eds.), *Twitter e Jihad: La comunicazione dell'ISIS*, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, Rome, March 2015.

²¹ “Italy terror cell that plotted to bomb Vatican smashed, prosecutors say,” *The Guardian*, April 24, 2015.

²² Joseph A. Carter, Shiraz Maher and Peter R. Neumann, “#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks,” *ICRS report*, April 2014.

²³ Cited after MEMRI, Special Dispatch no. 5102, December 21, 2012.

where Islam will subjugate Christians and become the sole religion in the world.” It is difficult to tell whether this statement is simply provocative and symbolic, or if it represents a real threat to the Italian capital. However, given the group’s ideological fanaticism, the Italian authorities and the Vatican take these statements seriously. Although there is no evidence that ISIL or any other jihadist group is currently planning an attack in the Holy City, the Vatican Gendarmerie are on the alert and, as mentioned above, the Italian Minister of the Interior slightly raised the terrorist alert level in early 2015.

Counter-jihadism in Italy

Compared to other European countries, Italy might have two advantages in the fight against jihadi terrorism. First, it still has fewer known suspects, which makes it easier to monitor jihadi terrorist activities. Second, most of the suspects still do not hold Italian citizenship, which makes expulsion the most telling weapon adopted by the Italian anti-terrorism services.²⁴ Italy has also been able to adjust its counter-terrorist capabilities on the basis of its experience with the fight against organized crime and left-wing terrorism. In April 2015, new legislation specifying the offences of “fighting abroad” and “spreading jihadist propaganda” was introduced.²⁵ Additionally, a Counter-Terrorism desk was established within the General Prosecutor’s Anti-Mafia Office.

According to Italian intelligence sources, more than a hundred actual or potential jihadists are constantly monitored. Most of them are citizens of North African or Balkan countries legally living in Italy, many of them being at least superficially integrated into Italian society. The focal areas of anti-terror surveillance are Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Liguria, Veneto, and Latium. According to official figures, more than 500 associations, almost 400 places of worship and a few larger mosques (in Rome, Milan, Colle Val d’Elsa and Ravenna) are constantly monitored.²⁶

Conclusions

In the past, Italy was less concerned with jihadi terrorists than other major European countries. Additionally, there has been no major terrorist attack inspired by radical jihadism so far, and the number of Italian foreign fighters in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan is still low. But this situation may be about to change. The difficult economic situation of Muslim immigrants, the country’s proximity to North Africa and the Balkans, and the active Italian participation in a number of peace-enforcement missions in Muslim countries increasingly make Italy a potential target for jihadi terrorists. This trend is further aggravated by the presence in Italy of US forces and several NATO institutions, such as NATO’s Joint Forces Command Naples, and by the symbolic significance of “Rome” as the historical and spiritual enemy in the jihadists’ distorted interpretation of the Islamic message and tradition. For most analysts, therefore, Italy now occupies a more prominent place among the European countries at risk of jihadi terrorist attack.

But the country is not unprepared. The Italian authorities have had time to learn from the experiences of other European countries. Additionally, the Italian police’s substantial expertise in fighting left-wing terrorism and organized crime is a major asset in addressing the jihadi terrorist threat. However, there is no reason to sit back and become complacent. Research and information are needed, and the protection of critical infrastructure has to be subject to permanent assessment. It is clear that radical jihadists will not literally “take Rome” and transform Saint Peter’s Square into a jihadi prayer site. But Rome should be on the alert and ensure that the jihadi terrorist threat in Italy is effectively countered.

²⁴ Lombardi 2015.

²⁵ “Anti-terror decree becomes law,” *ANSA*, April 15, 2015.

²⁶ Roberto Di Legami, “La minaccia corre sul web,” in *Polizia Moderna*, February 2015, pp. 12-18.



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