

*Analysis No. 318, November 2017*

## THE JIHADIST THREAT IN ITALY: A PRIMER

Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone

Italy's experience with jihadism presents some interesting peculiarities. At first glance, there are several overlapping reasons to consider the country as a major hub of jihadist mobilization and target for terrorist attacks. Yet, somewhat counterintuitively, Italy has not faced a particularly intense challenge from jihadist terrorism. Levels of domestic radicalization are, by any account, significantly lower than in most other European and Western countries.

Overall, Italy has a diverse jihadist scene that resembles that of other European countries, but which is substantially smaller in size and less sophisticated. Nonetheless, over the course of the past 12 months, various incidents have increased Italian counterterrorism authorities' concerns, as they reveal Italian links to foreign attacks and growth in the homegrown scene.

Italian authorities have developed skills and legal tools that are useful in confronting jihadist terrorism. These repressive tactics, however, have not been accompanied by an equally robust preventive approach. Unlike most Western countries, in fact, Italy has not yet developed any program or strategy aimed towards counter-radicalization or de-radicalization.

Lorenzo Vidino is the Director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University and the Head of the Radicalization and International Terrorism Centre at ISPI. He has testified on several occasions before the U.S. Congress and other parliaments; authored six books; and advised law enforcement officials around the world. He regularly provides commentary to diverse media outlets. In 2016, he was appointed by the Italian Prime Minister as Coordinator of the National Commission on Jihadist Radicalization.

Francesco Marone is Research Fellow of the Radicalization and International Terrorism Centre at ISPI. He is also an Adjunct Lecturer at the University of Pavia and an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT). He is the author of several publications in the field of security studies.



Italy's experience with jihadism presents some interesting peculiarities. At first glance, there are several overlapping reasons to consider the country as a major hub of jihadist mobilization and target for terrorist attacks. Indeed:

1. Italy is relatively close to several conflict areas in the Middle East and North Africa and has relatively porous borders, making it an ideal point of arrival or transit country for militants.
2. Italy recently received a large influx of migrants, most of whom hail from Muslim majority countries and conflict areas. Often, they do not face stringent security checks at the border, and upon entry to the country live at the margins of society.
3. Historically, Italy has been a logistical base for various jihadist groups since the early 1990s.
4. Italy represents a symbolic target for jihadist groups. The city of Rome, in particular, has great iconic value, as the cradle of Christianity and a major symbol of Western civilization. Rome has been frequently mentioned as a target in jihadist propaganda.
5. The Italian government has played an active role in various Middle Eastern conflicts, deploying troops to Afghanistan and Iraq (both during the 2003 invasion and currently as part of the anti-ISIS coalition) as well as substantial intelligence and political capital in the current Libyan strife.

Yet, somewhat counterintuitively, Italy has not faced a particularly intense challenge from jihadist terrorism. Levels of domestic radicalization are, by any account, significantly lower than in most other European and Western countries (tellingly, the number of foreign fighters from Italy is strikingly low). Similarly, aside from a couple of low-level plots that were thwarted or failed, there have not been any successful terrorist attacks on Italian soil since 9/11, a trend that has remained true since the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in 2014.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE EVOLUTION OF JIHADISM IN ITALY

Historically, Italy was one of the first European countries to witness jihadist activities on a relatively large scale. By the early 1990s Italian authorities had already detected and investigated various North African militant networks operating in the country.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the Islamic Cultural Institute (ICI) in Milan had acquired great importance for the global jihadist movement during the

---

<sup>1</sup> The only partially successful attack took place in October 2009, when a Libyan resident, Mohammed Game, detonated a home-made device outside military barracks in Milan, without causing casualties.

<sup>2</sup> L. Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*, Foreword by S. Dambruoso. Milan, ISPI and European Foundation for Democracy, 2014.



Bosnian conflict in the 1990s, by offering logistical support for volunteers seeking to reach the battlefield. Notably, ICI's imam, Egyptian national and former *Gamaa Islamiya* leader, Anwar Shabaan, eventually rose to the position of emir of the Arab foreign fighters in Bosnia.

ICI and its network of satellite mosques continued their activities throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, but various counter-terrorism investigations carried out throughout the 2000s significantly diminished their influence. Fortunately, the decline of this "first generation" of jihadists living in Italy did not immediately correspond with the growth of a "second generation" of homegrown militants. By the mid-2000s, while most European countries witnessed a quickly increasing number of homegrown radicalized individuals, Italy did not experience the same trend.

Italian authorities begin to monitor homegrown jihadists in the late 2000s and early 2010s, although their numbers were still relatively small. Arguably, the main reason for this gap is a simple demographic factor: unlike other Western European countries, large-scale Muslim immigration to Italy began only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and therefore the first wave of "second-generation Muslims" has only recently entered adulthood.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE ISIS-RELATED MOBILIZATION

In recent years, most Western countries have experienced a sharp increase in radicalization levels inspired by the successes and the pervasive propaganda efforts of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS. Italy has not been immune to this dynamic, which has affected both first-generation immigrants and a growing number of individuals with quintessential homegrown extremist tendencies. The latter category includes a growing number of Muslims born and/or raised in Italy (albeit only a few of those with said characteristics possess Italian citizenship, given the strict nature of Italian citizenship laws) and a disproportionately large cross-section of Italian converts.

However, the recent growth of the Italian jihadist scene pales in comparison to the surge that other European countries have experienced. While Italy is beginning to experience dynamics typical of homegrown jihadism (such as the

---

<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, radicals represent only a tiny minority of the Muslim presence within the country. There is no official information on the size and the composition of the Muslim community in Italy. However, relatively recent estimates from reputable sources set the number of Muslim individuals at not less than 1.6 million, out of nearly 61 million residents (2.6%), with a significant growth in recent years. Today, Islam is the country's second largest religion after Roman Catholicism. Italy's Muslim population is extremely heterogeneous and stratified along ethno-national and cultural lines, without any dominating group. In addition, it lacks a unified leadership.



bottom-up production of propaganda written and translated into Italian), the Italian jihadist scene remains tiny and unsophisticated when compared to that of most other European countries.

Data about foreign fighter mobilization provides compelling empirical evidence in this regard. According to data released by the Italian Interior Ministry in August 2017, 125 individuals with ties to Italy (only a minority of whom are full-fledged Italian citizens) left the country to join various jihadist groups (mostly the Islamic State) in Syria, Iraq and other Middle Eastern conflict zones. From this contingent, 37 individuals died and 22 returned to Europe.<sup>4</sup> The minuteness of these numbers is quite apparent when compared to recent estimates for other large European countries, such as France (at least 1,700 fighters), Germany (940), the United Kingdom (around 850); and even when compared to less populous countries such as Belgium (470), Austria (300) and Sweden (300).<sup>5</sup>

#### DIFFERENT PATHWAYS OF RADICALIZATION

As in most Western countries, Italian jihadists constitute a very heterogeneous group. Most are men, but not all. For example, the Italian contingent of volunteers who travelled to Syria and Iraq included no less than 10 women<sup>6</sup>. Most are between 18-30 years old, but the group includes minors<sup>7</sup> and individuals in their fifties and even sixties<sup>8</sup>. A significant number of jihadists are “second generation immigrants”, as is common in many other Western countries, but most are still first-generation migrants. The contingent is also ethnically diverse, with cases encompassing individuals from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and South Asia.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Dossier Virinale - Ferragosto 2017*, Rome, Ministry of the Interior, 15 August 2017, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. A.P. Schmid and J. Tinnes, *Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective*, Research Paper, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), December 2015; B. Van Ginkel and E. Entenmann (eds), *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies*, Research Paper, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), April 2016; D.H. Heinke, “German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and Its Implications”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, Issue 3, 2017, pp. 17-22; R. Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Center, October 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Among others, Maria Giulia Sergio, an Italian convert who, after her departure in September 2014, settled in the self-proclaimed “caliphate” with her new Albanian husband; Meriam Rehaily, a young “second-generation immigrant” who left for Syria in July 2015; Lara Bombonati, an Italian convert who went to Syria with her Italian husband and after his death in December 2016 returned to Italy.

<sup>7</sup> For example, an unnamed member of a pro-IS cell of four Kosovars dismantled in Venice in March 2017. According to investigators, the cell planned to carry out terrorist attacks in the city.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Maria Giulia Sergio’s 60-year-old parents converted to an extremist version of Islam and were convinced to travel to Syria by their daughter. They were arrested by Italian police in July 2015 before their departure.



Northern Italian regions with large Muslim communities such as Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia Romagna are home to the lion's share of radicalization cases, but investigations uncovered individuals and networks in every region of Italy. Counterintuitively, a significant number of Italian jihadists do not reside in large metropolitan areas, but in small cities and rural areas<sup>9</sup> throughout the country.

While some Italian jihadists had troubled backgrounds with extensive criminal records<sup>10</sup> or histories of mental illness, others came from stable families and appeared to be well-integrated<sup>11</sup>. Some did not possess ties to other radicalized individuals in the physical space and instead operated solely online.<sup>12</sup> Others radicalized in small clusters<sup>13</sup> or established jihadist networks<sup>14</sup>. Interestingly, Italy has seen a negligible presence of pre-Syrian conflict militant Salafist groups such as *Sharia4Belgium* in Belgium or *al-Muhajiroun* (and its different aliases) in the UK. It is often argued that the absence of such groups in Italy contributed to the small size of its jihadist mobilization.

In substance, Italy has a jihadist scene that resembles that of other European countries, but which is substantially smaller in size. Nonetheless, over the course of the past 12 months, various incidents have increased Italian counterterrorism authorities' concerns as they reveal Italian links to foreign attacks and growth in the homegrown scene:

- Anis Amri, the Tunisian failed asylum seeker responsible for the December 2016 Christmas market attack in Berlin, reportedly started his radicalization process in the Italian prison system (a topic of substantial concern to Italian authorities). After the massacre, he returned in Italy

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, in December 2013 two jihadist foreign fighters of Balkan origin, Ismar Mesinovic and Munifer Karamaleski left two small mountain villages in the province of Belluno, not far from Venice, to go to Syria.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Monsef el-Mkhayar, a "second-generation immigrant" born in 1995 in Morocco, had family troubles and a criminal record. In January 2015 he joined IS in Syria.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Anas el Abboubi, a second-generation "born-again" Muslim joined the ranks of IS in September 2013, at the age of 20. He lived with his well-integrated Moroccan family in a small rural town near Brescia, in northern Italy.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Mouner el-Aoual (nicknamed Mido), a Moroccan illegal resident, was arrested in Turin in April 2017 for his suspected involvement in terrorist-related activities. Italian and US investigators argued that he was among the administrators of a high-level pro-IS Internet channel.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Ravenna, a mid-size city in north-central Italy, has seen a relatively large mobilization of Tunisian foreign fighters, all of whom had ties to each other. See L. Vidino, F. Marone and E. Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West*, ISPI / PoE-GWU / ICCT - The Hague, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> For example, a jihadist cell of Pakistani and Afghan citizens, based in Sardinia and other Italian regions, was dismantled in April 2015. 18 people were arrested or sought, including the alleged perpetrators of brutal attacks in Pakistan.



where he was killed in a shootout with police.

- Ismail Tommaso Ben Youssef Hosni, a homeless 20-year-old Italian citizen born in Milan to a Tunisian father and an Italian mother, stabbed a policeman and two soldiers with kitchen knives after they asked to see his identity papers at Milan's central train station on 18 May 2017. Hosni, who had a criminal record (specifically, for drug dealing), was reportedly under the influence of cocaine at the time of the incident. Italian authorities found that the young man was an Islamic State sympathizer, and that he was previously placed under investigation for suspected ties to international terrorism. At this stage, Italian authorities are still investigating whether Hosni was driven by a terrorist motive.
- Youssef Zaghba, one of the three members of the cell that launched the London Bridge attack on 3 June 2017, was born in Morocco to an Italian mother and had dual Italian-Moroccan citizenship. In March 2016, he was stopped at the Bologna airport while attempting to travel to Turkey, and possibly onward to Syria.
- Ahmed Hanachi, the Tunisian man who stabbed two women to death in Marseille, France on 1 October 2017, had lived in Aprilia, near Rome, for many years. His brother, Anis, who allegedly indoctrinated Ahmed and who fought with IS in Syria from 2014 to 2016, was arrested in Ferrara, in northern Italy, six days after the attack.

#### COUNTER-TERRORISM POLICY

Given Italy's long history of confronting domestic terrorism (such as the Red Brigades in the 1970s and early 1980s) and sophisticated criminal organizations (in particular, the Sicilian Mafia, the *Ndrangheta* and the *Camorra*),<sup>15</sup> Italian authorities developed skills and legal tools that are useful in confronting jihadist terrorism. Additionally, over the last few years, Italian lawmakers have passed various laws aimed at strengthening the country's already extensive counterterrorism legislation, and adapting it to the current threat.

In general, Italy gives priority to the criminal justice system in its approach to counter-terrorism, as Italian authorities have ample powers to conduct lengthy surveillance operations and pre-emptive raids. Deportation of foreign suspects, in particular, has been the cornerstone of Italy's counterterrorism strategy. In fact, two antiterrorism laws, adopted in 2005 and in 2015, expanded the hypotheses for the administrative deportation of non-EU citizens. Since January 2015, authorities have deported 221 individuals; 89 from January to October 2017 alone.

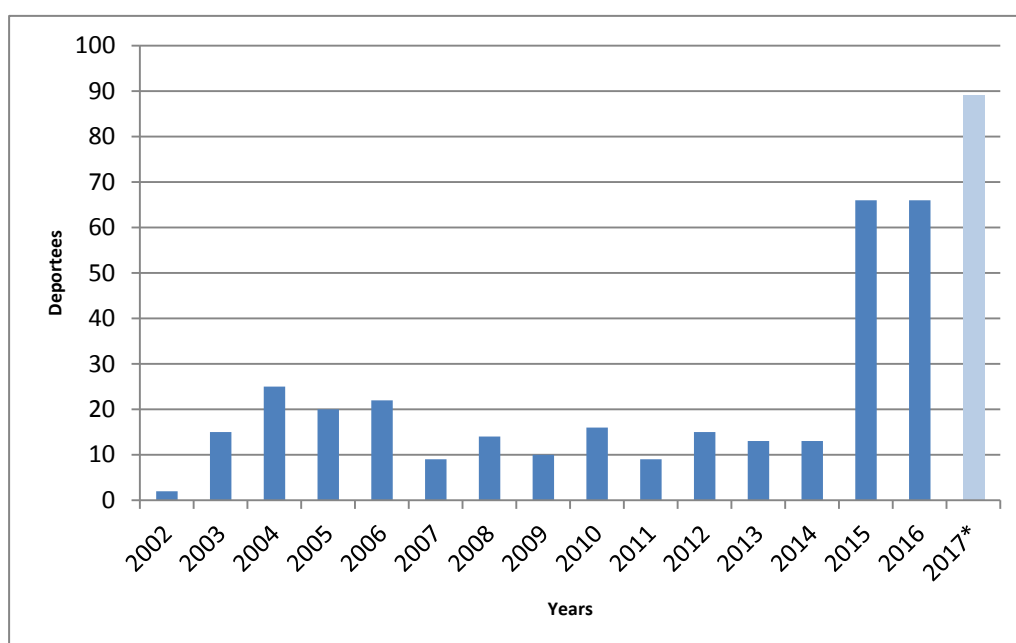
---

<sup>15</sup> F. Marone, *The Italian Way of Counterterrorism: From a Consolidated Experience to an Integrated Approach*, in S.N. Romaniuk *et al* (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 479-494.



Administrative deportations are often ordered when evidence against an individual is deemed insufficient for prosecution, but sufficient enough to determine that he/she may pose a threat to national security.<sup>16</sup> According to many experts, the wide use of this tool represents an important factor in maintaining low levels of radicalization in the country, as the use of fast-track deportations can help prevent the formation of extremist networks on national territory.

FIG. 1 - FOREIGN CITIZENS DEPORTED FROM ITALY FOR REASONS OF SECURITY  
(2002 - 31 OCTOBER 2017\*)



Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior

These hard-nosed, repressive tactics, however, have not been accompanied by an equally robust preventive approach. Unlike most Western countries, in fact, Italy has not developed any program or strategy aimed towards counter-radicalization or de-radicalization.<sup>17</sup> However, Italy's Lower House recently passed a bill in the summer of 2017, introducing "measures for the prevention of jihadist radicalization and extremism. The bill currently awaits final approval from the Upper House.

<sup>16</sup> F. Marone, *The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case*, ICCT – The Hague, March 2017.

<sup>17</sup> See L. Vidino, *L'Italia e il terrorismo in casa: che fare?*, Milan, ISPI, 2016.