# How Italy Successfully Avoided Large-Scale Islamic Terrorist Attacks?

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Vienna, 30 May 2025

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores the Italian resilience to large-scale Islamic terrorism despite sharing many socio-political and demographic features with other Western European nations that have experienced significant numbers of jihadi attacks. A mixed-methods approach, consisting of historical analysis, policy review, interviews and comparative case studies with France and Belgium, is utilized in this research in order to identify which combination of legal, institutional, social, and geopolitical factors that have contributed to Italy's particular security outcome. Italy's own experience with domestic terrorism during the "Years of Lead" bolstered the development of a robust counterterrorism infrastructure including proactive legislation, centralized intelligence and preventative policing practices. Additionally, the fragmented nature of Italy's Muslim population, lack of a formalized Islamic religious structure, limited colonial legacy with the Islamic world as well as lack of ghettoization have all contributed to mitigating radicalization in the country. Interviews including policymakers and religious leaders, offer valuable insight into the Italian success story. The findings suggest that Italy's case offers relevant lessons for counterterrorism frameworks across Europe and beyond.

## Acknowledgments

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To my husband Marijan, my parents Marija and Ivica and to my big family and friends. My mere writing skills cannot express the gratitude I feel towards each one of you, it is a true blessing to have you all in my life. Thank you for the love and support I received throughout this MA journey.

# Table of Contents

## List of Tables

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Background and Context

Ever since the outbreak of the religious wave of terrorism in Europe, Italy has been "spared", while some countries in the Western Europe, have witnessed and experienced much higher levels of terror. How come Italy got so "lucky"? According to the Global Terrorism Database data (GTD), The Apennine Peninsula has experienced only four instances of religiously affiliated terrorist attacks from 1991 until 2024. Three out of four were in connection to Islam, while one was related to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Global Terrorism Database, 2024). The outcome of these four attacks counted in total one fatal and four non-fatal injuries (Global Terrorism Database, 2024). According to the same database source, for instance, in the five year period, from 2015 to 2020, France witnessed 50 religiously affiliated terrorist attacks and counted 286 fatalities, while in the same period, Spain had the same number of religious-affiliated attacks as Italy, however with total a of 22 fatalities (Global Terrorism Database, 2024). However, in 2004, Spain has experienced a series of coordinated bombings against the rail network in its capital, Madrid, that resulted in 193 fatal and 2050 non-fatal injuries. Additionally, Belgium recorded 44 victims in eight Islamic terrorist attacks on its soil from 2015 to 2020 (Global Terrorism Database, 2024). After an unsuccessful train bombing plot in 2006, in which two explosive-filled suitcases malfunctioned, Germany saw a dozen of small-scale terrorist attacks and a large-scale one in Berlin where 12 people lost their lives while attending a Christmas market fair (Steinberg, 2017). London's public transportation was targeted in a series of coordinated attacks in 2005, 52 people lost their lives and more than 700 suffered injuries (British Transport Police). In comparison to other Western European countries, the number of attacks conducted in Italy and the number of victims is notably lower.

Islamic terrorism (often referred to as jihadi terrorism) in Europe has been a notable security threat since the late 20th century, more precisely in 1995, when the Algerian terrorist group GIA (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, tr. Islamic Armed Group) launched a bombing campaign in France which marked the start of the jihadi terrorism on European grounds. These attacks were in connection to then ongoing Algerian Civil War and France's colonial legacy in Algeria as well as French involvement in the Civil War (Nesser, 2018). In the early 2000s most of the carried attacks were claimed by the Al-Qaeda organization, while since 2015, by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Muslims have been present in Europe for centuries for the purposes of trade, diplomacy and military conquest, and it was not until the 1960s that they had started migrating to Europe for economic purposes and better life prospects.

While the September 11 events disturbed the American security and international political mood, the Madrid and London bombings have casted a grey shadow over European security policies. It was in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center in 2000, when the European Union (EU) adopted counterterrorism measures, giving priority to the fight against terrorism. The EU decided to carry out a coordinated policy with an interdisciplinary character. However, the action plan was obviously insufficiently implemented by the member states (Thieux, 2004). "Survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund in 2004…both Europeans (71%) and Americans (76%) share concerns about international terrorism and thus have a similar perception of the threat. However, they differ markedly in their response to terrorism; Americans prefer a military response (54%), whereas Europeans agree with this option only to a more limited extent (28%)" (Kaunert, 2009, p. 42). Counter-terrorism scholars often regard Europe as "paper-tiger" (Bures, 2006), on the other hand, crisis-driven political and legal solutions started changing European views on counterterrorism, immigration policy and civil liberties, leading to increased surveillance, stricter border controls, and greater intelligence sharing among EU member states (Kaunert, 2009), however, these measures also fueled

islamophobia across the continent (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024). In 2023, there were 334 arrests for jihadist terrorist offences in the EU member states in total. Some of the numbers are: Austria 18 arrests, Belgium 67, France 62, Germany 39, Italy 14, Spain 78 and The Netherlands 18 (Europol, 2024).

Despite these continent-wide cases, Italy remained relatively unaffected by jihadi terrorism, raising important questions about the unique combination of social, political, and historical factors that may have insulated Italians from the shocking events experienced in other parts of Western Europe.

**1.2 Research Question**

Italy is a Western European country with significant Muslim immigration but has experienced almost no Islamic terrorism on its soil ever since the outbrake of religiously affiliated terrorism. What political, social and economic factors have contributed for such a unique Italian position? How did Italian immigration policies, security measures, political narratives and diplomatic relations with predominantly Islamic countries have contributed to their resilience against jihadi terrorism? Furthermore, how do Italy's intelligence services, law enforcement strategies and counterterrorism practices differ from other European states that have experienced terrorist attacks? By addressing these questions comprehensively, this thesis aims to identify and analyze the unique set of factors that have made Italy resilient to large-scale Islamic terrorism so far.

**1.3 Objectives and Significance**

This research aims to investigate and understand the reason behind Italy's particular position, despite having Muslim immigration and similar historical, economic and political factors as

other affected Western European nations. Academically, the objective of this study is to contribute to the broader scholarly dialogue on counterterrorism, immigration and integration policies as well as the role of national political and cultural discourse in influencing security outcomes.

Practically, insights derived from Italy's unique case could complement counter-terrorism frameworks and policies aimed at preventing radicalization and fostering security resilience across Europe. By exploring Italy's experience, policymakers and security analysts can identify successful strategies and critical factors that may be replicable in other contexts and countries, hence improving the overall security across the European continent, or possibly create a tested formula on how to, in general, prevent terrorist attacks from any certain political or religious minority group in any country worldwide.

1.4 **Methodology and sources**

A mixed methods approach is used in constructing this thesis. Historical research, policy analysis, secondary data analysis, interviews, and comparative case studies as well as statistical data and data from surveys are all included in the process. When it comes to the historical research and time scope, I am mostly focused on the period from the occurrence of jihadi terrorism in Europe, the beginning of the 21st century, up until 2024. I am also briefly touching upon the history of the occurrence of terrorism in Italy, the so called *Anni di piombo* (tr. Years of Led) as well as the colonial history of Italy, France and Belgium for a better understanding of the present-day context of the Islamic terrorism in Western Europe.

At the center of policy analysis are the Italian counterterrorism and immigration laws that provide us crucial points in understanding their resilience to large-scale jihadi terrorist attacks. Furthermore, integration programs are also discussed. The criteria for selecting these policies

4

and documents came mostly from the interview I conducted with the Italian politician, jurist and the former State Secretary of Justice, Vittorio Ferraresi who introduced me to their legal and security framework.

I encountered State Secretary Ferraresi for the first time in Zagreb in January 2020 at the meeting of Justice Ministers during the 2020 (the six-month rotating presidency) Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Following the official ministerial proceedings, we engaged in a discussion on the differences between Italian and Croatian judicial systems and immigration laws. Therefore, when I contacted Mr. Ferraresi again in 2025 for an interview for my thesis purposes, he agreed to participate.

I also conducted an interview with Mr. Ahmed Tabakovic, Head Imam of the Bosniak community in Italy. I managed to get in contact with Mr. Tabakovic through Mr. Duje Jerkovic, a friend and a colleague from the University of Zagreb, who is currently pursuing his PhD studies at the University of Ca' Foscari in Venice and the University of Padova. Mr. Jerkovic's research focuses on the Islamic and Ottoman heritage in Dalmatia during the period of the Venetian Republic.

For the secondary data analysis, this thesis will primarily utilize the Global Terrorism Database. The choice of GTD was influenced by my mentor, Matthijs Bogaards' course, "Terrorism: A Comparative Politics Perspective", which I attended during the 2023/2024 academic year, where I became familiar with GTD's reliability and extensive coverage of terrorism incidents worldwide.

France and Belgium are chosen as comparative case studies due to their similar institutional, political, and socio-economic environments as fellow EU member states and Schengen area countries. Both France and Belgium had colonies (as well as Italy), France is a Mediterranean country, population and size-wise comparable to Italy, while Belgium represents society of

fully advanced Western European country. Despite these similarities, both France and Belgium have experienced significantly higher levels of Islamic terrorist activities when compared to Italy.

## 1.5 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1 discusses the context, objectives, methodology and structure of the thesis, while Chapter 2 gives an overview of the literature used in creating this thesis, conceptual framework and definitions as well as theoretical explanations on radicalization. Chapter 3 touches upon the history of Islam in Italy as well as the Italian history of political violence.

Chapter 4 discusses key institutional, cultural, integrational and geopolitical factors behind the absence of terrorism in Italy. Chapter 5 compares the Italian case with France and Belgium and Chapter 6 delivers a critique, outlines limitations, and implications of the findings. Chapter 7 brings conclusion and recommendations for the future prospects on this topic.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

**2.1 Defining Islamic Terrorism**

The word terrorism has its roots in Latin and other Indo-European languages in which this term conveys fear and alarm. The suffix '-ism' typically suggests an ideology or systematic practice, but in the case of terrorism, it emerged during the French Revolution. In 1793, the Jacobin regime institutionalized *la Terreur* to suppress enemies of the revolution, to distinguish mainly Robespierre's actions as illegitimate, abusive uses of power. Afterwards, the word spread across Europe and evolved in its usage. At the verge of the 20th century, terrorism shifted from state-led repression to non-state actors, notably political anarchists who used bombings and assassinations to draw media attention and advance in their political causes. Nowadays, terrorism has become a comprehensive phenomenon that incorporates various motives, actors, tactics, and contexts. Scholars have attempted to categorize it through different typologies, such as, by perpetrators (state vs. non-state), methods (suicide, cyber terrorism, etc.), motives (religious, political, ecological, etc.), and geographic scope (domestic or transnational) (Schmidt, 2023).

Peer-reviewed articles and academic sources highlight that defining terrorism is complex and contested, with no universally accepted definition (Weinberg et al., 2004). The discourse on Islamic terrorism is shaped by three major historical and discursive traditions: academic and policy influence, orientalist media representations and cultural and political mythologies (Jackson, 2007). Edward Said, in his 1978 book called 'Orientalism', argues that Orientalism is not just an innocent or objective scholarly pursuit, but rather a pervasive mode of thought that constructed the East as fundamentally different and inferior to the West. As Said contends, Orientalism served as a tool of imperial power, enabling Western societies to dominate and exert authority over Eastern societies. "The discourse derives a great many of its core

7

assumptions, labels and narratives from the long tradition and archive of orientalist scholarship on the Middle East and Arab culture and religion. This literature expanded rapidly in response to the tumultuous events in the Middle East in the 1970s and 1980s - such as the 1972 Munich massacre, the 1973 oil shocks, the 1979 Iranian revolution and embassy hostage crisis, the Rushdie affair and the terrorist kidnappings and hijackings of the 1980s. It has been greatly stimulated once again by the 9/11 attacks and subsequent war on terrorism. Importantly, Samuel Huntington's highly influential 1993 essay 'The Clash of Civilizations', the title of which is derived from a much-cited article by Bernard Lewis, reproduced a number of orientalists' claim for an international affairs audience and it is, therefore, an important antecedent of the current 'Islamic terrorism' discourse. As with terrorism studies scholars, a great many identifiable orientalist Middle East scholars, including Bernard Lewis, Feldman and the late Raphael Patai, have made frequent appearances as advisers and expert witnesses for official bodies, thereby transmitting many of the central assumptions and narratives of orientalist scholarship into the policy process" (Jackson, 2007, p. 400-401).

Furthermore, jihadism is defined by Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary as an "often violent effort by some Muslim people to defend their religion against those who they believe want to destroy it". According to Mark Sedgwick, there are two definitions of, the narrow and the wide one. In its narrow, scholarly sense, Jihadism refers to the belief that armed jihad is both theologically legitimate and an effective mean to achieve socio-political change. On the contrary, the wide, media and political usage of the term tends to equate jihadism with Islamism, Salafism, or violent extremes and is seen as a dangerous ideology driving global terrorism. Such a conflation blurs differences in goals, scopes, and recruitment strategies between movements like ISIS, the Taliban, Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda (Sedgwick, 2015). Moreover, these groups view jihad as a religious duty to engage in armed struggle against perceived enemies of Islam, particularly Western nations, the United States of America, Israel

and its allies. The notion of jihad is also manipulated to respond to events like foreign military interventions, perceived insults to Islam, or Palestinian suffering, combining personal and political grievances to a religious framework of justified violence (Nesser, 2018).

## 2.2 Theories of Radicalization and Terrorism

The Islamic terrorism, or The Fourth Wave of Terrorism, as Rapoport classifies it, began around 1979, triggered by four critical events in the Islamic world: the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the siege of Mecca, and the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty. Unlike previous waves (which were nationalist or ideological), the Fourth Wave is religiously motivated, primarily Islamic, but can also include Sikh, Jewish, and Christian groups This wave is characterized by self-martyrdom (suicide bombing), a tactic that made it more lethal and globally impactful than prior waves (Rapoport, 2022).

For Nesser, radicalization in an individual is triggered by a couple of elements. The most important ones are resourceful, ideological activists who recruit vulnerable individuals into the terrorist group. Moreover, most of the Jihadists are frequently recruited via friends and relatives. For instance, shared backgrounds, interpersonal trust as well as social bonds create environments that make individuals prone to radicalization. Furthermore, radicalization stems from personal crises, tragedies, or moral shocks, leading individuals to embrace extremist conspiracy theories and Jihadi ideologies. Also, one of the crucial factors that add to higher chances of radicalization is being in touch with the conflict zones, when individuals who travel to conflict zones often return more radicalized and ideologically driven, resulting in playing important roles as radicalizing agents within European jihadi networks. In addition, reciprocal radicalization occurs in environments in which opposing extremist groups exist, such as Islamist extremists and far right or anti-Islamic groups. Factors such as islamophobia, racism,

hostility towards Muslims contribute to an increased possibility of religious fundamental extremism. This dynamic interplay is depicted as a feedback loop in which increased polarization strengthens both sides and contributes to a more hostile and violent environment (Nesser, 2018). Besides, other authors, such as Randy Borum, also agree that radicalization is not a single, linear process or one with a universal cause. Instead, it's a complex and varied set of processes influenced by multiple factors. He also notes that holding radical beliefs does not necessarily lead to violence or terrorism. Many with extreme views never act violently, and many who commit terrorism are not deeply ideological (Borum, 2011).

In the synthesis of academic theories on radicalization, in Table 1., we can notice that multiple factors are not mutually exclusive. For instance, an individual may experience identity-based exclusion (Social Identity Theory), feel deprived of socio-political opportunities (Relative Deprivation), and be recruited through peer networks (Network Theory), all while being exposed to radical framing and ideology online (Cognitive Radicalization and Framing Theory). Therefore, each theory provides a unique lens, ranging from individual psychological traits to broader societal influences and helps to identify critical intervention points for preventing radicalization. Hence, to grasp the roots of radicalization is not merely to dissect sociological or psychological patterns, it is to confront the profound human struggle for meaning, identity, and justice in a world where real and perceived grievances are often blurred. These theories, taken together, remind us that behind every radicalized individual lies a complex interplay of unmet needs and unaddressed questions. Only by addressing these through thoughtful, humane and careful approaches can societies hope to defuse the ideological lure of terrorism and foster lasting peace.

*Table 1: Academic theories on radicalization*

| Theory Name | Core Idea | Application to Islamic Terrorism | Key Scholars |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social Identity Theory | Radicalization via strong group identification, perceived threats or discrimination | Alienated young Muslims seeking belonging in extremist groups | Henri Tajfel, John Turner |
| Relative Deprivation Theory | Frustration from perceived gap between expectations and reality of socioeconomic or political status | Frustrated Muslims experiencing blocked opportunities turning towards extremism | Ted Gurr |
| Cognitive Radicalization Theory | Extremist ideology through indoctrination, propaganda, and cognitive biases | Online extremist propaganda exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities | Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko |
| Social Movement Theory | Involvement in broader movements with shared identities, grievances, and mobilization structures | Extremist groups mobilizing individuals using collective grievances | Donatella della Porta, Sidney Tarrow |
| Psychological Vulnerability | Personal psychological issues or personality traits driving susceptibility to extremist ideologies | Individuals with identity crises, isolation, or mental health issues becoming radical | Jerrold Post, Arie Kruglanski |
| Rational Choice Theory | Radicalization as a rational process of weighing personal benefits (status, protection, revenge) against potential costs | Choosing extremism after deliberate calculation of personal gains | Martha Crenshaw |
| Network Theory | Radicalization facilitated through social networks, peer influence, and community connections | Leaders effectively framing injustice to justify violence | Marc Sageman, Scott Atran |
| Push and Pull Factors Model | Radicalization influenced by both personal grievances and attractive aspects of extremist groups | Leaders effectively framing injustice to justify violence | Tore Bjørgo |
| Framing Theory | Radicalization through persuasive framing of grievances and extremist solutions | Leaders effectively framing injustice to justify violence | David Snow, Robert Benford |

| Integrative Models (Staircase) | Multi-stage psychological progression towards radical beliefs and violence | Gradual ideological commitment reducing openness to alternatives | Fathali Moghaddam |
|---|---|---|---|

Sources: (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), (Gurr, 1970), (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008), (della Porta, 1995), (Kruglanski et al., 2014), (Crenshaw, 1981), (Sageman, 2004), (Bjørgo, 2005), (Snow and Benford, 1988), (Moghaddam, 2005)


**2.3 Literature Review: Islamic Terrorism in Europe**


The word terrorism itself is a complex term that is even contested among scholars. Schmidt (2023) highlights that terrorism's definition can vary significantly across contexts, often reflecting ideological, political and methodological perspectives. Rapoport (2022) identifies four waves of terrorism (the fifth one is yet unclear), while Weinberg et al. (2004) similarly argue that the lack of a universally accepted definition complicates legal and policy responses. For jihadist terrorism, Sedgwick (2015) differentiates academic definitions from broader political or media-driven conceptions that conflate with terms jihadism, Islamism, and violent extremism. However, Jackson (2007) critiques Orientalist frameworks, influenced by Edward Said's (1978) seminal work, demonstrating how cultural and political biases actually shape Western discourse on Islamic terrorism. Religiously influenced terrorism in Europe emerged during the Algerian Civil War, notably with the *Groupe Islamique Armé's* (GIA) attacks in France (Nesser, 2018). The Madrid (2004) and London (2005) bombings marked its escalation on European soil, impacting Europe-wide counterterrorism and immigration policies (Thieux, 2004). Since 2015, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has become a primary perpetrator of European attacks (Kaunert, 2009).

Academic literature on radicalization offers substantive content on many different ways one can be driven into extremism of, in this case, the Islamist kind. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory explains radicalization through identity-driven alienation and group

belonging, while Gurr's (1970) Relative Deprivation Theory highlights how socioeconomic disparities can function as crucial radicalizing factors. Cognitive Radicalization Theory (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008) emphasizes how cognitive vulnerabilities can be prone to exploitation through propaganda. Network Theory by Sageman (2004), underscores how peer and community can be strong influences. Other important contributions include Psychological Vulnerability Theory (Kruglanski et al., 2014), Rational Choice Theory (Crenshaw, 1981), and Framing Theory (Snow and Benford, 1988). The Integrative model or Staircase model, as Moghaddam (2005) describes it, synthesizes individual, social, and ideological factors into a multi-layered and multi-staged processes of radicalization.

The European Union's counterterrorism strategies started evolving after the September 11 attacks, focusing on coordinated policies, intelligence sharing, and increased surveillance (Kaunert, 2009). France and Belgium had to develop strict security frameworks following devastating terrorist attacks. France's secularist policies, including bans on Islamic headscarves, have been assessed as controversial yet, some argue, central to its integration and counter-terrorism strategies, in terms of diminishing possibilities of radicalization (Dell'Isola, 2021). Belgium, on the other hand, has challenging issues in segregated, ghetto, areas such as Molenbeek, that are proven to be radicalization hot spots. (Williams et al., 2016). Comparative analyses underscore both the successes and limitations of European counterterrorism approaches, emphasizing the need for balanced security and integration measures. Nevertheless, if we compare the number of victims and the number of conducted attacks, the Italian counterterrorism system seems to be operating better.

Despite significant Muslim immigration that is comparable to countries that have experienced terrorism, existing literature partially addresses Italy's noticeable resilience against Islamic terrorism (Bonino and Beccaro, 2019). Vidino's extensive work (2008, 2017) touches upon Italy's unique demographic and legal frameworks but falls short on fully exploring broader

sociopolitical and institutional dynamics. Italian-specific studies remain scarce, thus a critical research gap concerning Italy's unique combination of legal strictness, history, and cultural factors that mitigate radicalization, is still present.

Furthermore, this thesis integrates theoretical perspectives on terrorism literature (Nesser, 2018; Rapoport, 2022) and counter-terrorism policy analyses (Kaunert, 2009; Bonino and Beccaro, 2019). Mixed-method approach is used to elucidate Italy's resilience to large-scale terrorist attacks while combining policy analysis, comparative case studies, and interviews with policymakers and religious leaders (Ferraresi, 2025; Tabakovic, 2025). Moreover, the thesis critically engages with frameworks of securitization (Gaudino, 2025; Magazzini et al., 2024), institutional practices, and sociocultural factors, aiming to bridge identified gaps.

# Chapter 3: Demographics, Historical Context and Background of Islam in Italy

## 3.1 Islam in Italy: Historical and Demographic Context

Although Italy doesn't run an official statistic on individuals' religious affiliation in their population census, the number of Muslim population in Italy is estimated based on the data from religious organizations and research centers. According to *Istituto Nazionale di Statistica* (tr. National Institute of Statistics, ISTAT), only data on citizenship and country of origin are available, but not on religion. Hence, the number of Muslims in Italy is estimated and not officially recorded (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2025). For the purpose of this thesis, I will be using numbers of independent research centers such as the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), Pew Research Center and *Unione delle Comunità Islamiche d'Italia* (tr. Union of Islamic Communities in Italy, UCOII) in 2017. Turin-based CESNUR estimated in 2023 that there are 1 719 000 Muslim immigrants in Italy comprising 34,2 % of the total immigrant population, moreover, they are the most numerous immigrant religious group among immigrants. In addition, there are 566 000 Muslims among Italian citizens that make the most numerous religious minority group (Catholics being the majority) among Italians, making the total of 2 285 000 Muslims living in Italy (Introvigne & Zoccatelli, 2023). American Pew Research Center estimated this number to be 2 870 000 in 2016 (Pew Research Center, 2017), while UCOII numbers approximately 1 600 000 Muslims in Italy in 2016 (Unione delle Comunità Islamiche d'Italia, 2017).

Projections are that the number of Europe's non-Muslims will decline in total number in the future. On the other hand, "even if all migration into Europe were to immediately and permanently stop - a "zero migration" scenario - the Muslim population of Europe still would be expected to rise from the current level of 4.9% to 7.4% by the year 2050. This is because Muslims are younger (by 13 years, on average) and have higher fertility (one child more per

woman, on average) than other Europeans, mirroring a global pattern. A second, "medium"

migration scenario assumes that all refugee flows will stop as of mid-2016 but that recent levels

of "regular" migration to Europe will continue (i.e., migration of those who come for reasons

other than seeking asylum; see note on terms below). Under these conditions, Muslims could

reach 11.2% of Europe's population in 2050" (Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 5).

*Table 2: Muslims in Italy, overview*

| Population (2023) | 2 285 000 |
|---|---|
| Countries of Origin | Morocco, Albania, Tunisia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, Sub-Saharan Africa |
| Geographic Distribution | 60% North, 25% Center, 15% South |
| Migration Drivers | Syrian civil war, African conflicts, economic migration |
| Legal Status | High proportion of non-citizens, undocumented migrants, family reunification |
| Integration | Growing second-generation, increased conversions, limited mosque recognition |
| Migration Routes | Central Mediterranean (Libya, Tunisia), Balkan route |
| Political Impact | Central issue in public debate, such as security and integration |

Sources: (Pew Research Center, 2017), (Vidino, 2008), (Martelli, 2021), (Introvigne & Zoccatelli, 2023)

Muslims have started migrating to Italy in the 1970s, driven by labor needs. The beginning of

the 1990s saw substantial growth in migration, from 0.6% of the population in 1991 to 2.3%

by 2001. Main migration drivers were labor market demand, family reunification, and Italy's

geographic location as a Mediterranean gateway (Martelli, 2021).

Most of Muslims in Italy are concentrated in the North of the country, especially in the rich

and one of the most developed regions of Lombardia and Emilia-Romagna and many of these

belong to the second generation that are born in Italy and have attended the Italian education

system. The legal framework guarantees equal access to education regardless of residents' legal

status. In 2018, there were 1.3 million minors of immigrant background, 75% born in Italy. The ethnic background of most of the immigrant students in Italy in 2018/2019 was: 114 000 Albanians, 103 000 Moroccans, 23 000 Egyptians and 20 000 Pakistanis. When it comes to Muslim females in the Italian school system, a drop-off is noticeable at the age of 17, from 91.7% to 58.2% of school attendees, possibly due to cultural expectations (Martelli, 2021). In addition, Muslims in Italy are seen as culturally and religiously distinctive from the largely homogenous Italian society. In general, Muslim children face lower attendance, lower achievement and higher dropout rates due to multiple reasons such as language barriers, curriculum lacks inter-cultural focus, cafeteria meals not adjusted for halal food, verbal harassment from peers and teachers as Muslims in Italy are seen as culturally and religiously distinctive from the largely homogenous Italian society (Open Society Institute, 2002).

## 3.2 History of Terrorism and Political Violence in Italy

The *Anni di piombo* is a term used to describe the turbulent and violent political period from the 1960s to the late 1980s in Italy which arose from deep ideological polarization between left and right wing extremists, *Ordine Nuovo* (tr. New Order) being the neo-fascist extreme right-wing and *Brigate Rosse* (tr. Red Brigades) coming from an extreme left-wing political ideological spectrum. Both of these groups engaged in in bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, armed attacks and often collaborated with the Italian mafia members. It all began with workers' protests and strikes in the Industrial North. Inspired by student protests in 1968, workers demanded better wages and better work conditions. On the other hand, the neo-fascist far-right wanted to suppress any socialist and communist aspirations and organizations. (Drake, 1992). The first of the domestic terrorist attacks was in 1969, The Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan, in which 17 people lost their lives. Few members of *Ordine Nuovo* were accused of

organizing and executing the attack, however, their charges were dropped in 2004 (La Repubblica, 2004).

The culmination of violence happened when former Prime Minister Aldo Moro, center-left-wing member of *Democrazia Christiana*[1] (tr. Christian Democracy) got kidnapped and murdered by the members of the *Brigate Rosse* in 1978. Moro was seen as a key figure in forming a coalition of *Democrazia Cristiana* and *Partito Communista Italiano* (tr. Italian Communist Party, PCI). This was perceived as problematic by the extreme left as, from their point of view, it was the betrayal of the working class and an attempt of establishing capitalist imperialism (Drake,1992). Furthermore, The Bologna train station massacre in 1980 with 85 deaths additionally proved the Italian failures in fighting against domestic terrorism. The far-right *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari* (tr. Armed Revolutionary Nuclei, NAR) were discovered to be behind the attack, although they denied having been involved (Ferraresi, 1988). It is considered that the bombing was part of the strategy of tension to destabilize Italy and push the government toward authoritarianism (Ferraresi and Castagna, 1992).

It was not only the extreme right and left that were causing the destabilization of the country, undermining trust in public institutions and assert the power over the state. The Italian Mafia also adopted terrorism tactics, especially in the 1990s, that were marked by a series of bombings and killings targeting judges, politicians, police officers, and even damaging cultural heritage sites (Jamieson, 1994). The Mafia's use of terrorism was a strategic escalation intended to protect its interests, intimidate the judiciary and law enforcement, and destabilize the political environment. The attacks were not random but targeted those perceived as direct threats to the organization's survival. Basically, anyone involved in anti-mafia legislation could become a victim. However, Hutchinson and O'Malley argue that while there is a nexus between

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[1] Leading political party in Italy from the period after The Second World War until early 1990s.

terrorist groups and criminal enterprises (Mafia), they are not evidence of a full convergence or symbiotic relationship (Hutchinson and O'Malley, 2007).

## 3.3 Italy's Historical Relations with the Islamic World

In the Medieval and Early Modern Periods, cities such as Venice, Genova, and Florence were major centers of international commerce, acting as bridges between Europe and the Islamic world. These cities maintained extensive trade relations with Muslim powers, including Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, facilitating not only the exchange of goods but also ideas and cultural practices. From 827 to 1061 AD, Sicily was ruled by Muslim sultans, transforming Palermo into a prominent capital of Arab splendor. This period saw significant cultural and scientific exchange, with lasting impacts on Sicilian society, architecture, food and language (Goldstein and Grgin, 2008). In 1224, Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, settled around 20,000 Sicilian Muslims in Lucera (today Lucera in the region of Apulia), believing that this would make it easier to control them. The Muslim community in Lucera practiced Islam openly and with relative freedom. Despite religious observance, some Islamic dietary laws were relaxed. Muslims likely drank wine, raised pigs, and engaged in related trade. Cultural assimilation occurred gradually, however, conversion to Christianity was not widely documented. The colony prospered until 1300, when it was destroyed by Charles II of Naples, due to the king's decision on religious grounds. The king claimed that Muslims jeopardized the well-being of Christians in southern Italy (Taylor, 2007).

Italy colonized Libya, Somalia and Eritrea, predominantly Muslim countries in Africa and during the Mussolini period Italy attempted to portray itself as a protector of Islam in its colonies. "Sword of Islam" was used as a symbolic gesture to gain favor with Muslim subjects and recruit them for military campaigns during The Second World War (Wright, 2005).

Despite Silvio Berlusconi's initial support for the military campaign (unlike France and Germany who opposed it), Italy did not participate in the initial invasion of Iraq in March 2003 led by the US, as then Berlusconi government faced internal and public opposition to direct involvement with the war. However, later on, in 2003, Italy joined the multinational force under the USA leadership, deploying about 3 200 troops to southern Iraq for the purposes of peacekeeping, reconstruction, and training Iraqi security forces. Spain also participated in the same non-combat role, but they withdrew soon after the 2006 Madrid railway bombings. In this non-combat period that lasted until the withdrawal in 2006 under the II Government of Romano Prodi, Italy suffered 33 military fatalities, including 19 in a major bombing in 2003. While Berlusconi's aim was to raise Italy's international profile and move further from the Mediterranean region, the subsequent Prodi's government positioned Italy's foreign policy back to "its more traditional sensitivity towards its European partners" and put an emphasis on multilateralism (Balfour and Cugusi, 2007). On the other hand, Italy reaffirmed its commitment to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the USA alliance in Afghanistan where they deployed at around 4000 troops. Initially, there was more public support than for Iraq, but it faded over time, especially after Italian soldiers started losing their lives. Coticchia and De Simone argue that the drop in the Italian public support for the Afghan mission, after 2009, was not primarily due to casualties or military failure. Instead, it stemmed from an ineffective and inconsistent strategic narrative that failed to explain Italy's evolving role in the conflict (Cottichia and De Simone, 2016). Italians withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021 alongside their NATO partners (NATO, 2024). Also, the former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luigi Di Maio, currently serves as the first EU Special Representative for the Gulf region and Italy plays a vital role in KFOR operation in Kosovo (Esercito Italiano, 2025; European External Action Service, 2025).

# Chapter 4: Factors Explaining the Absence of Islamic Terrorism in Italy

## 4.1 Institutional and Legal Factors

As Vittorio Ferraresi contends, some of the important legislative implementations include Law no. 15 of 6 February 1980, which introduced innovative investigative tools, such as the collaboration of informants. Law no. 438 of 15 December 2001, updated the Italian criminal system in the field of international terrorism, immediately after September 11, introducing articles 270-bis and following in the Criminal Code, which penalizes associations for the purpose of international terrorism. Another significant act is Legislative Decree no. 7 of 18 February 2015 (converted into Law no. 43/2015), after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, extended the crimes of recruitment, training and jihadist propaganda also via the web, strengthening prevention measures. Italy has a unique model in Europe, based on proactive prevention, coordination and widespread territorial control. One of the most innovative tools is the Committee for Strategic Anti-Terrorism Analysis (CASA), established in 2004 at the Ministry of the Interior, a permanent table in which the State Police, Carabinieri, Guardia di Finanza, AISI, AISE, DIGOS, and the Central Directorate of the Prevention Police operate in synergy. The National Anti-Mafia and Anti-Terrorism Directorate (DNAA), reformed in 2015, has acquired coordination powers also for terrorist crimes, ensuring a centralized approach with the District Anti-Terrorism Prosecutors. The DIGOS (General Investigations and Special Operations Divisions), is active in all police headquarters, monitoring radicalized environments and sending sensitive reports on a daily basis, in close collaboration with the Islamic community in Italy. Furthermore, the Italian model is based on diversified urban and social environments, with immigration that is partly different in origin and history compared to that of other European states such as France and Belgium. A network of administrative controls and local intelligence, which makes it difficult to create radicalized enclaves without the latter being

intercepted. A strong synergy between criminal justice and administrative prevention, with measures such as special surveillance and expulsion for security reasons. Luck can play a role in any area of security. But a system that, from 2001 to today, has thwarted dozens of attacks through arrests, expulsions and preventive investigations, cannot be considered "lucky", it is an efficient system (Interview with Ferraresi, 2025).

Ever since having the experience of coupling with domestic terrorism, Italians have developed a robust framework for counterterrorism that include laws and comprehensive legal and security infrastructure (Table 3, 4, 5). No immunity is granted to anyone, special district prosecutors (in coordination with the police) investigate, prosecute every case and the ultimate decision is brought by an independent judge. Everyone who commits terrorist offences and is complicit as well as "those who publicly glorify one or more criminal offences" face imprisonment. In addition, "the punishment shall be increased if the offense is committed through electronic tools" and if "glorification and incitement relate to terrorist offenses". Moreover, Italian Justice offers mitigating circumstances and immunity for those who cooperate with justice (Council of Europe, 2017).

Italian legal system also uses certain preventive measures. These measures, such as expulsions of foreign nationals, aim to prevent future criminal activity, can be taken based solely on suspicion of an individual/group being involved in terrorism or organized crime. In a period from 2015 to 2018, on the grounds of terrorism and security threats, the Italian authorities expelled 349 foreign individuals from Italy and the Schengen area. In comparison, by October 2018, Belgian authorities had expelled about 195 individuals (infos.rt.lu, 2018). In the same period, France expelled 17 radicalized foreigners in 2016 (Leclerc, 2016), and 20 in 2017 (RTL Info, 2018). Thus, France's total from 2015 to 2018 was about 50 to 80 expulsions. The expulsion in Italy can be ordered either by the Ministry of Interior, Police Prefect over the suspected threat, or eventually judges can use this notion as an alternative measure for

incarceration. The advantage of this tool is the speed at which such (mostly preventive) expulsions can be executed, as opposed to undergoing a complete judicial process (Olimpio, 2018). On the other hand, Marone (2017) underlines that these measures could be assessed as something in between prevention and repression as such policies can be severely repressive to those to whom they are applied, especially considering that there's no court process in which the suspect can defend himself. Yet, despite certain critiques, these measures and practices have not sparked almost any debate within Italian society or in the political arena (Marone, 2017). Lorenzo Vidino, Italian expert on Islamism in Europe, stated for a US media outlet that he considers expulsions and restrictive laws on citizenship as the best tools for combatting terrorism. And due to the citizenship restrictiveness, most of the terrorist suspects are not Italian citizens and therefore "if it's difficult to charge them, you deport them". Moreover, he added that in comparison to Germany and Belgium, where nearly 800 German residents, 60% of them with German citizenship, became foreign fighters, and an estimated 500 traveled from Belgium to fight, the number of 110 foreign fighter from Italy was far lower (Stars and Stripes, 2016). Foreign fighters is a description used to describe "fighters, who traveled to those countries to join the ranks of the so-called Islamic State and other armed groups" (Marone and Vidino, 2019, p.2).

Furthermore, Italian police conducted a country-wide stop-and-search operations and identity checks as another layer of prevention. From 2016 to 2017, counter-terror units stopped and questioned over 160,000 individuals (including 34,000 at airports), arrested around 550 suspects, and closed more than 500 extremist websites (Kirchgaessner, 2017). To avoid radicalization in prisons, incarcerated jihadists are segregated in high-security prison wings, away from the general inmate population (Marone and Olimpio, 2019).

Laws described in the Table 3. specifically target terrorist associations (Articles 270 and 270-bis of the Penal Code), enforce strict prison conditions (Article 41-bis) and criminalize foreign

fighters and terrorist financing. Recent legislative efforts, such as the Security Decree Law enacted by the Meloni government in 2024, put an emphasis on enhancing surveillance, introducing stricter penalties stricter penalties for disruptive protests, expansion of intelligence powers and promoting academic cooperation with intelligence bodies. Furthermore, Table 3. emphasizes how Italy has been proactive in responding to terrorism. This historical continuity in legal adaptations indicates that the Italian authorities have leveraged past experiences in combating internal threats against contemporary challenges. However, enhanced surveillance (Security Decree-Law by Meloni Government) typically implies broader powers for security agencies, including more extensive use of electronic monitoring, data interception, tracking, etc. Moreover, stricter penalties for disruptive protests raise concern for civil liberties. In liberal societies, as Taylor (2002) argues, such surveillance enhancement raises serious questions concerning privacy and data protection rights.

*Table 3: Counterterrorism laws*

| Counterterrorism laws | Year | Description |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Article 270 and 270-bis, Penal Code | 1930 and subsequent amendments | Charging suspects with membership in a terrorist association, enabling indictments before an attack occurs |
| Article 41-bis, Law No. 354 (Prison Regime) | 1975 and subsequent amendments | Strict prison conditions for terrorists to prevent communication with external groups |
| Law No. 438 | 2001 | Measures against international terrorism; enhanced surveillance, asset freezing |
| Law No. 155 | 2005 | Strengthened counter-terrorism measures and investigative powers, expulsion law |
| Law No. 85 | 2009 | Ratification of Prüm Treaty; cross-border cooperation, national DNA database |
| Law No. 43 | 2015 | Criminalizes foreign fighters, travel for terrorism, recruitment and training |

| Law No. 153 | 2016 | Ratifies several international conventions aimed at preventing and suppressing terrorism. Introduced provisions to combat the financing of terrorism, computer surveillance and the prosecution of offences related to terrorist activity |
| Security Decree-Law Meloni Government | 2024 2025 | Tightened security measures, surveillance enhancement, stricter penalties for disruptive protests, expansion of intelligence powers, increased academic-intelligence collaboration |

Source: (Council of Europe, 2017), Interview with Vittorio Ferraresi, former Italian State Secretary of Justice, May 2025

Table 4. details Italy's key agencies, including DIGOS, ROS Carabinieri, AISI, AISE, CASA, and DIS, clarifying their roles and jurisdictions. DIGOS and ROS Carabinieri highlight specialization in counterterrorism and organized crime, while AISI and AISE cover internal and external threats respectively. CASA serves for an inter-agency cooperation, serving as an umbrella strategic analytical hub, while DIS, appointed by the Prime Minister, coordinates intelligence across agencies. Moreover, Table 4. highlights how interagency collaboration serves an important role in counter-terrorism strategies. The system is constructed in a way that it exemplifies coordinated preventive and investigative actions, which effectively deter radicalization and terrorism.

*Table 4: Security and Intelligence Agencies*

| Security and Intelligence Agencies and Special Forces | Role | Jurisdiction |
|---|---|---|
| **DIGOS (Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali)** tr. Special operational forces | Counter-terrorism, domestic intelligence, prevention and investigation of politically motivated crimes, surveillance of extremist groups. | Italian National Police (*Polizia di Stato*), domestic |
| **ROS Carabinieri (Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale)** tr. Special military police forces | Specialized anti-terrorism and organized crime investigations, high-level operational activities, surveillance, and prevention. | *Carabinieri* (tr. Military Police), both domestic and international |

25

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **AISI (Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Interna)** tr. Internal information and security agency | Domestic intelligence agency focused on internal security threats, counterterrorism, espionage prevention, safeguarding national security. | Internal/domestic affairs |
| **AISE (Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Esterna)** **tr. External information and security agency** | Foreign intelligence service handling international threats, foreign intelligence gathering, counterespionage and international terrorism. | External/foreign affairs |
| **CASA (Comitato di Analisi Strategica Antiterrorismo)** tr. Comity of Strategical Analysis for counterterrorism | Cooperation of senior officials from all security agencies (police, Carabinieri, intelligence, finance police, and others) to exchange intelligence in real time and coordinate responses | Internal/domestic Affairs |
| **DIS (Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza)** tr. Department of Security Information | Central organ of the Republic's Security Information System (SISR). It cooperates and coordinates the activities of the agencies. | Directed by the Director General, appointed by the Prime Minister, after consulting the CISR (Inter-ministerial Committee for the Security of the Republic) |

Source: (Council of Europe, 2017), Interview with Vittorio Ferraresi, former Italian State Secretary of Justice, May 2025

**4.2 Integration and Community Factors, *intesa* and *otto per mille***

The status of Islam in Italy has been unresolved since the early 2000s, "the Italian Constitution formally grants freedom of religion for all but reserves a special position for the Catholic Church and requires other faiths to sign a specific treaty called an *intesa* (tr. Understanding) to fully operate. Not having an *intesa* means that religious holidays are not recognized, it impacts religious education in schools as well as chaplaincies in hospitals, prisons, and the military. Muslim associations have been applying for an *intesa* since 2000, but still haven't received one" (Momigliano, 2017).

"In many European countries, such as France, Germany, Belgium or the Netherlands, the issue of institutional recognition of Islam has been a source of tension for decades, mainly because Islam is often not perceived as an indigenous part of the European religious landscape. Although the Muslim presence in Europe is more than 1000 years old, public perception is still linked to migration, security issues and social integration. In most of these countries, states have developed different models of cooperation with Muslims, some centralized (as in Austria), some plural (as in Germany), but all of those with, more or less, formalized forms of dialogue and recognition. On the other hand, part of the responsibility lies within the Muslim communities themselves. As the main imam of a community that brings together European Muslims, Bosniaks, who have been living and contributing to the Italian society for about 30 years, I can testify that there is a lack of sufficiently mature internal coordination and institutional culture" (Interview with Tabakovic, 2025).

Despite the fact that almost 2 million Muslims live in the country, institutional agreement has not been reached between the state and an Islamic organization. This is essentially a symptom of a deeper problem: the relationship between institutions and the Muslim minority has not yet been fully defined, either legally or socially. "The main external reason for the lack of *intesa* is the formal argument that Muslim communities are not united, hence, that the state "has no one" to negotiate with. It is true that there are several large Islamic organizations operating in Italy, such as UCOII and others, but none of them gathers the majority of Muslims or has indisputable legitimacy. But it should also be said that such a request for a "unique interlocutor" was not made, for example, with the Jewish or Protestant communities, which are also plural. Therefore, the fact that Islam has not yet signed an *intesa* reflects institutional resistance to the recognition of Islam as a permanent, internal component of Italian society" (Interview with Tabakovic, 2025).

Religious groups that have *intesa* are the Catholic Church, Waldensian Church, Assemblies of God in Italy (ADI), Union of the Seventh-day Adventist Christian Churches, Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI), Italian Evangelical Baptist Christian Union (UCEBI), Evangelical Lutheran Church in Italy (CELI), Holy Orthodox Archdiocese of Italy and Exarchate for Southern Europe, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apostolic Church in Italy, Italian Buddhist Union (UBI), Italian Hindu Union, Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai (IBISG), Church of England Association (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, n.d.). There was an attempt to officially recognize Islam by establishing *Consulta per l'Islam Italiano* (tr. Consultation for Italian Islam) which consisted of 16 Muslim advisory members that were appointed by the Interior Ministry Giuseppe Pisanu in 2005. However, the then Interior Minister's opinion was that Islam is not ready for an *intesa.* (Ministero dell'Interno, 2005). In 2017, while facing influx of Muslim refugees, the Ministry of Interior attempted establishing a new *Patto nazionale per un Islam italiano* (tr. National Pact for an Italian Islam), bringing together all the Muslim communities' representatives, both Sunni and Shia. Again, the 2017 Pact did not bring any official recognition or funding (Prezzi, 2024).

"The public and political perception of Islam in Italy often intertwines with security and migration narratives. In the past, certain governments conditioned the signing of the *intesa* with additional requirements, such as the use of the Italian language in religious sermons, an official list of imams, a ban on foreign funding, which is not required of any other religious community. On the one hand, this is a justified demand that I personally support and consider correct, but on the other hand, this fact also indicates the existence of latent institutional distrust that is often not based on real problems, but on political rhetoric and sensationalist media" (Interview with Tabakovic, 2025).

Muslims in Italy are linguistically diverse, coming from Maghreb countries, Albania, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sub-Saharan Africa and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, their

religious communities lack of one, "umbrella" leader. In total, there are 8 official mosques with classical domes or minarets on Italian soil (Bombardieri, 2011). In comparison, the UK has at around 1500 registered mosques, France has 2600 official Muslim places of worship (France 24, 2015; UK Parliament, 2018). Such a low number could stem from the lack of official recognition of Islam as a religion by the Italian state. Without recognition, religious communities have little legal protection to establish worship sites, so any projects of new mosques can face bureaucratic difficulties and possible local opposition.

"A particular problem among Islamic organizations in Italy is the lack of mutual trust. Instead of cooperation and coordination, there is often competition and even suspicion towards one another. This not only weakens our voice towards institutions but also sends a negative message to younger generations of Muslims who are looking for credible, open and contemporary forms of religious life. Ultimately, the issue of inter-religious dialogue within Muslims in Italy is not just legal, but deeply political and social. What we lack is not just a "signature", but mutual trust and institutional courage, both on the part of the state and within Muslim communities" (Interview with Tabakovic, 2025).

The *Otto per mille* (tr. eight for thousand) is a crucial law that explains the religious funding framework in Italy, as well as helps understand why Islam is Italy institutionally hindered when compared to other religions. The *Otto per mille* is a law that requires each taxpayer to allocate their 0.8% tax money to either a state-run social organization or religious organization recognized by the Italian state. Italy, according to its Constitution, is a secular country, however, some religious organizations have more right than others. Established by Law No. 222/1985, it originally applied only to the Catholic Church but later extended to other religions that have signed an official *intesa*, and by not having the treaty with the state, Islamic organizations have no rights in sharing funds provided by the state for the confessional purposes, therefore, must be financed by private donations (Vidino and Marone, 2017).

## 4.3 Cultural and Social Factors

Unlike France or Britan who, due to their colonialism, have a longer experience with Muslims and Muslim migrants, Italy started shaping its experience with Islam after decades after, in the 1980s (Vidino, 2008). Multiple surveys have shown that Italians display more negative public sentiment towards Muslims than the rest of Europe. In 2016, about 69% of Italians had an unfavorable opinion of Muslims which was the highest proportion among European countries polled (Momigliano, 2017). In 2019, a Pew Research Center survey found that 55% of Italians held unfavorable views of Muslims, while majorities in countries like France, Germany, the UK, and Sweden express favorable opinions of the latter (Pew Research Centre, 2019). Italians also exhibit greater social distance. In 2017 poll, only 43% of Italians said they would accept a Muslim as a member of their family which was the lowest acceptance rate in Western Europe countries. The same question resulted in 66% in France and over 50% in the UK and Germany who would accept Muslim family members. With such views and opinions, Italians align more with Eastern Europeans than with Western Europeans (Pew Research Center, 2019).

"Many communities function without clear statutes, without professionally trained staff, and often without a transparent financial and organizational system. Imams and community leaders do not always have the necessary competencies to operate in a democratic and secular society: knowledge of the language, legal framework, pedagogical approach and communication with the state. In addition, the ethnic and ideological closure of some communities prevents the construction of an inclusive, contextualized 'Italian Islam'. We still rely too much on models from our home countries that are incompatible with secular, European society, instead of developing a responsible, European Islamic presence, in line with local laws and social norms" (Interview with Tabakovic, 2025).

Despite socially tense climate, Italian Muslims have avoided radicalization in a scale similar to, for instance, France, Germany or Belgium. The homegrown extremist pool was simply smaller in size than in France or Britain, which have had Muslim communities for multiple generations. Moreover, large Italian towns still do not have immigrant or Muslim ghettos, where young and unemployed are concentrated and isolated from the rest of the urban population as ghettoization can lead to radicalization. Muslim immigrants in Italy live dispersed and intermingle more with the general population, making it harder for radical Islamist networks to penetrate these communities (Marone and Vidino, 2019).

"While Italy should recognize that Islam is not a "foreign phenomenon", but a stable religion with its numerous citizens who want to contribute to society, Muslims must take their share of responsibility: professionalize their structures, educate their religious leaders, open up to each other and to society, and we should not stay so "closed" towards others as this only further marginalizes us" (Interview with Tabakovic, 2025).

**4.4 Geopolitical, Geographical and Foreign Policy Factors**

Given the historical overview, Italy can be perceived as pragmatic towards Muslim countries, whether is it trade in the Middle Ages or today. Its unique geography gives this boot-shaped country a special geopolitical position. When compared to France or the UK, Italy was never a colonial power to that extent. Italian pragmatism can be seen in its post-colonial relationship with Libya, once a colony theirs. Rome cultivated good relationship with Gaddafi, and in 2008 signed a friendship treaty that envisioned Italy investing 5 billion euros to the Libyan economy. Nevertheless, this treaty was also of a great importance for Rome as well. The Italian energy company (ENI) became the largest operator in Libya's oil and gas sector, accounting for an estimated 70% of Libya's hydrocarbon production revenues in recent years. Even after disruption in 2011 and after many foreign companies were expelled from the country, ENI

remained and continued operating. Through ENI Italy developed its diplomatic ties with other Muslim Arab countries such as Algeria and Egypt (De Lucia Lumeno, 2024). Unlike France's often unilateral interventions in the Sahel or Britain's historically global military presence, Italy's influence is exerted more via commerce, development aid, and bilateral agreements than force. Hence, Italy positioned itself as an international trader of a great importance, often promoting Made in Italy products, rather than emphasizing their military power. "We think it is better to promote our food, fashion and cars, rather than the fact that we have an aircraft carrier, Beretta rifles, etc., that's why our diplomacy is very successful and we have good relationship with almost everyone, after all, we're the *brava gente*[2] (tr. good people). But don't get me wrong, we do promote our military industry, but that's not something seen on a supermarket shelf or a TV commercial", (Interview with high-level Italian bureaucrat, March 2025).

**4.5 Political Discourse on Islam**

In 2010, the *Lega Nord* (tr. League North) party was a member of Silvio Berlusconi's government. Their MPs introduced a bill to ban face-covering veils like the burqa. Lega MP Carolina Lussana argued the burqa was "not just a public order problem" but an "offense to women's dignity" and contrary to equality under Italy's constitution (Islamophobia Watch, 2010). This proposal was supported by Souad Sbai, Berlusconi's Muslim-born parliamentarian, calling the burqa a product of "a rising wave of extremism" and discrimination against women. However, Sbai and others pressed for ius soli (birthright citizenship) for immigrant children, reflecting a more inclusive view (WorldWide Religious News, 2011).

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[2] A phrase adopted by historians and a popular belief that refers to Italian benevolence and innocence during the times of the Second World War, a myth of a good Italian.

In 2012, President Giorgio Napolitano paid a historic visit to Rome's Grand Mosque alongside government ministers. The visit sent a clear message of religious tolerance, however, no *intesa* between the state and the organization was approved and signed (La Repubblica, 2012). In 2013, Cécile Kyenge from the center-left party, was appointed as Italy's first black minister. As Minister of Integration, Kyenge advocated for *ius soli* citizenship, visited Rome's Mosque for which she faced series of accusations by right wing politicians, namely Matteo Salvini, leader of the *Lega Nord*, for promoting Muslim and Arab interests (WorldWide Religious News, 2011).

In January 2015, the *Lega Nord* led the government of the region of Lombardy and passed regional regulations, dubbed an "anti-mosque law", effectively blocking new mosques by imposing strict building rules and local referenda requirements. Prime Minister Matteo Renzi reacted by referring the Lombardy law to the Constitutional Court, arguing it violated religious freedom (Al Jazeera, 2015). Since Islam was (and still is) not formally recognized by the Italian state, these rules uniquely overcomplicated and hindered attempts of Muslims to build or make official new places of worship.

After terrorist attacks in France and Europe in 2015, the *Lega Nord* politicians openly linked those events to domestic policy on Islam. Moreover, the Italian Constitutional Court rejected Lombardy's anti-mosque law to which Lega's leaders reacted with fury. Lombardy's governor Roberto Maroni wrote on social media X (formerly Twitter) "the left cheers Allahu Akbar". Salvini went as far as to congratulate "the Islamic court" on its ruling, pointing out that Italy's highest court had been effectively subjugated by Islam (Times of Israel, 2016).

Moreover, a famous 2018 video of the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, then leader of the *Fratelli d'Italia*[3] (tr. Brothers of Italy) party, in which she framed Islam as antithetical to

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[3] *Fratelli d'Italia* is currently the country's ruling party, May 2025.

Italian culture, went viral in 2022 and again in 2025. Adding that certain interpretations of Islamic culture are incompatible with European culture and values and that foreigners that apply Sharia law, mainly Saudis, fund Italian mosques and Muslim associations. (YouTube, *Meloni: Salvini ha ragione[4]*, 2018). The same rhetoric was continued by Matteo Salvini who stated that Islam is a law, not a religion, adding that Europe is too soft on Islam and it is losing its identity, emphasizing that the influx of Muslim migrants is posing an existential threat (Politico, 2017).

The 2018 Italian government consisted of the populist *Movimento 5 stelle* (tr. Five Stars Movement) and the *Lega Nord* parties, Salvini became the Interior Minister and a deputy head of government. Their political program outlined stricter controls on Islamic places of worship, the closure of 'irregular' mosques, a registry of imams, and scrutiny of foreign funding (Al Jazeera, 2018). On the other hand, Yassine Lafram, who was at that time, head of the Islamic Communities Union repeatedly condemned terrorism and stressed that Italian Muslims are "part of the national community, not a fifth collum". Moreover, he pointed out that "I don't think Italy is a racist country. But some politicians exploit fear relentlessly as propaganda." (Al Jazeera 2018).

**4.6 Conclusion**

To explain all the factors that keep Italy relatively safe from Islamic terrorism one could definitely start with their stringent and robust legal system, institutional and security framework. On the one hand Table 3 (page 19) illustrates the scope of the Italian judicial system, while Table 4 (page 20) shows who is actually working the most on the application of all these enacted laws (in addition to the classic law enforcement agencies). Maybe Italy didn't have the full-scale experience with Islamic terrorism, however, it had its own years long

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[4] tr. Meloni: Salvini has a point

experience with domestic terrorism. On these domestic terrorism foundations, Italian lawmakers were able to build today's firm legal system.

"Italy's relative immunity from the jihadist attacks that have tragically struck some other European countries is not the result of luck. Instead, it is the result of an effective legislative system, a consolidated institutional structure, and one of the most coordinated intelligence services in the world. Italy experienced terrorism firsthand, dramatically, in the 1970s and 1980s. This led to the construction of an extraordinarily regulatory framework which has been tested in in the real world" (Interview with Ferraresi, 2025).

Despite unresolved institutional issues with the recognition of Islam, which are followed by restrictive policies that reflect latent societal and political apprehensions, the dispersed settlement patterns of Muslim communities and the lack of ghettoization have prevented large-scale radicalization processes observed in, for instance, Belgium or France.

Additionally, the diplomatic pragmatism of Italy and its foreign policy practices have safeguarded Italians from becoming a direct target of Islamist terrorism. Yet, ongoing challenges such as political polarization surrounding Islam, and societal prejudices underline that sustaining this successful balance requires continuous vigilance and progressive dialogue between communities and state institutions. "The *intesa*, when it comes, it will not be just a legal document, it will be a symbol of the maturity of both parties" (Interview with Tabakovic, 2025).

# Chapter 5: Comparative Case Studies

"The overall terrorist threat to the security of the EU remains acute. The main concern of Member States is jihadist terrorism and the closely related phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters who travel to and from conflict zones" (Europol, 2024).

## 5.1 Italy and France

France has experienced a far higher frequency and severity of Islamist terrorist attacks on its soil than Italy. As mentioned previously, between 2015 and 2020 France suffered 50 religiously motivated terrorist attacks resulting in 286 fatalities, including high-profile jihadist incidents such as the 2015 Paris attacks and the 2016 Nice truck attack. Whereas Italy saw practically no successful Jihadist attacks in that period. According to the GTD, Italy experienced only four religiously affiliated terrorist incidents from 1991 to 2024 (three linked to Islamist extremism and one to another cause), causing a total of just one fatality and a handful of injuries. Those three linked to Islamism were not organized by either ISIS or Al-Qaeda. This simple statistic sets the stage: France as the primary target of Jihadist terrorism in Europe, while Italy as an outlier with an incredibly low number of attacks so far (Global Terrorism Database, 2024).

The difference between French and Italian Muslims is mostly in terms of the time of the arrival. France is a home of one of Europe's largest Muslim communities (around 5 million) and has a long history of immigration from its former, predominantly Muslim, colonies. Many French Muslims are second or third generation citizens born in France, beneficiaries of jus soli citizenship policies that grant nationality to those born on French soil. On contrary, Italy's Muslim community (around 2, 3 million people) is relatively newer, mostly composed of the first generation immigrants who arrived from the 1980s onwards (Vidino, 2008).

The French Republican model practices their traditional *laïcité* (tr. strict secularism), expecting immigrants to adopt to French identity, make their religious affiliation a private matter and assimilate into French society. This was, at times, perceived as state policies targeting Muslim practices. For instance, laws banning Islamic headscarves in public schools (2004) and full faced veils in public spaces (2010). While intended to uphold secular values, such measures have also been perceived by many French Muslims as institutional discrimination, contributing to grievances. Indeed, many French jihadists have been second generation who, despite being legal citizens, felt socially excluded in the only country they knew which is a fertile ground for extremist narratives to take root. (Dell'Isola, 2021).

Until the 1990s, Islam in Italy remained largely invisible in the public sphere and immigrants were viewed simply as foreign workers who (if Muslims) practiced their religion in private spaces. After family reunifications in the late 1990s, a more permanent Muslim presence emerged, alongside places for prayer and cultural centres (Conti, 2019). Moreover, Italy's Muslim population is dispersed and heterogeneous, lacking concentrated urban enclaves seen in France. There are relatively fewer purpose-built mosques in Italy (due in part to local political resistance and the absence of a formal state recognition of Islam), so Muslims often pray in informal sites scattered across cities. Crucially, Italy has avoided creation of ghettos such as Saint-Denis in Paris suburbs or Molenbeek in Brussels (Bonino and Beccaro, 2019).

Another key difference is the approach to domestic security and counterterrorism, especially in identifying and neutralizing threats. Italy's counter-terrorism strategy has been described as proactive and preventive, due to their decades long of experience combating domestic terrorism and organized crime. In comparison to France, Italy has been practicing deportation of suspect foreigners by bypassing judicial processes, despite some accusations of breaking human rights because of the aforementioned practice (Bonino and Beccaro, 2019). There is a recent example of a Pakistani imam of Bologna, Zulfiqar Khan, who resided in Italy since 1995. In October

2024 he was expelled from the Italian and Schengen territory due to his sermons in which he advocated for a fundamentalist vision of jihad, defined homosexuality as a disease and accused Americans, Germans, French, English and Italians of supporting "the impure Zionists" and also invoked Allah to destroy the oppressors. His defender Francesco Murru said that this is a case of a "return of a police state and the prosecution of crimes of opinion" (La Stampa, 2024). In contrast, France's terrorists have largely been French citizens or their long-term residents (Bonino and Beccaro, 2019). Dealing with one's own citizens limits the use of deportation and French authorities must rely more on surveillance, incarceration, and deradicalization tools.

Italy also benefits from a highly centralized intelligence and policing framework for counterterrorism. At the beginning of the 3rd millennium, learning from both the US and its own experiences, Italy established the *Comitato di Analisi Strategica Antiterrorismo* (tr. Anti-terrorism Strategic Analysis Committee, CASA) under the Interior Ministry. CASA serves as a national fusion center where all law senior enforcement and intelligence agencies (from the national police, Carabinieri (military police) to intelligence services) share information on terrorist threats in real time. This centralization means intelligence is pooled effectively and potential threats can be addressed almost immediately. France, while it has strong intelligence agencies and anti-terror units (DGSI, DGSE, RAID, etc.), faces a more complex environment. Firstly, there is a larger pool of suspects and has historically dealt with some inter-agency coordination issues. Moreover, French authorities have at times been overwhelmed by the sheer volume of radicalization cases on their radar. For instance, thousands of individuals are on France's Fiche S watchlist for Islamist extremism, making full surveillance difficult in practice. Italy's smaller radical milieu has been easier to monitor closely (Bonino and Beccaro, 2019).

The emergence of Islamist terrorism in France in the 1990s was directly tied to the French colonial past. The GIA of Algeria conducted terrorist attack as revenge for French support of the Algerian government during the Algerian civil war (Nesser, 2018). In short, France's

colonial legacies created both the demographic presence (large Algerian diaspora in France) and some of the historical resentments that have occasionally been exploited by jihadist propagandists. Italy, on the other hand, has a far more limited colonial history in the Muslim world. While Italy did colonize Libya (as well as Somalia and Eritrea) in the early 20th century, the scale and duration of its rule were shorter, and Italy's post-colonial ties with those populations are not as deeply institutionalized as France's ties with the North African countries. More importantly, Italy's Muslim immigrant population today does not primarily come from its former colonies. Thus, anti-colonial grievance is a far less salient element in Italy's context (Bonino and Beccaro, 2019).

## 5.2 Italy and Belgium

Belgium also has faced a significant jihadist terrorism threat in the past decade, far out of proportion to its small size. Notably, Belgium was struck by coordinated Islamic State attacks in March 2016 (the Brussels airport and Maalbeek metro bombings), which killed 32 people and injured hundreds. Between 2015 and 2020, Belgium experienced several Islamist terror incidents with a result of 8 attacks causing 44 deaths (Global Terrorism Database, 2024). Italy, in that same timeframe, recorded zero successful jihadist attacks despite having 2 million of Muslims more than Belgium. The estimates are that there are at least 900 000 Muslims residing in Belgium (Pew Research Center, 2017).

One of the most cited factors regarding terrorism in Belgium is the pronounced social segregation of its Muslim communities, Molenbeek and Schaerbeek of Brussels being the most famous examples. This neighborhood which international notoriety as a "jihadist hub" after multiple terror plots were traced back to it (von der Burchard and Cerulus, 2015).  Molenbeek is a dense, working-class municipality that became home to many immigrants from Morocco

and other countries. Over decades, it became a symbol of economic neglect and high unemployment, with a younger generation trapped between their parents' immigrant culture and a Belgian society in which they struggled to advance. For the past 15 years, Molenbeek and the adjacent Schaerbeek had a large concentration of 34 000 young adults aged from 20 to 29 that lived in these communes, many facing a lack of opportunity and studies have found that most of jihadists were around 20 to 24 years old with connections to this specific areas of Brussels. This confluence of youthful demographics and socioeconomic marginalization made parts of Brussels a breeding ground for extremist recruiters (Williams et al., 2016).

As mentioned previously, Italian cities, even when hosting significant immigrant communities, tend to have neighborhoods where immigrants and natives live in proximity, or where immigrants are spread but in smaller clusters. There is also a rural dimension to the Muslim immigrants as many of them work in agriculture or in small factory towns in the north, rather than all crowding into cities. This relative lack of ghettoization in Italy has helped prevent the formation of a concentrated pool of radicalization-prone youth (Bonino and Beccaro, 2019).

In the early 2010s, in Brussels and Antwerp, the Sharia4Belgium group, notoriously notable for preaching extremist Salafism and encouraging young men to go fight in Syria managed to radicalize dozens of youths before authorities cracked down (von der Burchard and Cerulus, 2015). Nothing quite comparable took root in Italy.

Another important distinction is how local and national authorities interact on these matters. Belgium's governance structure is complex. Belgium is a federal state with significant powers devolved to regions and language communities, and even within Brussels, police is divided in six different local police zones, therefore this security division could be hampering Belgium's ability to monitor and respond to radicalization. Even the then Prime Minister of Belgium Charles Michel, acknowledged a failure stating, "I notice that each time there is a link with

Molenbeek, this is a gigantic problem.", (Williams et al., 2016; von der Burchard and Cerulus, 2015). As mentioned, Italy's national security is far more centralized and gathered under an 'umbrella' agency, and that is CASA.

Belgium got international attention for having one of the highest per capita rates of foreign fighters traveling to join ISIS in Syria or Iraq. By 2015, approximately 500 individuals from Belgium (out of a population of just 11 million) had left to fight in Syria (Marone and Vidino, 2019). Many of these came from the Brussels and Antwerp regions, and a significant number were Moroccans or of Moroccan descent, reflecting Belgium's immigrant demographics. This phenomenon not only indicated intense radicalization on Belgian soil, but the possibility of ISIS-trained fighters to return to their homes in Belgium posed a direct national security threat. Indeed, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Belgian-Moroccan from Molenbeek, foreign fighter in Syria as well, was behind 2015 Paris attacks (BBC News, 2015). Number of foreign fighters from Italy is way lower in absolute and relative terms (Italy's population being 50 million) and they are mostly foreign immigrants, however, with one exception of a radicalized ethnic Italian Giuliano Delnevo, who died in Syria while fighting for the ISIS (Bonino and Beccaro, 2019).

One of differences is also a prison radicalization percentage. In Belgium, but as well as in France, many petty criminals embraced jihadism while incarcerated. Belgium found that a disproportionate share of its prison inmates were Muslims, estimates ranged from 20 to 30% of prisoners, versus cca. 6% of the general population (Williams et al., 2016). The fact that Belgium dealt with overcrowded prisons and lack of deradicalization programs in the early 2010s, extremists like Brussels attack plotter Khalid Zerkani were able to recruit followers behind bars. The Belgian government eventually moved to isolate extremist prisoners to prevent this trend (Williams et al., 2016). When it comes to Italy, as mentioned, their experience from dealing with Mafia members, made them better in managing detainees. Consequently,

Italian prisons have not become the same kind of jihadist incubators that some Belgian (and French) prisons did.

Moreover, Belgium did not have colonies in Islamic countries, but in Congo, Rwanda, Burundi. And just like Italy, they lack a direct colonial legacy with Muslim populations. However, Belgium did have a significant labor migration agreement with Morocco and Turkey in the 1960s, which led to large Moroccan and Turkish communities forming in Belgium. Over generations, these communities faced challenges of integration as integration experiences differ significantly due to regional Belgian policies and labor market structures (Gsir et al., 2015). Based on the Belgian and French experience with foreign workforce, Italy had the time to better prepare their policies for immigrants in their country.

**5.3 Lessons and Key Differences**

When compared, the Italian, French and Belgian states reveal several critical differences in policy, community structure, integration models, and historical context that have influenced their respective experiences with Islamist terrorism. Synthesizing these insights provides a clearer understanding of why Italy has enjoyed a relative immunity from jihadist terror, in comparison to other Western European countries and what lessons might be drawn by policymakers concerned with preventing any kind of radicalization.

A key differentiator is how each country incorporates (or fails to incorporate) Muslim immigrants. France's Republican assimilation model grants citizenship relatively easily to the second-generation immigrants (making them legally French), but then expects them to fully embrace French secular identity. This model, in the context of historical colonial ties, inadvertently produced alienated citizens, individuals who are legally French but feel they will never be accepted as truly French. Belgium's *laissez-faire* approach similarly resulted in many youth descending from immigrants, who feel socially excluded from the Belgian mainstream,

42

despite of being legally Belgian. Italy's stricter citizenship regime has, paradoxically made many Muslims outsiders by law, however, this very outsider status may have lessened the kind of identity conflict that indulges homegrown extremism. This is not to say Italy's approach is superior for integration, it definitely raises issues of equity and belonging, but, on the other hand, according to statistics, it minimized the pool of 'homegrown' jihadists.

French *laïcité* kept religion and state largely separate, meaning that the state was/is not a partner in social cohesion. Belgium officially recognizes Islam as a religion and even subsidizes certain Islamic institutions, but in practice, this recognition did not translate into unity. Italy, notably, lacks a formal accord with Muslim organizations (Islam is still not officially recognized as a religion in Italy as of May 2025).

To conclude, Italy's case, juxtaposed with France and Belgium, suggests that a combination of strict security practices and historical self-awareness has, so far, kept the country relatively safe from religious-based terrorism. Each country's experience is unique, but the contrasts seen in these comparative cases offer valuable insights into dealing with terrorism.

*Table 5: Summary of key differences between Italy, France and Belgium*

| Feature | Italy | France | Belgium |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Terrorist Attacks (2015-2020** | 0 successful jihadist attacks; 4 religiously affiliated attacks since 1991, 1 fatality total | 50 religiously motivated attacks, 286 fatalities; Paris 2015, Nice 2016 | 8 attacks, 44 fatalities; Brussels 2016 |
| **Muslim Population** | cca. 2.3 million, mostly first-generation immigrants, dispersed, no large ghettos | cca. 5 million, many second/third generation, concentrated in urban banlieues, strong colonial ties | cca. 900,000, significant Moroccan/Turkish descent, concentrated in Molenbeek, Schaerbeek |
| **Integration Model** | Restrictive citizenship, Muslims often legal outsiders, no official recognition of Islam (no *intesa*), low ghettoization | Republican assimilation, *jus soli* citizenship, *laïcité* (strict secularism), visible institutional discrimination | Official recognition of Islam, but fragmented communities, high |

| | | | social segregation, federal governance |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Counterterrorism Approach** | Proactive, preventive: deportations, centralized intelligence (CASA), rapid response, experience from domestic terrorism | Surveillance, deradicalization, less ability to deport citizens, overwhelmed by volume of suspects | Complex, fragmented policing, less centralized, high rate of foreign fighters, prison radicalization |
| **Foreign Fighters** | cca. 110, mostly non-citizens, few returnees | Hundreds, many citizens, returnees | cca. 500, among highest per capita in Europe, returnees |
| **Colonial Legacy** | Limited (Libya, Somalia, Eritrea), less demographic/historical impact, pragmatic diplomacy | Strong (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), deep demographic/historical impact, anti-colonial grievances exploited | Non-Muslim countries, but large labor migration from Morocco/Turkey, integration challenges |
| **Possible Radicalization Factors** | Smaller pool of homegrown extremists, less prison radicalization, fewer social enclaves | Alienation of second/third generation, prison radicalization, discrimination, colonial grievances | High youth unemployment, social exclusion, prison radicalization, community fragmentation |
| **Legal tools** | Fast expulsions, preventive justice, centralized prosecution, strict laws | Judicial process for citizens, less use of expulsions, focus on surveillance and deradicalization | Fragmented law enforcement, delayed response, reliance on deradicalization after attacks |

44

# Chapter 6: Limitations, Challenges, and Criticisms

Italy's counterterrorism model has often been praised for avoiding high-profile Islamist attacks. However, some scholars warn of certain drawbacks. Italian policy relies heavily on the securitization of Muslim communities, treating them as possible radicals. Surveys show Italian media and politicians frequently overestimate the Muslim population and depict it as a security threat, while right wing politicians, such as the currently ruling *Fratelli d'Italia* often depict Muslims as a civilizational threat to Western Christians, thus Italian heritage. Therefore, such narratives could only backfire and result in higher chances of radicalization. In academic terms, Italy's approach has been criticized as an example of a 'securitized' stance. Islam is seen not as a cultural faith but rather as a security issue. This securitization has led to policies that makes control more important over inclusion, raising concerns among scholars that Italy may be embedding deep grievances in its Muslim population (Gaudino, 2025; Magazzini et al., 2024).

Italian core strategy against terrorism could be assessed as preventive justice. From 2015 to 2018 the number of anti-terror expulsions almost tripled. While this may remove some dangerous actors, it also targeted innocent migrants, as Celoria (2021) contends. Furthermore, she warns that conflating migration control with counterterrorism can erode rule-of-law principles. Indeed, Celoria argues that Italy's approach shifts the burden of proof: individuals are uprooted on preventive grounds without judicial oversight. This lack of transparency and a possibility to appeal has drawn criticism from human rights observers. Basically, Italy's system essentially allows the executive to decide on a person's life because of potential future crimes, as many of those migrants have abandoned their home countries and previous lives in search for a better one (Celoria, 2021). Hence, there is a possibility of misuse or overuse of the expulsion law.

Italian law still does not formally recognize Islam as a religion, unlike Christianity, Judaism or Buddhism. This means Muslim associations cannot gain official status and often exist only as cultural clubs and their places of worship are often registered as cultural clubs and hosted in private homes or shops. In other words, Italy's roughly two million Muslims, the second most numerous religious groups have no state-approved venues for worship. As a result, Muslims meet mostly in improvised spaces that reflect and reinforce marginalization (Magazzini et al., 2024).

"What it means to be Muslim in Italy today can by no means be reduced to a single identity, and on the contrary has many versions, layers, and declinations. In terms of demographics and nationalities, Muslims in Italy do not have a main national group of reference" (Magazzini et al., 2024, p. 27). Studies show that while the majority of first-generation immigrants in Italy report positive feelings toward the country, public attitudes remain hostile, almost 10 years ago around 70% of Italians held negative views of Islam (Groppi, 2017), which leaves a greater possibility for youth to radicalize.

Another challenge regarding the integration of Islam and Muslims into the country are politicians who often use Islam as a political tool in order to gain more supporters and votes. Figures like Matteo Salvini and his right-wing populist peer leaders have painted Muslims as a threat to national identity. Nevertheless, counter-terrorism experts warn that framing counterterrorism purely as a war on Islam fails to address important drivers of radicalization (Gaudino, 2025).

Italy's current approach might be helpful in the short term, but at the cost of treating social issues as security problems. Scholars question whether a preventive strategy can be sustained on longer terms. In other contexts, experts, such as Boncio (2017) have attempted to model radicalization risk using broad indicators (Boncio, 2017). In practice, governments use more

detailed tools (e.g. VERA-2R, ERG-22+) with multiple sub-domains and structured scoring systems (Pressman et al., 2012). Hence, one might propose a simplified formula for an individual's radicalization risk score:

$$R = \alpha \cdot S + \beta \cdot E + \gamma \cdot D + \delta \cdot B$$

S represents sociopolitical factors (discrimination, political alienation), E economic factors (unemployment, poverty), D demographic profile (age, immigration generation), and B behavioral attributes (criminal history, online activity). The coefficients ($\alpha,\beta,\gamma,\delta$) would reflect the weight of each category. This hypothetical model underscores that Italy's exclusive policies could raise S and E factors among Muslims therefore increasing R (Radicalization). Counter-terrorism scholars emphasize that without active integration, many risk indicators remain unchecked. Thus, the formula illustrates the scholars' critique: Italy's heavy focus on security (large $\alpha$) should be balanced by reducing S, E, D, and B through social policy and inclusion. In more simple terms: Each type of influence is given a weight (a level of importance), and then all of them are added together to get an overall risk score. The Greek letters tell us how important each part is, for instance, if social exclusion (S) matters more, it gets a bigger value weight (like $\alpha = 0.5$). If age matters less (D) $\gamma = 0.1$, etc.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion and Policy Implications

## 7.1 Summary of Key Findings

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that Italy's unique combination of legal, institutional, social and geopolitical factors have insulated this Mediterranean state from the large-scale Islamic terrorism experienced by other Western European countries. Italians have been able to transform their own painful history into one of the most effective operational systems in Europe. It is the synergy between laws, well-coordinated institutions, and highly specialized judicial intelligence that has allowed their institutions to protect Italian society from these tragic events that, unfortunately, have affected other countries.

As mentioned, Italy developed a robust legal system to fight extremism in their country. The experience gained throughout dealing with domestic terrorism and organized crime has translated into a counter-terrorism success story. The emphasis on daily intelligence sharing (Table 4.) and close monitoring of radicalized environments is vital for early intervention. In sum, Italy's exceptionalism stems from a combination of favorable demographics, strict law enforcement and international cooperation.

Paradoxically, factors that signal weaker integration (such as Muslims remaining immigrants rather than citizens, therefore lacking large community hubs and ghettos) have possibly limited opportunities for penetration of radicalism within the Muslim society in Italy, despite some scholars not agreeing to this. In contrast to France's or Belgium's experience, especially with segregated areas/ghettos, Italy's challenges with Muslim integration have manifested more in social and political tensions, rather than in violent extremism. Italy's Muslim population is dispersed across the country and socioeconomically diverse, which helps reducing the formation of isolated ghettos that, as seen in Belgium, often serve as radicalization hubs.

48

In addition, Italy maintains pragmatic and economically driven diplomatic relationships with predominantly Islamic countries. Through diplomacy and using the *brava gente* phrase they have managed to minimize the anti-colonial grievances that, one could argue, reduced geopolitical antagonisms that can potentially inspire retaliatory terrorism.

## 7.2 Recommendations for Future Policies

One of the first things to propose, based on this thesis, is to pursue strategic investments in community integration initiatives to prevent marginalization and ghettoization. When we delve into academic theories on radicalization, the conclusion is that an individual who is better integrated into a community, definitely has much lower chances to radicalize. That is why Italian legislators should work on recognizing Islam as a religion, to be more precise, securing an *intesa* with Muslims. Providing the official state recognition of their second most followed religion in a country, in a combination with already existing counterterrorism laws and well-coordinated institutions, can decrease the likelihoods of extremism.

Moreover, legislators across the EU should prioritize deradicalization. Data has shown that radicalization often emerges in prisons and marginalized communities. Through prison segregation policies, Italians have managed to diminish radicalization among jailed convicts. This is one of the practices that could be replicated and adapted in other EU countries as well.

To mitigate potential human rights concerns, maintaining a balanced approach between security and civil liberties is needed. While preventive measures such as expulsion and rigid surveillance have proven to be effective, ensuring full transparency in these controversial, however, successful practices, is a step forward to making such frameworks accepted Europe-wide.

Lessons learned from the Italian success story of fighting religiously driven terrorist attacks offer important insights for other EU countries as well. As seen in comparing Italy to France and Belgium, the significance of centralized and coordinated intelligence-sharing frameworks, such as CASA and DIS should be an imperative. Establishing or enhancing similar coordinated intelligence structures at the EU level could drastically improve response times, efficiency, and effectiveness in preventing terrorist or any other security incidents across member states. Furthermore, as one of the latest Security Decrees in Italy dictates, further academic cooperation with intelligence bodies should be encouraged. The result of stronger collaboration could foster innovative strategies, data-driven insights, and a continuous dialogue between academia and security institutions, as security is not something that should be taken for granted.

## 7.3 Areas for Further Research

Certain longitudinal studies could explore whether Italy's dispersed model of immigrant settlement prevents radicalization over longer periods compared to concentrated urban enclaves elsewhere. Also, another longitudinal study could analyze the integration trajectories of Muslim communities in Italy. This could help assess whether current patterns of low radicalization persist or if new challenges emerge over time with the second and third generation coming of age.

If feasible, it could be valuable to observe and evaluate the impact of not recognizing Islam and Muslims as one of the religious communities of Italy. How does this legal gray status impact internal organization, leadership, and identity formation within Italian Muslim communities? Also, could such status influence vulnerability to radicalization?

Additional research on the socioeconomic factors and urban policies that prevent the formation of segregated enclaves or ghettos should be conducted. Did Italy avoid having segregated

ghettos by accident or it was part of the state-sanctioned integration policies, or perhaps local authorities have more power in deciding on where Muslim refugees and immigrants can settle? Understanding the mechanisms behind Italy's more dispersed immigrant housing patterns may offer useful insights for other countries facing similar challenges.

51

# Appendix: Interviews

Ferraresi, V. (2025, May). Interview with the former Italian Vice-Minister and State Secretary of Justice. (Personal interview).

Tabakovic, A. (2025, May). Interview with the head imam of the Bosniak community in Italy. (Personal interview).

Interview with a high-level Italian bureaucrat (2025, March). (Personal interview).

# Glossary

**Anni di piombo** - Years of Lead

**brava gente** - good people

**Brigate Rosse** - Red Brigades, far-left terrorist organization

**Comitato di Analisi Strategica Antiterrorismo (CASA)** - Committee for Strategic Counterterrorism Analysis

**Consulta per l'Islam Italiano** - Consultation for Italian Islam

**Democrazia Cristiana** - Christian Democracy, political party

**Ente nazionale idrocarburi (ENI)** - National Hydrocarbons Board, Italian Energy company

**Fratelli d'Italia** - Brothers of Italy, political party

**Groupe Islamique Armé** - Islamic Armed Group

**intesa** - agreement (state-religion treaty)

**Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT)** - National Institute of Statistics

**ius soli** - right of the soil (birthright citizenship)

**la Terreur** - the Terror (from the French Revolution)

**laïcité** - French secularism

**laissez-faire** - let do (policy of minimal state intervention)

**Lega Nord** - League North, political party

**Movimento 5 stelle** - Five Star Movement, political party

**Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari** - Armed Revolutionary Nuclei, far-right terrorist organization

**Ordine Nuovo** - New Order, far-right terrorist organization

**Otto per mille** - Eight per thousand, tax designation law

**Partito Communista Italiano (PCI)** - Italian Communist Party

**Patto nazionale per un Islam italiano** - National Pact for an Italian Islam

**Unione delle Comunità Islamiche d'Italia (UCOII)** - Union of Islamic Communities in Italy

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