

# Assessing Assumed Italian Exceptionalism *Vis-à-Vis* Jihadi Terrorism

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NEXTGEN 5.0



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## INTRODUCTION

Unlike<sup>1</sup> other European countries, Italy has not been particularly affected by Jihadi terrorism. As for the phenomenon of foreign fighters, Italian Jihadi combatants are considerably minor in size than their French, British, and Belgian counterparts. And besides a couple of dozen low-level thwarted or failed plots, there has been only one partially successful Jihadi-related attack on its soil since 9/11. In light of this, some Italian experts believe that fear of Jihadi terrorism is exaggerated<sup>2</sup> or even socially constructed<sup>3</sup> to favour precise international and domestic agendas. But as numerous pundits deem instead Jihadi terrorism as a worrisome matter, this essay assesses Italy's supposed exceptionalism when it comes to the lack of large-scale Jihadi attacks. Following a brief overview of the evolution of Italian Jihadism, this investigation explores Italy's seemingly exceptional condition, emphasizing strengths and weaknesses of its domestic milieu - particularly at the operational, legal, and social level. Although Italy might be currently safer than other European societies, not only could Rome turn into a prime target in the short/medium term; evidence also suggests that, in the long term, the risk of experiencing more serious dynamics of radicalisation is not minimal.

## THE EVOLUTION OF JIHADISM IN ITALY

Structured networks of first generation North African militants and small cluster of Al-Qaeda operatives were already active on Italian soil in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Aside from a few plots against Italy, these cells mainly used *il Belpaese* as a logistical platform to recruit, plan attacks, gather

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<sup>1</sup> First published in *Small Wars Journal*

<sup>2</sup> See D'Avanzo, G. 2006. *Il mercato della paura*. Torino: Einaudi; Massari, M. 2006. *Islamofobia. La paura e l'Islam*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

<sup>3</sup> See Massari, M. 2006. *Islamofobia. La paura e l'Islam*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

<sup>4</sup> Vidino, L. 2014. *Home-grown Jihadism in Italy: birth, development, and dynamics of radicalization*, ISPI, Milan. Pg.1

intelligence, and raise funds for operations committed abroad.<sup>5</sup> But in spite of significant Jihadi presence, the Italian milieu has been relatively safe throughout the 2000s. Whilst other European nations were grappling with Jihadi groups, including international and homegrown actors, a series of counter-terrorism investigations forced several Jihadi networks to decrease the intensity of their activities in Italy.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, “first generation” jihadists were not immediately replaced by a “second generation” of homegrown radicalised individuals, which began to emerge only in the late 2000s.<sup>7</sup> As such, the current panorama of Jihadism in Italy resembles that of other European countries, with traditional networks alongside small clusters and lone actors with homegrown characteristics. Yet, this is still significantly smaller in size and less sophisticated.<sup>8</sup>

## THE REASONS BEHIND THE ITALIAN EXCEPTIONALISM

There are six main reasons why Italy might be deemed as an exceptional case. First and foremost, Italy’s alleged security could be a matter of demographics. Historically, large-scale Muslim immigration to Italy began only in the late 1980s, decades later compared to other European realities.<sup>9</sup> Hence, not only is Italy home to fewer Muslims in

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<sup>5</sup> See Andreoli, M., 2005. *Il telefonista di Al Qaeda. La confessione del primo terrorista pentito della Jihad in Italia*. Milano: Dalai Editore; Groppi, M. 2017. The Growing Jihadi Terror Threat to Italy: How Italian Exceptionalism is Rapidly Diminishing. *CTC Sentinel West Point*, 10(5), pp.20-28; Groppi, M. 2015. *Dossier on the Italian Muslim Community: Index of Radicalisation*. [Italian]. CEMISS; Vidino, L. 2014. *Home-grown Jihadism in Italy: birth, development, and dynamics of radicalization* [Italian]. ISPI, Milan; Vidino, L. 2013. The Evolution of Jihadism in Italy: Rise and Homegrown Radicals. *CTC Sentinel West Point*, 6(11); Vidino, L. 2006. *Al Qaeda in Europe*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

<sup>6</sup> Vidino, L. 2014. Home-grown Jihadism in Italy: birth, development, and dynamics of radicalization, ISPI, Milan. Pg.1

<sup>7</sup> Vidino, L., and F., Marone, 2017. The Jihadist threat in Italy: a primer [Italian]. ISPI Analysis, Milan. Pg.3

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Vidino, L. 2014. Home-grown Jihadism in Italy: birth, development, and dynamics of radicalization, ISPI, Milan. Pg.8

absolute or per capita terms<sup>10</sup> smaller Muslim communities could also explain why Rome counts less foreign fighters (125) compared to France (1,700), Germany (940), the United Kingdom (850), and Belgium (470).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, while the latter feature larger amounts of second and third generations immigrants who are potentially more at risk of radicalization,<sup>12</sup> Italy mostly hosts first generation Muslim immigrants who, for the moment, have not carried out homegrown attacks.<sup>13</sup>

Second, Italy has not been on Jihadi groups' top hit-list. In truth, Italy has covered a significant role in the Islamic State's propaganda, being mentioned as a target multiple times.<sup>14</sup> But the Caliphate's mentioning of "Rome" or "Rumiyah" has mostly embodied Western Christendom rather than the Italian capital.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, out of 30 ISIS-related attacks on European soil in the last three years, none have stricken Italy. This could demonstrate that the Caliphate might have a hierarchy of attacks and, if that is the case, Rome does not appear to be more appealing than London, Paris, and Brussels. Aside from debatable theories arguing that Italian Mafias cooperate with Jihadi groups and deter terrorism,<sup>16</sup> Italian exceptionalism might be a result of ISIS's actual exploitation of Italy. In fact, not only has the Caliphate

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<sup>10</sup> Hackett, C., 2016. "5 Facts About the Muslim Population In Europe". *Pew Research Center*, [online] 19 July. Available at: <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/29/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/>>

<sup>11</sup> See Barrett, R., 2017. *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Center; Heinke, D. H., 2017. German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: The Updated Data and Its Implications. *CTC Sentinel West Point*, 10(3), pp. 17-23

<sup>12</sup> Dalgaard-Nielsen, A., 2010. Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33(9). Pg.800

<sup>13</sup> Marone, F., 2017. "The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case". *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, [online] 13 March. Available at: <<https://icct.nl/publication/the-use-of-deportation-in-counter-terrorism-insights-from-the-italian-case/>>

<sup>14</sup> Groppi, M. 2017. The Growing Jihadi Terror Threat to Italy: How Italian Exceptionalism is Rapidly Diminishing. *CTC Sentinel West Point*, 10(5). Pg.23

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> See *Panta Rhei Research*, 2018. "The Crime-Terror Nexus in Italy and Malta." *Working Paper*.

used Italy as a logistical/operational hub to recruit fighters and gather intelligence, but it has also infiltrated its borders with terrorists disguised as refugees.<sup>17</sup>

Third, at the domestic operational level, the responsiveness of security agencies has generally been efficient in countering terrorism. According to an interview with a senior official from *Carabinieri*,<sup>18</sup> Italy's remarkable experience and fight against organised crime and left/right-wing terrorism has granted police a "wealth" of experience in monitoring and surveillance of potential terrorists. With time, Italian authorities have gradually developed a sprawling structure on the territory too, which allows for greater control and favours information gathering.<sup>19</sup>

Fourth, Italy boasts sound counter-terrorist legislation. Expanding on Article 270 *bis* of the Penal Code, Article 270 *quinquies* allows to prosecute individuals who participate actively and/or marginally (training and different kinds of support, even in the virtual space) in any activity related to terrorism.<sup>20</sup> That is, this new form introduced in 2005 allows Italian authorities to intervene in very early stages of terrorism and radicalisation, pre-emptively punishing behaviours that precede and are functional to the commission of terrorist acts.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Italian officials can conduct lengthy surveillance operations, pre-emptive raids, and even preventive expulsions of foreign suspects. As a matter of fact, the use of administrative deportations have become the cornerstone of Italy's aggressive counterterrorism strategy, for it legalises expulsions of non-EU suspects when there is insufficient evidence against them for prosecution, but there is sufficient proof to determine that suspects

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<sup>17</sup> Groppi, M. 2017. The Growing Jihadi Terror Threat to Italy: How Italian Exceptionalism is Rapidly Diminishing. *CTC Sentinel West Point*, 10(5). Pg.25

<sup>18</sup> Author interview, anonymous senior Carabinieri official in Milan, February 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See Bricchetti, R., 2014. Codice penale e di procedura penale e leggi complementari. Il Sole 24 Ore S.p.A.

<sup>21</sup> Vidino, L. 2014. Home-grown Jihadism in Italy: birth, development, and dynamics of radicalization, ISPI, Milan. Pg.103

are a threat to national security.<sup>22</sup> With 258 foreign citizens that have been deported without trial since 2015 (Italian Ministry of Interior, 2018), Italy's use of administrative deportation has proved to be an important factor in maintaining low levels of radicalisation in the country, helping to prevent the formation of extremist networks on Italian soil,<sup>23</sup> and likely discouraging aspiring homegrown jihadists - especially those belonging to first-generation immigrants seeking better conditions for their families.<sup>24</sup>

Fifth, Italy lacks large, impoverished outskirts outside of major cities. Unlike France, Belgium or Britain, where large sections of the Muslim population often live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods torn by crime, poverty, and Jihadi visions, Italian ghettoised Muslim "inner-city" areas have yet to emerge.<sup>25</sup> Compared to zones like Saint-Denis in Paris, Molenbeek in Bruxelles or Tower Hamlets in London, Italian outskirts are less populous and ethnically more heterogeneous, where Muslim citizens equal only to 7% of the local population.<sup>26</sup> Although Italian Muslims mostly have low-income occupations, the unemployment average rate in Italian Muslim neighbourhoods numbers below 10%, while European outskirts average around 40%.<sup>27</sup> As such, it could be argued that, for the time being, better urban and social conditions within Italian Muslim neighbourhoods may contain potential feelings of frustration leading to radicalisation and terrorism.

Sixth, Italy's marginal involvement of Italy in the Middle East may also contribute in making the country a less appealing target. Although

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<sup>22</sup> Marone, F., 2017. "The Use of Deportation in Counter-Terrorism: Insights from the Italian Case". *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, [online] 13 March. Available at: <<https://icct.nl/publication/the-use-of-deportation-in-counter-terrorism-insights-from-the-italian-case/>>

<sup>23</sup> Vidino, L., and F., Marone, 2017. *The Jihadist threat in Italy: a primer* [Italian]. ISPI Analysis, Milan. Pg.7

<sup>24</sup> Groppi, M. 2017. *The Growing Jihadi Terror Threat to Italy: How Italian Exceptionalism is Rapidly Diminishing*. *CTC Sentinel West Point*, 10(5). Pg.25

<sup>25</sup> Groppi, M. 2016. *Da noi nessuna Molenbeek ma il futuro non è garantito.. Limes:Indagine sulle periferie*, April Issue. Pg.2

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

it has provided training and logistical assistance to several local forces in Iraq and Libya,<sup>28</sup> Italy has never actively participated in airstrikes like France and the UK. This may have positively affected the attitude of large portions of Muslim communities towards the nation. As a recent study by Groppi reveals,<sup>29</sup> “outrage at Western foreign policy” is not a significant driver behind the justification of religiously framed violence within the Italian Muslim community.

## THE THREAT TRAJECTORY

In spite of the provided evidence, Italy’s future vis-à-vis Jihadi terrorism might be more fragile than it seems. To begin with, the re-emergence of Balkan route and seemingly unstoppable migration flows could allow the Islamic State, which is expanding in Libya, to infiltrate Italy and establish clusters on its soil on a larger scale.<sup>30</sup> This could force Rome to increase its military efforts at a regional level, increasing inner Muslim resentment towards Italian foreign policy. In parallel, as claimed by a distinguished Parliamentary Commission,<sup>31</sup> the threat from homegrown jihadism is likely to increase, as the Web, the prison system, and women and converts are pivotal actors in triggering jihadi radicalisation.

Such changing scenarios might undermine the alleged Italian exceptionalism in a number of ways. Operationally, a potentially larger number of lone actors and clusters that are typically devoid of

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<sup>28</sup> Repubblica, 2016. “Libia, l’Italia invia un contingente di 300 uomini. E con gli alleati condanna attacchi ai pozzi”. [online] 12 September; Cadalanu, G., 2016. “Così l’Italia addestra le forze irachene che si preparano alla battaglia di Mosul”. *Repubblica*, [online] 10 May. Available at: [http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2016/05/10/news/cosi\\_l\\_italia\\_addestra\\_le\\_forze\\_irachene\\_che\\_si\\_preparano\\_alla\\_battaglia\\_di\\_mosul-139467580/](http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2016/05/10/news/cosi_l_italia_addestra_le_forze_irachene_che_si_preparano_alla_battaglia_di_mosul-139467580/) >

<sup>29</sup> Groppi, M. 2017. An Empirical Analysis of Causes of Islamist Radicalisation: Italian Case Study. *Perspective On Terrorism*, 11(1). Pg.74.

<sup>30</sup> Karmon, E., 2017. “New Trends in the Global Jihadi Offensive”. *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, [online] 30 May. Available at: <<https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2021/new-trends-in-the-global-jihadi-offensive#gsc.tab=0>>

<sup>31</sup> Commissione Parlamentare. (2017) In “Terrorismo, Gentiloni: ‘Rischio da carcere e web, ma fenomeno contenuto’”. *Il Fatto Quotidiano*.

organized structure could render monitoring, surveillance, and response arduous.<sup>32</sup> As a result, in the shorter term, Rome could become a much more appealing target and Italian authorities might not always be as successful as before in countering terrorism. Socially, Muslims are expected to increase by 102% by 2030; within this framework, unmet expectations, increasing xenophobia, and the emergence of impoverished and crime-torn outskirts outside of major cities could exacerbate and polarize an already divided Italian society. In the longer period, trapped between cultures, detached and frustrated second and third generation of Italian Muslims could fall prey to Jihadi visions.

These operational and social circumstances could negatively affect the Italian legal preventive system, finally. The increasing amount of converts and second/third generation Italian Muslims naturally hinders deportation processes, for Italian citizens cannot be expelled from the country, even if suspected or charged with terrorism accusations. Thus, both in the short and the long term, Italy might find itself unable to deal with potential Jihadis and extremists, eliminating, arguably, one of the most successful tools of its prevention policy. In this regard, if the nation ignores the above mentioned challenges and refrains from investing in more holistic prevention programs, particularly at the social level, Italy might become the next France.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This investigation has attempted to examine the case for Italian exceptionalism when it comes to Jihadi terrorism. As outlined, there are a number of factors behind this, including a relatively low number of foreign fighters and second generation immigrants; the fact that notwithstanding the repeated threats, international terrorist groups seem to still consider Italy as a useful logistical hub rather than a priority target; an efficient response of security agencies; an extensive use of administrative deportation of foreign suspects; less anger

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<sup>32</sup> Author interview, anonymous senior Carabinieri official in Milan, February 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Groppi, M. 2017. The Growing Jihadi Terror Threat to Italy: How Italian Exceptionalism is Rapidly Diminishing. *CTC Sentinel West Point*, 10(5). Pg.25

among Muslims community over the country's foreign policy; and finally, the lack of ghettoised "inner-city" areas where Muslim are more likely to experience a sense of marginalisation, alienation and discrimination that in turn may lead some of them to radicalise or even to embrace violence. Yet, Italy's future appears more fragile than it may seem. And considerable operational, social and legal challenges risk to undermine the effectiveness of its counterterrorism response measures in both short and long term.

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