

## Publications

### The Institutionalization of Islam in Europe: A Case Study of Italy

by Sara Silvestri

Despite the historical, cultural, geographical, and ethnic differences that characterize Muslims and the Muslim communities throughout Europe, we can identify a common interest in the institutionalization of Islam within the borders of the European Union. A mutual interest in formalizing relations has become visible between the Muslims living in Europe and the European states where they reside.

Each European government has sought to relate to its local version of Islam in different ways and for various reasons, according to the cultural and political history of the region, the impact of secularization, and the characteristics and circumstances of the local Muslim population. Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, have never officially regulated relations with religious communities but have somehow provided a platform for ethnic and religious-based mobilization within the sphere of civil society. Others, such as Italy, are contemplating the possibility of adopting a top-down approach, whereby the state requests the creation of a representative body and participates in the selection of its members. And some, such as France, Belgium, and Spain, have taken mixed approaches, whereby Muslims are free to choose, by election or appointment, their own representatives, though governments can retain the right to co-opt additional members. Examples of this last approach are the appointment of Dalil Boubakeur as President of the *Conseil Français du Culte Musulman* (CFCM, French Council of Muslims) in 2003 and the appointments of various members of the Belgian Muslims' *Exécutif* (Executive Council) in the mid-1990s.

Although these attempts at institutionalizing Islam in Europe could be welcomed as a step toward the inclusion of Islamic stances in the Western pluralistic and democratic systems, the process also hides some traps, which results in two principal concerns. One concern is that states in which Islam is either the state religion or the predominant cultural and religious tradition might interfere with the representation and mobilization of Europe's Muslims. Transnational Islamic organizations (of which the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the Islamic World League are prime examples), together with the public authorities of some Muslim countries of emigration (e.g., Morocco, Algeria, and Turkey), often seek to intervene in the establishment and appointment process of Muslim authorities in Europe (as in the case of the *Exécutif des Musulmans de Belgique*). It is common knowledge that Turkey controls a number of mosques through the European branches of the Ministry for Social Affairs (the *Diyanet*) and that Saudi Arabia has financed the construction of major mosques (open to and used regularly for prayer by large numbers of Sunni Muslims of various traditions) in European capitals, such as Brussels, London, and Rome. A quick glance at the list of the officials and board of directors (often nationals, if not diplomats, of Muslim and Islamic countries) of these mosques and cultural centers and at the activities that they sponsor — conferences, Arabic language and Quran classes, free distribution of religious publications — provides an idea of how this subtle interference often works.

The other principal concern is the specter of extreme interpretations of political Islam that is haunting Europe and the entire West. This fear is reinforced by the recent history of both Iran and Algeria and by the discourse surrounding terrorist organizations (e.g., Al Qaeda) that have hijacked the language and

symbols of Islam. These preoccupations also explain the recurring concern with establishing official relations with “moderate” Islamic groups, a request that inevitably leads to an idea of artificiality in the construction of Islamic institutions in Europe. So far, none of the attempts to institutionalize and nationalize Islam in the EU member states has led to a full representation of Muslim voices, regardless of the approach adopted, be it bottom-up or top-down. One reason these attempts failed is because of the heterogeneity of the Muslim communities explained above; another is because of the interference of Muslim states, through their embassies, in the private lives of their own citizens who have decided to live and practice their faith in Europe. It should be clarified here that the countries intervening in European politics over the institutionalization of Islam in Europe are not all pursuing a common agenda. They often appear more interested in extending their control over their own citizens (as in the case of Morocco), rather than in supporting their citizens’ efforts to become responsible representatives of Islam within the European countries where they reside. 1

### **A Case Study of Italy: A Slow and Tortuous Path Toward the Institutionalization of Islam**

According to the Italian Constitution (Article 8), all religious denominations are free before the law, and their relations with the state are regulated by *intese* signed by the religious representatives of recognized beliefs. 2 Since the early 1990s, several attempts have been made by the various Muslim groups present in Italy to produce such an agreement. Several factors have rendered any attempt to stipulate an *intesa* with Italy unsuccessful. These factors include the lack of a hierarchical organization with an institutional leadership in Islam, the modest number of Italian citizens practicing Islam and involved in the negotiation process, and the internal competition (between Muslim associations and between them and Muslim states) for the social and political hegemony over Italy’s heterogeneous Islam.

In early 2003, Italian Interior Minister Giuseppe Pisanu put forward the idea of creating a Council of Muslims in Italy. His proposal — which as of June 2005 had not yet materialized — seems to be based on a compromise between the Italian state, the existing Italian Muslim associations (or, more accurately, those associations that are “entitled” to negotiate with the state), and some Muslim countries. Apparently inspired by the parallel French experience of 2003, this hypothetical Italian Council would be expected to work as a consultative body and to include “moderate” Muslims only — that is, individuals who are far from Islamist circles, willing to cooperate with the government, and personally chosen by the Minister. 3

Unlike his British counterpart, Pisanu has adopted a top-down approach when speaking of and to Muslims. 4 He takes for granted that most of them are immigrants (and not citizens) and does not hide his plan to co-opt only the “worthy” ones as his Muslim interlocutors. In this it is evident that although his theoretical frame of reference is European and his model is the French CFCM, his concrete efforts to solve the “Islamic question” in Italy are explicitly nationally oriented. Asked to comment on the search for a legitimate Muslim interlocutor, Pisanu replied that compared to the “consolidated” French Muslim community, the Italian one is “shapeless, in an embryonic stage, thus unable to express today a democratic representativeness.” The proposed Italian solution, he added, would be “more modest and cautious.” The most crucial thing, Pisanu affirmed, is to “make this dialogue [between government and

Muslims] start” and to help an “Italian Islam grow on solid foundations.”<sup>5</sup> The Interior Minister firmly believes that the whole of Europe should appreciate the importance of establishing official relations with the faith communities, and he sees that this is a common concern shared by his colleagues all over Europe. For this reason, in the autumn of 2003, he promoted a European Charter of Interfaith Dialogue among the European Justice and Home Affairs ministers and then presented it at the European Council of December 2003.<sup>6</sup>

Minister Pisanu’s plan for a Muslim Council in Italy has sparked intense debate in Italy, meeting both criticism and approval from all quarters, including from Muslims and non-Muslims. Leaving aside for a moment the complaints of the Muslim groups that felt discriminated against because they were not selected as interlocutors of the government, the discussions around this hypothetical Muslim Council have also unveiled some discrepancies and problems concerning Italy’s position in regard to religious freedom.

Throughout the 1990s, three drafts of *intesa* were produced and presented to the various Italian governments, to no avail, by four Muslim groups.<sup>7</sup> Two of them, the *Associazione Musulmani Italiani* (AMI, or Association of Italian Muslims, proposal issued in 1993) and the *Comunità Religiosa Islamica* (Co.re.is, or Islamic Religious Community, proposal issued in 1998),<sup>8</sup> were founded by and are chiefly composed of Italian converts. The other one is a Muslim organization whose members are mainly foreign nationals from North Africa and the Middle East: the *Unione Comunità Islamiche in Italia* (UCOII, or Union of Islamic Communities in Italy, proposal issued in 1992). A fourth Islamic body, the *Centro Islamico Culturale d’Italia* (Cultural Islamic Centre of Italy) has also repeatedly asked for an *intesa* without, however, proposing a draft version.<sup>9</sup>

The UCOII is an umbrella association claiming to represent 80–90 percent of all the Muslim mosques and associations in Italy. It includes a number of mosques and Islamic associations located and operating mainly in the center and northern part of Italy. The UCOII managed to overcome internal tensions and rivalries that were cutting through Muslim communities, especially in Milan, so that in the end all of the components agreed to confer their negotiating power to UCOII. The *Centro Islamico Culturale d’Italia*, despite being the first *ente di culto*, or registered Islamic body with legal personality, is not a paradigmatic example of “Italian” Islam, for it represents the will of the embassies of the Islamic states (the World Muslim League, representing the interest of Saudi Arabia, and Morocco) that sponsor the Mosque of Rome (also called *Moschea di Monte Antenne*), where the Centre has its seat. In 1998 UCOII and Centro made an attempt to unite (by forming the *Consiglio Islamico d’Italia*, or Islamic Council of Italy) and submitted a joint proposal of agreement to the Italian government. The experience led immediately to a controversy over issues of representation and hegemony over the Muslim faithful living in Italy. As a result, most members of the Council resigned. The Council has not been revoked, but it is de facto defunct.

As a matter of fact, no progress has been made in the last ten years either in signing the agreements or with regard to Italy’s new law on Religious Freedom. Ironically, the content, the requests, and the tone of the three drafts of *intesa* do not seem to differ very much from one other. They tend to insist on preserving the freedoms that are already listed in the Italian Constitution and repeat the usual requests

concerning Islamic burial, halal (prepared according to Islamic law) food, Islamic education, and places of worship. 10

A variety of reasons can be identified for the failure to conclude an agreement with Muslims, the most conspicuous of which stem from obstacles within the Islamic communities: (a) non-citizens who are not entitled to become a “recognized” religious association and thus sign an agreement with the state and (b) “the multitude of competing Muslim organizations that claim to represent the entire Muslim community.” 11 But hidden behind these obstacles lie much more delicate reasons for the failure to conclude an agreement; these can be linked to internal rivalries, mainly between Muslims, and Italian party politics that have little to do with the issue of Islam per se.

Muslim representatives, for their part, complain that the entire Italian system is rigid and still shaped according to the former state religion, Catholicism. Strong opposition to the institutionalization of Islam in Italy comes from certain political, religious, and intellectual circles that are obsessed with the possibility that Muslims would have undue influence on Italy once the *intesa* had been obtained. All of these complex problems highlight how scarce the political support for the negotiation of a state agreement with the Muslim community might be, and as Silvio Ferrari and others have said, there is little likelihood that one will be developed or adopted in the near future.

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## Notes

1 These considerations are based on author’s conversations with Moroccan nationals and diplomats, in London and Rome, between 2003 and 2004.

2 *Intesa* is the technical term, in the Italian Constitution, to define an official agreement between the state and a religious group.

3 Further reflections on the implications of this initiative will be addressed at a later stage in a section dedicated to Italy.

4 For some reason he keeps calling them *islamici* (“Islamic”) instead of *musulmani* (“Muslims”).

5 Interview by Paolo Galimberti, *El Pais (Internacional)*, 28 February 2004. Translation by author.

6 Council of the European Union, *Statement on Interfaith Dialogue and Social Cohesion*<sup>1</sup> [5983/03 – JAI 373], 10 December 2003.

7 The texts are available in COMECE, *Islam en Europe, Législation relative aux Communautés Musulmanes* (Brussels, 2001).

8 This name was deliberately chosen because it constitutes a pun reminiscent of the name of the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad.

9 For detailed accounts of the stories of power struggle, fractures, and alliances of the four Italian Muslim groups and their relations with sympathizers and with the Italian state, see Stefano Allievi,

*“Organizzazione e potere nel mondo musulmano: il caso della comunità di Milano,” in I musulmani nella società europea*, by Jacques Waardenburg, Sami A. Abu-Salieh, Mohammed Salhi, et al. (Turin: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1994), 157–175; Renzo Guolo *“La rappresentanza dell’islam italiano e la questione delle intese,” in Musulmani in Italia. La condizione giuridica delle comunità islamiche*, ed. Silvio Ferrari (Bologna: il Mulino, 2000); and Magdi Allam, *“La mappa dell’islam italiano,” in Islam, Italia*, ed. Roberto Gritti and Magdi Allam (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 2001), 41–69.

10 The full texts of the *intese* are published in COMECE, *Islam en Europe. Législation relative aux Communautés Musulmanes* (Brussels, 2001). Cf. also Fouad Allam, *“L’Islam contemporaneo in Europa e in Italia fra affermazione identitaria e nuova religione minoritaria,” in Secondo Rapporto sull’Integrazione degli Immigrati in Italia*, ed. Giovanna Zincone for Commissione per le politiche di integrazione degli immigrati (Bologna: il Mulino, 2001), 577–611 and, in the same volume, *“Appendice. Il disegno di legge governativo sulla libertà religiosa,”* 612–19.

11 Silvio Ferrari, Filippo Corbetta, and Gianluca Parolin, *“The Situation of Muslims in Italy,” in Monitoring the EU Accession Process: Minority Protection Volume II. Case Studies in Selected Member States*, by Open Society Institute (Budapest and New York: Open Society Institute, 2002), 265.