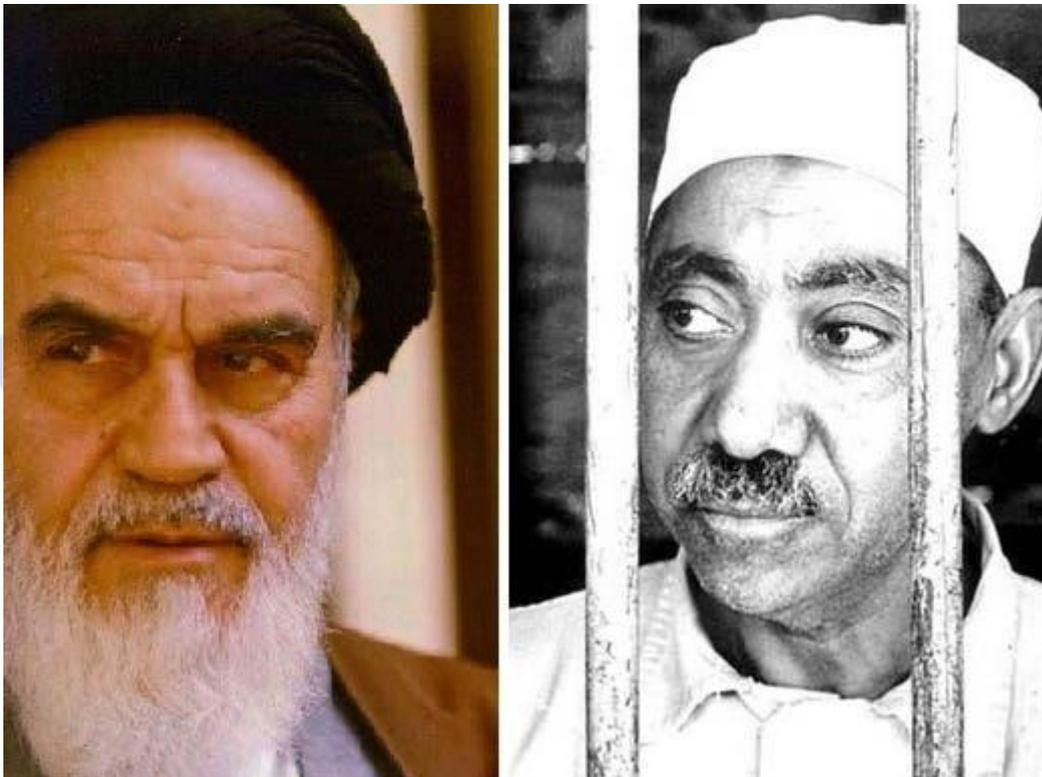


Muslim Brotherhood and Khomeinism in Italy: The Told and the Untold



By Dr. Tommaso Virgili and Giovanni Giacalone

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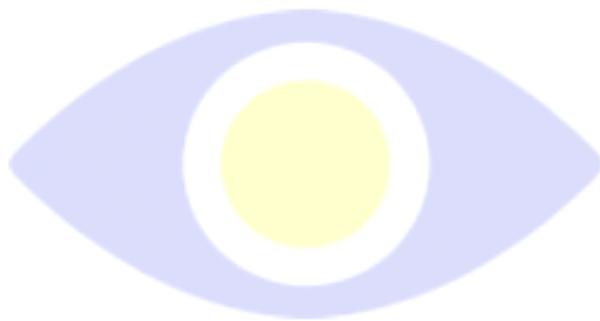
Cover image credit:

'Why Sayed Qutb inspired Iran's Khomeini and Khamenei', [Al-Arabiya English](#), 3 September 2018.

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European
Eye on
Radicalization

Europe and the Muslim Brotherhood: Is the Mood Changing?

On 10 February 2022, the European Commission, replying to a Parliamentary question, admitted to financing entities that can be traced back to the network of *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen*, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).¹ This was far from a first for the European Union (EU), which has a long record of support to MB-linked institutions. Among those, we find Islamic Relief, the Forum of Muslim Youth and Student Organizations (FEMYSO), the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (*Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France* or CCIF, dissolved by French authorities in connection with the murder of schoolteacher Samuel Paty in late 2020), the Islamic University of Gaza, the Lokahi Foundation, the Muslim Association of Ireland and even SETA, a think tank in Turkey connected to the ruling Justice and Development (AKP) party, which publishes a yearly *Islamophobia Report* – de facto, an MB tool to bash all criticism of the *Ikhwan* and their sympathizers.² Certainly, the Commission is in good company with national states in its support to MB entities.

As of late, however, the winds seem to have started changing. Since the beginning of the legislature in 2019, the European Parliament has grilled the Commission with dozens of questions on its support to the MB.³ At the national level, too, the MB product is starting to sell less well.

To take just the most recent occurrences: in November 2021, a scandal erupted due to a joint EU-Council of Europe campaign promoting the hijab as an “instrument of freedom”;⁴ the campaign saw, once again, the involvement of FEMYSO,⁵ and it led France to address a formal protest to the Council of Europe.⁶ In October 2021, the Austrian Ministry of Integration organized the “Vienna Forum on Countering Segregation and Extremism in Integration” – a high-profile gathering on political Islam that brought together ministers and experts on Islamism from several European countries.⁷

These episodes are in line with a wider recent tendency in Europe to recognize the dangers of non-violent Islamism: despite inconsistencies – it is not uncommon to see a state body or department cooperate with entities that another body or department warns against – many European countries have by now produced intelligence reports that unequivocally present the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in the West as a threat to liberal democratic values.⁸

What about Italy?

¹ ‘Parliamentary Questions’, European Parliament, 10 February 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2021-004897-ASW_EN.html

² Paul Stott and Tommaso Virgili, *Network of Networks: The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe* (European Conservatives and Reformists Group at the European Parliament, 2021), chap. 5, <https://ecrgroup.eu/files/MuslimBrotherhood.pdf>.

³ All publicly available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/parliamentary-questions.html>

⁴ Mayeul Aldebert and John Timsit, ‘La liberté dans le hijab’: une campagne de communication du Conseil de l’Europe fait polémique’, *Le Figaro*, 11 February 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/la-liberte-dans-le-hijab-une-campagne-de-communication-du-conseil-de-leurope-fait-polemique-20211102>.

⁵ Hadrien Brachet and Jean-Loup Adenor, ‘Derrière la campagne pro-voile du Conseil de l’Europe, la galaxie des frères musulmans’, 11 March 100AD, <https://www.marianne.net/societe/laicite-et-religions/derriere-la-campagne-pro-voile-du-conseil-de-leurope-la-galaxie-des-freres-musulmans>.

⁶ Aldebert and Timsit, ‘La liberté dans le hijab’.

⁷ ‘Große Konferenz Zu Politischem Islam in Wiener Innenstadt’, *Vienna.at*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.vienna.at/grosse-konferenz-zu-politischem-islam-in-wiener-innenstadt/7165066>.

⁸ Stott and Virgili, *Network of Networks: The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe*, chap. 4.

Muslim Brotherhood-Related Entities in Italy

While the scholarly and institutional debate on Islamism seems rather less advanced in Italy than in other European countries, this is certainly not due to the lack of material for discussion. The Islamist area that can be related to the *Ikhwan* has been present in the Italic Peninsula since the early 1970s, when Middle Eastern university students in Perugia – a number of whom were affiliates and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood – formed the Union of Muslim Students in Italy (USMI).⁹

The ideological posture of USMI emerged clearly from its first publications, where it translated the writings of MB ideologue Sayyid Qutb and his Subcontinental counterpart, Abu A'la al-Mawdudi, whose influence over the Islamist movement is often neglected in Western analysis.¹⁰ USMI “clearly aimed to strengthen the Islamic identity among the students or to promote a re-Islamization that included a political awareness based on radical Islamic ideology”.¹¹ As explained by Prof. Paolo Branca of Milan’s Catholic University, these publications unequivocally denounced the association’s ideology.¹²

USMI’s posture reflected a wider geopolitical context: in those years Islamist movements were strongly opposing Middle Eastern governments, and Middle Eastern students in Italy were reproducing the political and religious dynamics underway in their Arab countries of origin.¹³

Two decades later, these students, mainly Syrians, Jordanians, and Palestinians, became the major representatives of a new organization, born in 1990, known as the Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy (*Unione delle Comunità Islamiche d’Italia* or UCOII).¹⁴ A member of the Council of European Muslims (CEM), formerly known as the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE), UCOII is now “the flagship public organization of the Brotherhood milieu in Italy”.¹⁵

Such a premise is important to understand the ambiguous nature of UCOII: on the one hand, the organization is very active on the political and societal scene – as it attempts to become the main, if not the only, interlocutor of the Italian institutions – and on the other hand, it constantly generates controversies due to its connections with the Muslim Brotherhood (vainly denied¹⁶) and because of its problematic stances on sensitive issues.

For instance, in 2006, UCOII published a series of articles in different Italian newspapers where the Israeli bombing of Gaza was compared to the Nazi massacre of nearly 800 Italian civilians at Marzabotto in 1944, generating heavy protests within the Italian political arena, from some in the

⁹ Lorenzo Vidino, ‘Islam, Islamism, and Jihadism in Italy’, *Hudson Institute*, 4 August 2008, <http://www.hudson.org/research/9813-islam-islamism-and-jihadism-in-italy>.

¹⁰ Oved Lobel, ‘The Graveyard of Empires: The Causes and Consequences of American Withdrawal from Afghanistan’, *European Eye on Radicalization*, 4 August 2021, <https://eeradicalization.com/afghanistan-report-three-jihads-us-withdrawal-and-delusions-oved-lobel/>

¹¹ Andrea Pacini, ‘I Musulmani in Italia’ (University of Padua, 2001), 10, <http://www.cestim.it/argomenti/02islam/02islam-relazione-pacini.pdf>. Own translation from Italian.

¹² As quoted by P. Branca, ‘L’Islam in Italia. Appartenenze religiose plurali e strategie diversificate’ in ‘L’Islam trasmesso: pubblicazioni musulmane in Italia’, Turin conference, 2 and 3 December 2004; <http://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/163732/lislam-in-italia-appartenenze-religiose-plurali-e-strategie-diversificate>

¹³ Pacini, ‘I Musulmani in Italia’, 10.

¹⁴ Vidino, ‘Islam, Islamism, and Jihadism in Italy’.

¹⁵ Lorenzo Vidino and Sergio Altuna, *The Muslim Brotherhood’s Pan-European Structure* (Austrian Fund for the Documentation of Religiously Motivated Extremism (Documentation Centre Political Islam), 2021), 153, https://www.dokumentationsstelle.at/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report_EU_Strukturen_final.pdf.

¹⁶ ‘Usa: Piccardo (Ucoii), Mai Fatto Parte Dei Fratelli Musulmani’, *Adnkronos*, 20 September 2011, http://www1.adnkronos.com/Archivio/AdnAgenzia/2001/09/20/Cronaca/USA-PICCARDO-UCOII-MAI-FATTO-PARTE-DI-FRATELLI-MUSULMANI_162200.php.

media, and from the Jewish community.¹⁷ Those responsible for the campaign were Nour Dachan (*v. infra*) and alleged¹⁸ UCOII co-founder Roberto Hamza Piccardo. The latter has raised numerous other controversies: he has endorsed polygamy,¹⁹ claimed that Israel has no right to exist,²⁰ praised radical preachers,²¹ and most recently called the Taliban “partners in faith” victorious against “Western colonizers” and their Afghan collaborators.²²

In 2013, at the time of the overthrow of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi, some members of the youth section of UCOII, the Young Muslims of Italy (*Giovani Musulmani d’Italia* or GMI), became active in support of the ousted Islamist government. Among those was Ahmed Abdel Aziz, at the time vice-president of GMI and coordinator and founder of the Committee for Freedom and Democracy in Egypt. Ahmed and his brother Omar were pictured with Egyptian MB member Salah Sultan inside the headquarter of the Islamic Alliance of Italy (*Alleanza Islamica d’Italia* or AII). Omar Abdel Aziz was also photographed in the Rabaa al-Adawiyya square in Cairo in July 2013 next to Salah Sultan and even used that picture as cover photo on his Facebook account.

Alleanza Islamica, too, is a member of CEM, and it is also blacklisted as a terrorist group by the United Arab Emirates.²³ Lorenzo Vidino defines it “the inner core of the Brotherhood milieu in Italy”.²⁴ The association’s headquarters is in Viale Monza 50, in Milan, which has hosted GMI and the Coordination of Islamic Associations in Milan (*Coordinamento Associazioni Islamiche Milanesi* or CAIM), at the time directed by Davide Piccardo, the son of Roberto Hamza Piccardo. Davide constantly took positions in favour of Mohamed Morsi and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with various comments on Facebook and photographs taken at rallies.²⁵

Another former member of the directive board of CAIM and Islamic Relief Italia, Moroccan citizen Yassine Baradai, is today the national secretary of UCOII. In August 2020, Baradai claimed that Christianity and Judaism are “heresies” which “manipulate the original message of the prophets”, and that “Islam came on earth to correct the mistakes made in the earlier Holy Scriptures (Torah and the Gospels).”²⁶

¹⁷ Virginia Piccolillo, ‘Gaza come Marzabotto». Bufera sull’Ucoii’, *Corriere della Sera*, 20 agosto 2006, https://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Politica/2006/08_Agosto/20/piccolillo.shtml. Carmelo Lopapa, ‘Ucoii, Inserzione a Pagamento Sui Giornali “Stragi Israeliane Come Quelle Naziste”’, *La Repubblica*, 20 agosto 2006, <https://www.repubblica.it/2006/08/sezioni/esteri/medio-oriente-16/ucoii/ucoii.html>.

¹⁸ He only joined later according to UCOII representative Izzedin Elzir and former member Yassine Baradai. Personal communications.

¹⁹ ‘Poligamia, Piccardo (Ucoii): “E’ un diritto civile”. Salvini: “Vai a casa tua”’, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 8 June 2016,

<http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2016/08/06/poligamia-piccardo-ucoii-e-un-diritto-civile-non-condivido-le-relazioni-gay-eppure-sono-lecite/2960482/>.

²⁰ Hamza Roberto Piccardo, Piccardo: se non è moderato non è islam, interview by Stefano Lorenzetti, *Panorama*, 22 September 2005, <https://www.informazionecorretta.com/main.php?mediaId=14&sez=120&id=14226&print=preview>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Hamza Roberto Piccardo, ‘Il ritorno dei Talebani: contro i popoli non si vince’, *La Luce*, 15 August 2021, <https://www.laluce.news/2021/08/15/il-ritorno-dei-talebani-contro-i-popoli-non-si-vince/>.

²³ ‘UAE Blacklists 82 Groups as “Terrorist”’, *Al Arabiya*, 15 November 2014, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2014/11/15/UAE-formally-blacklists-82-groups-as-terrorist>.

²⁴ Vidino and Altuna, *The Muslim Brotherhood’s Pan-European Structure*, 153.

²⁵ Screenshots and pictures in the authors’ possession.

²⁶ Bepi Pezzulli, ‘The Muslim Brotherhood Covets a Presence in Italy’, *Times of Israel*, accessed 18 March 2022, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-muslim-brotherhood-covets-a-presence-in-italy/>. Giovanni Giacalone, ‘Le accuse del leader islamico: cristiani ed ebrei sono “eretici”’, *Il Giornale*, 31 August 2020, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/segretario-ucoii-ebraismo-e-cristianesimo-storpiature-ed-1886534.html>. Valentina Colombo, ‘A Mosque for Everyone? Only for the Muslim Brotherhood’, *European Foundation for Democracy* (blog), 18 December 2014, <https://www.europeandemocracy.eu/news/a-mosque-for-everyone-only-for-the-muslim-brotherhood/>.

The Imam of the Great Mosque in Rome, Abdellah Redouane, strongly criticized Baradai's statements.²⁷ Just two months before, in June 2020, Redouane had publicly denounced UCOII on Facebook, defining its former president (and current president emeritus), Syrian doctor Mohamed Nour Dachan, as "the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Italy". Redouane also accused UCOII of attacking those Islamic groups that do not want to be under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, and he confuted UCOII's claims of being the voice of majoritarian Islam in Italy.²⁸

This was a serious blow to UCOII for two reasons. Firstly, because it came from a very important institutional authority within Islam. As a matter of fact, the Great Mosque of Rome is the only Islamic centre recognized as a religious entity by the Italian institutions; its board of directors is mainly composed of ambassadors from Sunni Muslim countries to Italy or the Vatican.²⁹ Secondly, because it was the first time that a very influential voice within organized Islam publicly connected UCOII to the Muslim Brotherhood, denouncing its *modus operandi* and even naming specific high-ranking members.

These were neither the first nor the most serious "slip-ups" that involved UCOII and its galaxy. On various occasions, its leaders have issued invitations to radical preachers such as Wagdy Ghoneim³⁰ (better known for his praise of jihad,³¹ his antisemitic³² and anti-Christian rants,³³ and his praise of female genital mutilation³⁴); Riyadh al-Bustanji³⁵ (who brought his daughter to Gaza to "learn jihad and martyrdom"³⁶); Tareq al-Suwaidan³⁷ (blacklisted from the Schengen space due to his viciously antisemitic statements³⁸); and Aid al-Qarni³⁹ (whose views include: "Allah will destroy the Jews and their helpers from among the Christians and the Communists, and He will turn them into the Muslims' spoils" and, "Throats must be slit and skulls must be shattered. This is the path to victory, to *shahada*, and to sacrifice."⁴⁰).

²⁷ 'Volano stracci islamici. "Cristiani eretici", il discorso choc che fa litigare i musulmani italiani', *Il Tempo*, 1 September 2020, <https://www.iltempo.it/attualita/2020/09/01/news/islam-cristianesimo-eresia-frasi-choc-yassine-baradai-ucorii-replica-abdellah-redouane-grande-moschea-roma-24384670/>.

²⁸ Giovanni Giacalone, 'La Grande Moschea di Roma all'Ucoii: "Siete Fratelli Musulmani"', *Il Giornale*, 6 December 2020, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/grande-moschea-roma-allucoii-siete-fratelli-musulmani-1869880.html>. Pezzulli, 'The Muslim Brotherhood Covets a Presence in Italy'.

²⁹ A. Pacini, "I musulmani in Italia", Report held at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Padua in the context of seminar on Islam in Europe and in the world, organized by GRIM (Research Group on Islam e modernity), 29 January 2001, p.12

³⁰ Piccardo, *Se non è moderato non è Islam*.

³¹ 'Wagdy Ghoneim Praises Jihad On Hamas TV', *The Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Watch*, 3 July 2010, <https://www.globalmbwatch.com/2010/03/07/wagdy-ghoneim-praises-jihad-on-hamas-tv/>.

³² 'Ghoneim: No to the Jews', *The Investigative Project on Terrorism*, 24 May 1998, <http://www.investigativeproject.org/567/ghoneim-no-to-the-jews>.

³³ 'Egyptian Islamist Wagdy Ghoneim on Slaughter of Copts in Libya: Treachery Runs in Christians' Blood', *MEMRI*, 19 February 2015, <https://www.memri.org/tv/egyptian-islamist-wagdy-ghoneim-slaughter-copts-libya-treachery-runs-christians%E2%80%99-blood>.

³⁴ 'Wagdy Ghoneim', *The Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Watch*, 17 January 2015, <https://www.globalmbwatch.com/wagdy-ghoneim/>.

³⁵ Alberto Giannoni, 'A Milano l'imam dei martiri. Gli ebrei: "Pisapia si dissoci"', *Il Giornale*, 8 September 2013, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/milano/milano-limam-dei-martiri-ebrei-pisapia-si-dissoci-942133.html>.

³⁶ 'Jordanian Cleric Riyadh Al-Bustanji: I Brought My Daughter to Gaza to Learn Jihad and Martyrdom-Seeking', *MEMRI*, 22 June 2012, <https://www.memri.org/tv/jordanian-cleric-riyadh-al-bustanji-i-brought-my-daughter-gaza-learn-jihad-and-martyrdom-seeking>.

³⁷ Valentina Colombo, 'Islam in Italia: Comandano i Fratelli Musulmani', *Informazione Corretta*, 31 March 2016, <https://www.informazionecorretta.com/main.php?mediaId=115&sez=120&id=61912>.

³⁸ 'Interrogazione a Risposta Immediata n. 3-02158 Dell'On. Le Molteni: Iniziative Volte a Negare l'ingresso Nel Territorio Nazionale Ad Un Noto Predicatore Islamico Kuwaitiano Di Tendenze Radicali e Antisemite' (Camera dei Deputati, 6 April 2016), <http://brigguglio.asgi.it/immigrazione-e-asilo/2016/aprile/interrogazione-molteni-alfano.pdf>.

³⁹ Giovanni Giacalone, 'Il presidente Ucoii alla Camera: osannava predicatore islamista che incitava alla jihad', *Il Giornale*, 17 July 2018, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/conferenza-stampa-ucorii-camera-direttivo-inquietante-1554535.html>.

⁴⁰ 'Following Reports by MEMRITV: Saudi Cleric Retracts Antisemitic Statements', *MEMRI*, 30 March 2005, <https://www.memri.org/reports/following-reports-memritv-saudi-cleric-retracts-antisemitic-statements>.

The war in Syria that resulted from the savage crackdown by Bashar al-Assad's government on peaceful protests in 2011 has represented a litmus test for a milieu where opposition to Assad is widespread. It is worth recalling that, in 1982, Bashar's father, Hafez, massacred thousands of people in Hama to suppress an insurrection led by the Muslim Brotherhood and a radical splinter known as the Fighting Vanguard of the Holy Warriors (*al-Tala'i al-Muqatila lil-Mujahideen*).⁴¹ It is therefore neither surprising nor blameworthy *per se* that, after uprising was transformed into a civil war, UCOII's members strongly voiced their support for the Syrian opposition; most of the international community took the same view. Certain friendships, however, have proven problematic. In particular, the Dachan family was in close contacts with Ammar Bacha and Haisam Sakhanh,⁴² members of an anti-Assad group in Milan who would later become foreign fighters for the jihadist groups who joined the insurgency in Syria.⁴³ One daughter of Nour Dachan was romantically involved with Bacha, while another was featured speaking close to Sakhanh during an anti-Assad demonstration in Milan (along with Bacha, he had already been arrested for an attempted assault on the Syrian Embassy in Rome).⁴⁴ Bacha and Sakhanh later became comrades in arms with jihadists in Syria – but this did not put an end to their contacts with their Italian friends, who kept praising them publicly on social media.⁴⁵ Sakhanh is currently serving a lifelong prison sentence in Sweden for international terrorism.⁴⁶



⁴¹ Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 101-4.

⁴² Francesca Totolo, 'La corte dei miliziani jihadisti e dei "ribelli moderati" in Italia (prima parte)', *Il Primato Nazionale*, 29 March 2021, <https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/approfondimenti/corte-miliziani-jihadisti-ribelli-moderati-in-italia-prima-parte-187349/>; Francesca Totolo, 'La corte dei miliziani jihadisti e dei "ribelli moderati" in Italia: i Dachan (seconda parte)', *Il Primato Nazionale*, 30 March 2021, <https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/approfondimenti/corte-miliziani-jihadisti-ribelli-moderati-italia-dachan-seconda-parte-187536/>.

⁴³ Rodolfo Casadei, 'I jihadisti di Cologno Monzese che combattono per il califfato in Siria', *Tempi*, 22 September 2013, <https://www.tempi.it/siria-jihadisti-italia-cologno-monzese-califfato-assad/>.

⁴⁴ Giorgio Borghetti, 'Quei dubbi sulla giornalista siriana che Mattarella vuole premiare', *Il Giornale*, 6 February 2019, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/premio-conferito-mattarella-giornalista-islamista-scatena-1704892.html>; Viceministro dell'Interno Filippo Bubbico, 'Interrogazione a Risposta Scritta C. 4/01996', *Open Parlamento*, 7 August 2014, <https://parlamento17.openpolis.it/atto/documento/id/83277>.

⁴⁵ Totolo, 'La corte dei miliziani jihadisti e dei "ribelli moderati" in Italia (prima parte)'; Totolo, 'La corte dei miliziani jihadisti e dei "ribelli moderati" in Italia'; Francesca Totolo, 'La corte dei miliziani jihadisti e dei "ribelli moderati" in Italia (terza parte)', *Il Primato Nazionale*, 4 August 2021, <https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/cronaca/corte-miliziani-jihadisti-ribelli-moderati-italia-terza-parte-188739/>.

⁴⁶ Borghetti, 'Quei dubbi sulla giornalista siriana che Mattarella vuole premiare'.

Islamogauchisme

The centre-Left Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico* or PD) has on many occasions shown its sympathies toward Islamist actors. In June 2012, PD candidate (now MP) Lia Quartapelle published (and later removed) a post entitled “Siamo tutti Fratelli Musulmani” (We Are All Muslim Brothers), wherein she defended the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Quartapelle, in particular, sided with the MB against the Egyptian Constitutional Court that had dissolved the Parliament due to the unconstitutionality of the electoral law.⁴⁷ Echoing the protest of the Brotherhood, which held many of the seats deemed unlawful,⁴⁸ Quartapelle condemned the “coupist” verdict and the consequent decision of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to hold the interim legislative power until the election of the new parliament. She (wrongly⁴⁹) compared the situation to the Algerian one in 1991, where the army cancelled the second round of elections and took over the government when it became clear the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut* or FIS) would emerge victorious, and she even made a parallel with the Western refusal to engage with the “legitimate winners” of the 2006 elections in the Palestinian areas, the local MB branch Hamas, a recognized terrorist group by many states. “Whoever supports democracy in the world today, cannot but support the Muslim Brotherhood”, she wrote.⁵⁰

A few years later, Quartapelle politically backed PD candidate Sumaya Abdel Qader at the 2016 municipal elections in Milan. Abdel Qader is the daughter of one of UCOII’s founders, and she has served in several MB-linked institutions, including CAIM, FIOE and FEMYSO.⁵¹ In June 2016, the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale* exposed Facebook posts of Abdel Qader’s mother in support of Hamas,⁵² while Sumaya’s husband, Abdallah Kabakebbji, a former member of GMI, had generated controversy due to a Facebook post where he called Israel an historical and political mistake to be amended through a “ctrl+alt+canc (sic.)” – which caused strong protests among the Jewish community and some in the political arena.⁵³

The party’s decision to put Abdel Qader forward was strongly criticized by liberal Muslim Maryan Ismail, at the time in the PD as well. Ismail publicly denounced the relations between the party and some individuals related to the *Ikhwan*’s galaxy. Abdel Qader and the PD reacted with a lawsuit, but, after a preliminary investigation, the judge decided that the information provided by Ismail was not based on malicious allusions but rather on evidence-based facts.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ ‘Egypt: Supreme Constitutional Court Decision Dissolves One-Third of the Parliament’, web page, Library of Congress, 18 June 2012, <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2012-06-18/egypt-supreme-constitutional-court-decision-dissolves-one-third-of-the-parliament/>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ For a clear comparative analysis, Sabrina Gasparrini, ‘Il Medio Oriente visto dal Cairo’, podcast (Radio Radicale, 20 June 2012), <https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/355159/il-medio-oriente-visto-dal-cairo>.

⁵⁰ Lia Quartapelle, ‘Siamo Tutti Fratelli Musulmani’, qdR Magazine (archived), 26 June 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20120626200103/https://qdrmagine.it/2012/6/19/66_quartapelle.aspx.

⁵¹ Vidino and Altuna, *The Muslim Brotherhood’s Pan-European Structure*, 157.

⁵² Giorgio Borghetti, ‘I Post Imbarazzanti Della Madre Di Sumaya’, *Il Giornale*, 16 June 2016, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/milano/i-post-imbarazzanti-madre-sumaya-1272533.html>.

⁵³ Luciano Capone, ‘I Fratelli musulmani non sono lontani. L’islam politico agita le elezioni a Milano’, *Il Foglio*, 18 May 2016, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2016/05/18/news/i-fratelli-musulmani-non-sono-lontani-lislam-politico-agita-le-elezioni-a-milano-96250/>.

⁵⁴ Luca Fazzo, ‘La consigliera velata Pd che sostiene Sala è legata agli islamisti’, *Il Giornale*, 3 July 2019, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/consigliera-velata-pd-che-sostiene-sala-legata-agli-islamisti-1658010.html>. Alberto Giannoni, ‘Islam estremo, Sala smetta di difenderlo’, *Il Giornale*, 3 August 2019, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/milano/islam-estremo-sala-smetta-difenderlo-1658678.html>. Luca De Vito, ‘Perde Sumaya Abdel Qader’, *La Repubblica*, 7 March 2019, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2019/03/07/perde-sumaya-abdel-qader-vicina-ai-fratelli-musulmaniMilano09.html>.

In those same elections, the PD put forward Sameh Meligy, another candidate from Milan's Islamist environment, who proudly posted on his Facebook account a photograph of himself with mayoral candidate Beppe Sala and the comment "It's official, I'm running for municipality 4". However, Meligy withdrew his candidacy as the media exposed his membership in the Italian Islamic Alliance and his links to Islamist extremists, such as Kuwaiti preacher Tareq Suwaidan.⁵⁵

The refugee crisis a decade ago was another catalyst of cosy relations between the PD and the MB galaxy. In 2014, the municipality of Milan entrusted UCOIL-linked Islamic Centre of Cascina Gobba and the Turkish MB equivalent Millî Görüş with the reception of Syrian refugees, and it later doubled down by relying on CAIM to host asylum seekers in an area assigned to CAIM for Friday prayers.⁵⁶

Staying in the area of migration, in May 2016 PD club "Il Ponte" in Padua, together with Hind Talibi (Islamic Community of Padua) organized a conference on integration inviting sociologist Stefano Allievi (another supporter of Abdel Qader at the municipal elections⁵⁷) and Roberto Hamza Piccardo.⁵⁸ There is no need to repeat here Piccardo's positions on different topics, simply to say that they raise quite a few doubts about his capacity and willingness to make a positive contribution to the integration of Muslims.



⁵⁵ Cristina Giudici, 'Da amico dell'imam antisemita a (quasi) candidato. Il Pd a Milano va nel caos su integralismo e islam politico', accessed 23 April 2022, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/italia/2016/05/03/news/da-amico-dell-imam-antisemita-a-quasi-candidato-il-pd-a-milano-va-nel-caos-su-integralismo-e-islam-politico-95674/>.

⁵⁶ Elisa Banfi, *Welfare Activities by New Religious Actors: Islamic Organisations in Italy and Switzerland* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 174.

⁵⁷ Stefano Allievi and Ilda Curti, 'Chi ha paura di Sumaya? E perché?', Stefano Allievi, 21 May 2016, <https://stefanoallievi.it/anno/chi-ha-paura-di-sumaya-e-perche/>.

⁵⁸ Screenshots and pictures in authors' possession.

Sunni and Shia Islamists in Italy: A New Unholy Alliance?

The latest twist in the Italian Islamist scene is the construction of organic links between Sunni and Shia Islamist organizations. In a recent meeting of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue at Regione Lombardia, Ali Faeznia, president of the Imam Ali Cultural Centre (Shia) entrusted Mohamed Asfa (Sunni imam of Via Padova Mosque), and Ali Abu Shwaima (Sunni imam of Segrate Mosque) as his delegates. Shwaima and Asfa have also been designated by Milli Görüş.⁵⁹

The Imam Ali Centre is not generically Shia; it is Khomeinist. Khomeinism is the state theology of the Islamic Republic of Iran and is named after its founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989).⁶⁰ Among its recent events, the Centre has celebrated the anniversary of the “victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran” at the presence of the Iranian consul,⁶¹ and a commemoration of Qassem Sulaymani, the leader of Iran’s terrorism forces who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2020, including a vow of “revenge” against the perpetrators of his killing.⁶² Among the Centre’s associates are neo-fascists who praise the Iranian regime, Hezbollah, Assad, and Hamas.⁶³

As to the Sunni representatives designated by Faeznia, they have long been known in the UCOII circuit and beyond. Abu Shwaima has a long curriculum in Muslim-Brotherhood-related entities. In Italy, he was a founding member of USMI and then of UCOII, as well as first president of the FIOE-linked Islamic Waqf. Abroad, he was a founding member of the European Institute of Human Sciences (*Institut Européen de Sciences Humaines* or IESH) and sat in the board of FIOE.⁶⁴ He is also known for his endorsement of polygamous marriages and for claiming that it is “indecent” for a woman to ride a bike.⁶⁵ Furthermore, he has been investigated over illegal circumcisions performed at his mosque.⁶⁶

Mahmoud Asfa, a Jordanian with Italian citizenship, is currently the president of the House of Islamic Culture (*Casa della Cultura Islamica* or CCI). Milan-based, it was founded in 1993 and it has engaged in dialogue with many Catholic, Buddhist, and Jewish groups of the Forum of Religions in Milan. Previously with UCOII, in 2008 Asfa distanced himself from the organization.⁶⁷ In May 2020, during an interview with the online newspaper *Il Giornale*, Asfa made some controversial statements regarding Hamas, which he claimed to know extremely well and defined as “an organization recognized throughout the Arab Muslim world that is fighting for the liberation of its country”.⁶⁸ Asfa was also photographed at pro-Palestinian rallies next to Mohammed Hannoun, president of the Charitable Association for Solidarity with the Palestinian People (*Associazione benefica per la solidarietà*

⁵⁹ Alberto Giannoni, ‘Alleanze, Liti e “Strani” Leader. Rebus Islamico Nella Consulta’, *Il Giornale – Milano*, 4 March 2022.

⁶⁰ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism Essays on the Islamic Republic*, (California University Press, 1993).

⁶¹ Centro Culturale Imam Ali, ‘Cerimonia del quarantaduesimo anniversario della vittoria della rivoluzione islamica dell’Iran’, Instagram, 9 February 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CLFpjx_HM7b/.

⁶² Matteo Pugliese, ‘The Radicalization of the Shia Community in Italy: A Threat That Should Be Addressed’, *European Eye on Radicalization*, 13 November 2020, <https://eeradicalization.com/the-radicalization-of-the-shia-community-in-italy-a-threat-that-should-be-addressed/>.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Vidino and Altuna, *The Muslim Brotherhood’s Pan-European Structure*, p. 154.

⁶⁵ Alberto Giannoni, *Le donne che fermeranno la jihad: La sfida all’islam politico lanciata da Maryan Ismail e dalle altre voci libere* (Algama, 2021), 23.

⁶⁶ Pier Francesco Fedrizzi, ‘Segrate, mutilazioni religiose condannati Imam e medici’, *La Repubblica*, 20 February 2001, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2001/02/20/segrate-mutilazioni-religiose-condannati-imam-medici.html>.

⁶⁷ ‘Intellettuali islamici schierati con Asfa: «Segnale positivo il premio all’imam»’, *Il Giornale*, 21 November 2009, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/intellettuali-islamici-schierati-asfa-segnale-positivo.html>.

⁶⁸ Giovanni Giacalone, ‘La frase choc: “Quando gli israeliani uccidono migliaia di palestinesi non è terrorismo?”’, *Il Giornale*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/intervista-mahmoud-asfa-imam-padova-milano-1864079.html>. Own translation from Italian.

con il popolo palestinese or ABSPP).⁶⁹ ABSPP, which the Israeli domestic security agency Shin Bet (or SHABAK) classifies as the Italian emissary of the Hamas-linked Union of Good,⁷⁰ had its bank accounts shut down in December 2021 due to a series of suspicious transactions possibly directed to Hamas.⁷¹

While it is not novel to witness friendly exchanges between Sunni and Shia Islamists,⁷² the establishment of organic links welding together Khomeinists, UCOII, and Milli Görüş marks a noteworthy evolution that is in line with dynamics already seen in other European countries.⁷³ A relevant example comes from Germany, and specifically from the Islamic Centre of Hamburg (IZH), whose chairman (a self-claimed former member of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps or IRGC⁷⁴) was, in fact, invited as a guest speaker at the fourth annual conference of the Imam Ali Centre in Milan.⁷⁵ While the IZH is, in the words of the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), “an instrument of the Iranian government”,⁷⁶ it is also part of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD), which has been defined “the umbrella organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in Germany”.⁷⁷ Furthermore, IZH founder Abdul-Karim Grimm was married to Fatima Grimm, who was in charge of the publications of the MB-linked Islamic Centre of Munich.⁷⁸



⁶⁹ Pictures in authors' possession.

⁷⁰ Israeli Security Agency, 'The Union of Good – Analysis and Mapping of Terror Funds Network', n.d., https://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/english/TerrorInfo/coalition_en.pdf.

⁷¹ Massimiliano Coccia, “Finanzia Hamas”: bloccati i conti a una Onlus di Genova', *La Repubblica*, 12 September 2021, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2021/12/09/news/finanzia_hamas_bloccati_i_conti_a_una_onlus_di_genova-329600616/.

⁷² For instance, Imam Ali Centro Culturale di Milano, 'La Festa della profezia del profeta dell'islam', Telegram, 3 March 2022, https://t.me/culturale_imamali/2356. Centro Culturale Imam Ali, 'Presentazione “Medio Oriente: dall'egemonia USA alla Resistenza Islamica”', 8 November 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CWAreFbLO9Z/>.

⁷³ A relevant example is the Islamic Centre of Hamburg, an Iranian entity connected to the MB milieu. See Birgit Gärtner, 'Eine Erfolgsgeschichte Der Muslimbruderschaft', Heise, 10 January 2021, <https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Eine-Erfolgsgeschichte-der-Muslimbruderschaft-5019447.html?seite=all>. See also Susanne Schröter, *Antisemitisch, Antidemokratisch, Islamistisch. Das “Islamische Zentrum Hamburg” Und Radikale Schiitische Netzwerke in Deutschland* (AJC Berlin Ramer Institute, 2019), 7, https://ajcgermany.org/system/files/document/AJC-Berlin_IZH-Broschuere_43S_A5%281%29.pdf.

⁷⁴ Susanne Schröter, 'Antisemitisch, Antidemokratisch, Islamistisch. Das “Islamische Zentrum Hamburg” Und Radikale Schiitische Netzwerke in Deutschland', 2019, 7, https://ajcgermany.org/system/files/document/AJC-Berlin_IZH-Broschuere_43S_A5%281%29.pdf.

⁷⁵ Centro Culturale Imam Ali, '4a edizione della Conferenza Imam Ali', Instagram, 9 March 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BuyDGdsHB04/>.

⁷⁶ Schröter, 'Antisemitisch, Antidemokratisch, Islamistisch. Das “Islamische Zentrum Hamburg” Und Radikale Schiitische Netzwerke in Deutschland', 8.

⁷⁷ Guido Steinberg, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in Germany', in *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Organization and Policies of a Global Islamist Movement*, ed. Barry M. Rubin, 1st ed, Middle East in Focus (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 152.

⁷⁸ Birgit Gärtner, 'Eine Erfolgsgeschichte Der Muslimbruderschaft', Heise, 10 January 2021, <https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Eine-Erfolgsgeschichte-der-Muslimbruderschaft-5019447.html?seite=all>.

What Islamists Want – and What They Should Not Get

Islamist organizations in Italy share not only similar ideological tenets, but also similar objectives – namely, public recognition, representation, and access to public funding. While the Ministry of Interior excluded UCOII from the previous Committee for An Italian Islam, the organization now sits at the ministerial table of the new Permanent National Consultation for Religions, Culture and Integration, where it has signed the National Pact for An Italian Islam – the precondition for official recognition. Either directly or through its local members, it has also stipulated agreements with national and local authorities on key issues, such as deradicalization activities in prisons⁷⁹ and reception of refugees.⁸⁰ Stipulating an agreement (*Intesa*) with the state would mean for UCOII access to generalized public funding, representation and therefore power, easier penetration into an array of public entities (such as hospitals, schools, prisons, the army, etc.), and potentially other legal benefits (such as civil recognition of religious marriages).

In Europe, countries like France and Austria have already taken steps to contrast the infiltration of Islamists, not only in the Muslim community, but also in politics and academia. Italy, where Islamists are particularly active today, needs to take a clear stance on this matter. Indeed, a common course of action at the European level is required to avoid the creation of “Islamist-friendly” countries.

Who do our institutions want to empower? Which ideologies do we want to promote? Who should get recognition and representational power? These are the issues that should guide policy decisions on which groups to interface with.

It is crucial to ensure pluralism in the Islamic associative sphere in order to prevent the attempts by any organizations to impose themselves as the exclusive representatives of a community that is as broad and diverse as Italy’s Muslims, with different expressions based on ethnicity, culture, and doctrine. Muslims have the right to elect their own representatives, who should not be placed in key positions according to family relationships and organizational ties.

Last, but not least, the connection between Sunni Islamism and Iranian-linked Shia Islamism must be carefully investigated. As past and present events in the Middle East have shown, Sunni and Shia extremists can viciously fight each other, but they can also establish alliances in the name of a common goal – for example, opposition to the West and/or Israel or the pursuit of a sharia-based state – as has been seen with Iran and Al-Qaeda.⁸¹ The Muslim Brotherhood (with local exceptions) has historically entertained warm relations and shared ideological affinities with Iranian Islamists and the Islamic Republic they created in 1979.⁸² Italy needs to be mindful about the signs of a reproduction of this unholy alliance at the local level, as its potential for societal radicalization and institutional infiltration poses a novel threat to its liberal democracy.

⁷⁹ Vidino and Altuna, *The Muslim Brotherhood’s Pan-European Structure*, 155.

⁸⁰ Alberto Giannoni, ‘Per Promuovere i Diritti, Ue e Comune Si Affidano Ai Fratelli Musulmani’, *Il Giornale*, 15 July 2021, <https://blog.ilgiornale.it/giannoni/2021/07/15/per-promuovere-i-diritti-ue-e-comune-si-affidano-ai-fratelli-musulmani/>; Banfi, *Welfare Activities by New Religious Actors*, 175.

⁸¹ Kyle Orton, ‘Death and Consequences for Al-Qaeda’s Leadership’, *European Eye on Radicalization*, 16 November 2020, <https://eeradicalization.com/death-and-consequences-for-al-qaedas-leadership/>

⁸² ‘An Islamist Alliance: Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood’, *European Eye on Radicalization*, 28 November 2019, <https://eeradicalization.com/an-islamist-alliance-iran-and-the-muslim-brotherhood/>. Mohammed Amr, ‘Iran’s Islamic Republic and the Muslim Brotherhood’, *European Eye on Radicalization*, 7 May 2019, <https://eeradicalization.com/irans-islamic-republic-and-the-muslim-brotherhood/>.