

The development of home-grown jihadist radicalisation in Italy

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Theme

The Muslim communities and jihadist networks in Italy and Spain present similar characteristics and it is therefore interesting to look at the recent development of home-grown jihadist radicalisation in Italy.¹

Summary

Over the last three years the demographic and operational features of jihadism in Italy have shown significant shifts. The first generation of foreign-born militants with ties to various jihadist groups outside Europe is still active, although less intensely than in the past. The Italian authorities, however, have increasingly noted forms of home-grown radicalisation similar to those recorded in other West European countries over the past 10 years.

The lag has been caused by a simple demographic factor. As in Spain, large-scale Muslim immigration to Italy began only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, some 20 (in some cases 30 or 40) years later than in economically more developed European countries like France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. The first, relatively large, second generation of Italian-born Muslims is therefore coming of age only now, as the sons of the first immigrants are becoming adults in their adoptive country. Of these hundreds of thousands of young men and women, a statistically insignificant yet security-relevant number is embracing radical ideas.

Analysis

The first generation

Jihadist networks have been active in Italy since the late 1980s.² A disproportionate role in the country's experience with jihadism has traditionally been played by Milan's Islamic Cultural Institute (ICI), a former garage-turned-mosque controlled by members of the Egyptian Gamaa Islamiya since its foundation in 1988.³ For more

¹ This article is part of an extensive study on the development of jihadism in Italy. It is sponsored by the European Foundation for Democracy (Brussels) and the Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (Milan).

² See Lorenzo Vidino, 'Islam, Islamism and Jihadism in Italy', *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 7, 4/VIII/2008.

³ DIGOS (Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali) report on searches at the ICI, 15/IX/1997, and

than 20 years the ICI, dubbed ‘the main al-Qaeda station house in Europe’ by the US government, served as a hub for fundraising, recruiting, logistical support and the propaganda activities of various North African militant networks.⁴ But since the 1990s similar networks have become present throughout Italy. Their demographics mirror migration patterns, as the vast majority of individuals involved in them are first-generation immigrants from Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. Many of them are in the country illegally and live in conditions of socioeconomic disenfranchisement.

By the mid-2000s, several aggressive security investigations that led to the dismantling of dozens of cells and the voluntary departure from Italy of many hardened jihadists caused a significant decrease in jihadist activity in Italy –a trend different from most European countries–. Some of the long-established networks and some new actors (Pakistanis, for example) continued some of their activities but with a markedly lower intensity. In this regard, it is important to note that, other than for a few far-fetched plots, no attacks against Italy were planned by established networks in the period despite a number of plots targeting other European countries.

Things changed in October 2009, when the Libyan national Mohammed Game attempted to enter a military base in Milan. When confronted by the guard, he detonated an explosive device he carried, severely injuring himself and lightly wounding the guard. The ensuing investigation led to two North-African men who had helped Game with his plot.⁵ Game, who had recently begun attending the ICI, operated largely independently and his radicalisation process had occurred largely online.⁶ Game’s attack was considered a watershed event by the Italian authorities. The 2009 annual report sent by Italian intelligence to Parliament clearly stated that ‘in the proximity of structured groupings active in logistics and propaganda can operate isolated individuals or micro-clusters ready to act in complete independence’.⁷ It also raised concerns about the arrival in Italy of the phenomenon of Internet-driven home-grown radicalisation –in this case, mirroring a dynamic seen throughout Europe years before–.

The new cases

Despite the novelty, it is questionable whether Game can be considered a case of home-grown radicalisation. Although he was radicalised in Milan, Game grew up in Libya and moved to Italy only as an adult. Although scholarly opinions differ, it is

DIGOS memorandum on the ICI, 20/V/1994. The ICI is also known as the Viale Jenner mosque, from the street on which it is located.

⁴ David S. Hilzenrath & John Mintz (2001), ‘More Assets on Hold in Anti-Terror Effort; 39 Parties Added to List of Al Qaeda Supporters’, *Washington Post*, 13/X/2001.

⁵ Verdict against Mohamed Game and HadyAbdelaziz Mahmoud Abdel Kol, Tribunal of Milan, verdict 10/1583, 4/X/2010.

⁶ Interview with official, Milan, July 2013; Verdict against Mohamed Game and HadyAbdelaziz Mahmoud Abdel Kol, Tribunal of Milan, verdict 10/1583, 4/X/2010.

⁷ 2009 annual report to the Italian Parliament (Relazione sulla politica dell’informazione per la sicurezza), pp. 19-21.

arguable that to be considered a ‘purely’ home-grown case it would be necessary not only for radicalisation to have occurred in the country but for the individual to have been socialised –born or at least raised– there.

Yet a handful of cases that have surfaced over the last few years do present clear-cut home-grown characteristics, underscoring how the phenomenon has now reached Italy. Operation Niriya, a lengthy investigation into a network of Italian converts operating online, led the authorities to Mohamed Jarmoune, a young Moroccan-born man living in Niardo, a quiet mountain town in the province of Brescia.⁸ Living a secluded life between work and his parents’ house, Jarmoune spent all his time –up to 15 hours a day– online, disseminating jihadist material and connecting with like-minded individuals around the world.⁹ After months of monitoring, the authorities decided to arrest Jarmoune after he conducted online surveillance of Jewish targets in Milan.¹⁰ In May 2013 Jarmoune was sentenced to five years and four months in prison.¹¹

As they wrapped up the case against Jarmoune, the authorities stumbled upon another young man of Moroccan descent who, like Jarmoune, lived with his well-integrated family in a small rural town near Brescia.¹² Without ever leaving Italy, Anas El Abboubi had managed to build contacts with the leaders of various extremist groups, from the German-based Millatu Ibrahim to Sharia4Belgium.¹³ El Abboubi had apparently taken it upon himself to establish the Italian branch of the franchise, starting the blog Sharia4Italy and involving a handful of local friends. Concerned by the increased militancy of his online activities and by the fact that he had looked at various iconic sites in Brescia online, the authorities decided to arrest El Abboubi.¹⁴ He was later released as a court judged his behaviour not criminally relevant.¹⁵

⁸ Interviews with Italian authorities, Brescia and Milan, September and October 2013; verdict in the Jarmoune case, Tribunal of Brescia, verdict 613/13, 16/V/2013.

⁹ Indictment of Mohamed Jarmoune, Tribunal of Cagliari, case 984/2012, 13/III/2012.

¹⁰ Verdict in the Jarmoune case, Tribunal of Brescia, verdict 613/13, 16/V/2013.

¹¹ Verdict in the Jarmoune case, Tribunal of Brescia, verdict 613/13, 16/V/2013.

¹² Interview with Italian officials, Brescia, October 2013; indictment of Anas El Abboubi, Tribunal of Brescia, case 28496/12, 10/VI/2013.

¹³ Interview with Italian officials, Brescia, October 2013; Laura Damiani, ‘Manette al padre di “Sharia4Italy”, terrorista internazionale’, *Corriere della Sera*, 12/VI/2013; Wilma Petenzi, ‘L’aspirante bombarolo sgridato dal padre per cento euro spariti’, *Corriere della Sera*, 14/VI/2013.

¹⁴ Indictment of Anas El Abboubi, Tribunal of Brescia, case 7456/11, 10/VI/2013; Wilma Petenzi, ‘Nel mirino dello studente pure questore e piazza Loggia’, *Corriere della Sera*, 13/VI/2013.

¹⁵ In November 2013 the Italian supreme court (Corte di cassazione) confirmed the decision. Interviews with Brescia prosecutor Antonio Chiappani and El Abboubi’s lawyer, Nicola Mannatrizio, Brescia, September and October 2013; Wilma Petenzi, ‘“Terrorista” a Vobarno, la procura pronta a ricorrere in Cassazione’, *Corriere della Sera*, 2/VII/2013; ‘El Abboubi resta libero, ma è “scomparso”’, *Brescia Oggi*, 9/XI/2013; interview with the Italian authorities, Rome and Brescia, October 2013; ‘El Abboubi resta libero, ma è “scomparso”’, *Brescia Oggi*, 9/XI/2013.

El Abboubi has since travelled to Syria, where he reportedly joined the al-Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. In August 2013 he created a new Facebook profile under the name Anas al-Italy and posted several pictures of himself shooting or posing with heavy weapons.¹⁶ He also posted a video titled *Response to secular fundamentalism* in which El Abboubi, speaking in front of a camera, outlined his spiritual testament. In a cadence reminiscent of his teenage rapping days, he delivered a 15-minute condemnation of Western society, which he described as ‘perverse and melancholic’.

Another active member of the Italian online jihadist scene was in the spotlight in June 2013, when news was released that Giuliano Ibrahim Delnevo had died in Syria. Born in Genoa in 1989, Delnevo had grown up in a middle-class family and had converted to Islam in 2008.¹⁷ He had been active in the local Islamic scene, but as his views became radicalised he was unable to find like-minded individuals in Genoa. He sought them online and in European countries with a more highly-developed Salafist scene. By 2011, Delnevo was actively trying to join jihadist groups but was struggling to find the right contacts to do so.¹⁸ After a first, unsuccessful, attempt in the summer of 2012, Delnevo managed to enter Syria a few months later. He reportedly died while fighting alongside a Chechen-led brigade of foreign fighters.¹⁹

The characteristics of Italian home-grown jihadism

The current panorama of jihadism in Italy is extremely fragmented and diverse, marked by the presence of various actors with very different features. ‘Traditional’ networks, although weakened by the waves of arrests and expulsions carried out by the authorities over the past 15 years, are still active.²⁰ But cases like those of Jarmoune, El Abboubi and Delnevo indicate that a home-grown jihadism with characteristics similar to the phenomenon seen over the past few years throughout central and northern Europe has reached Italy. Three cases do not make a trend, but there are indications that these cases are not isolated incidents but, rather, the most visible manifestations of a bigger phenomenon. A 2012 intelligence report for the Italian Parliament, in fact, alerted to the presence of several individuals ‘belonging to the second generation of immigrants and Italian converts who are

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/anas.alitaly.7>, accessed 1/XII/2013.

¹⁷ Interview with Carlo Delnevo, Giuliano’s father, Sestri Levante, October 2013; Marco Imarisio, ‘Quei 40-50 jihadisti partiti per la Siria dalle città italiane’, *Corriere della Sera*, 19/VI/2013; Bruno Persano, ‘Mio figlio è morto da eroe e oggi sono orgoglioso di lui’, *La Repubblica*, 19/VI/2013; interview with the Italian authorities, Genoa, September 2013.

¹⁸ Interview with the Italian authorities, Genoa (September 2013) and Rome (October 2013).

¹⁹ Interview with the Italian authorities, Genoa, September 2013; interview with Carlo Delnevo, Giuliano’s father, Sestri Levante, October 2013; Gabriele Piccardo, ‘Giuliano Ibrahim Delnevo: l’amico Umberto Marcozzi: “Mi scrisse che in Siria i martiri profumano”’, *Huffington Post*, 18/VI/2013; Andrea Cortellari, ‘Siria, Delnevo indagato per terrorismo a Genova già dal 2009’, *Il Giornale*, 18/VI/2013.

²⁰ 2011 annual report to the Italian Parliament (Relazione sulla politica dell’informazione per la sicurezza), p. 76; 2012 annual report to the Italian Parliament (Relazione sulla politica dell’informazione per la sicurezza), p. 20.

characterized by an uncompromising interpretation of Islam and attitudes of intolerance towards Western customs'.²¹

Home-grown jihadism in Italy is, so far, a substantially smaller phenomenon than in most central and northern European countries. Providing exact numbers is an impossible task, but, according to research conducted by the author and conversations with several senior Italian counterterrorism officials, it can be argued that the individuals actively involved in this new home-grown jihadist scene number around 40 to 50. Similarly, it can be argued that the number of those in various ways and in varying degrees sympathising with jihadism is somewhere in the lower hundreds. It is, in substance, a small milieu of individuals with varying sociological characteristics (age, sex, ethnic origin, education and social condition) who share a commitment to jihadist ideology. Most of them are scattered throughout northern Italy, from big cities like Milan and Bologna to tiny villages. A few are located in the centre or the south of the country.

It should be clarified that most of these individuals have not been involved in any violent activity. Most of them limit their commitment to jihadist ideology to an often frantic online activity aimed at publishing and disseminating material that ranges from the purely theological to the operational. While this activity at times represents a violation of the Italian penal code, most prospective home-grown Italian jihadists are just that –hopefuls– and do not resort to violence. Yet, as the cases of Jarmoune, El Abboubi and Delnevo show, some members of this country-wide informal scene occasionally make –or attempt to make– the leap from the keyboard to the real world. Why, when and how that leap from virtual to actual militancy happens is the subject of much debate and concern among counterterrorism officials and experts.

It is possible to identify some characteristics that are common to this new scenario. The first is their detachment from Italian mosques. In some cases home-grown militants do not frequent them of their own volition, either because they consider them not to be in tune with their interpretation of Islam or because they fear surveillance by the authorities. But, in most cases, it is mosque officials who make it clear to the militants that certain views and activities are not tolerated on their premises. Most Italian mosques have, in the words of Claudio Galzerano –one of the experts in Italian counterterrorism–, the ‘right antibodies’ and avoid ‘bad apples’.

The new scenario also seems to be unconnected with the ‘traditional’ jihadists and their mosques. There are various factors that might explain this. One appears to be the linguistic barrier between the two groups. While militants of the first generation are largely North Africans whose native language is Arabic and whose fluency in Italian is often limited, the home-grown activists have the opposite characteristics,

²¹ 2012 annual report to the Italian Parliament (Relazione sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza), p. 46.

often hampering communication between the two.

But arguably more important in explaining the disconnection between the two groups is the diffidence with which traditional structures view the new home-grown generation. The secretive and risk-averse traditional structures, in fact, appear unreceptive to the newcomers. It is likely that they might suspect some of the home-grown activists, particularly Italian converts, to be spies seeking to infiltrate them. Even if the veracity of the home-grown activists' commitment is proved, in many cases their behaviour is deemed to be risky. Many of them, in fact, dress (long white robes, military fatigues, long beard...) or act in extremely conspicuous ways. They often openly express their radical views online or in various public venues. This sort of conduct, which inevitably attracts the attention of the authorities, makes the new home-grown activists extremely unattractive to the eyes of traditionalists.

Completely at odds with mainstream mosques and Islamic organisations, shunned by established jihadist networks and operating as individuals or small clusters throughout the national territory, Italian home-grown activists have created their own scene, which is mostly Internet-based. It is, in fact, on various blogs, Facebook and other online social media that this tiny community comes together.

A handful of individuals are the key connectors in this scene, being extremely active online (and, in some cases, also in the real world) and in constant communication with many other online users. Unlike most of the militants of the first generation, who were only passive consumers of online propaganda, this new generation of home-grown activists are also often active producers of their own jihadist material. Jarmoune, El Abboubi, Delnevo and many others, in fact, translated and posted various texts and produced their own videos –in some cases of a remarkable quality–.

A problem of integration?

Understanding the factors that make an individual become radicalised has been one of the most controversial subjects of the terrorism-related academic and policymaking debate of the past 15 years.²² Theories explaining the phenomenon abound but most experts agree that every case is different and that in most cases it is a combination of factors, rather than just one, that radicalise an individual. One of the factors often mentioned in the debate on radicalisation among European Muslims is lack of integration. Particularly in the first part of the 2000s many argued that the root of the problem was the marginalisation, disenfranchisement and discrimination felt by many European Muslims. Unwilling to tolerate these miserable conditions, the theory argued that some of them chose jihadism as a way of challenging the system and taking their revenge.

²² See Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010), 'Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 33, nr 9, p. 797–814.

Over the past few years this theory has been criticised by many experts who believe it has no empirical basis. First, an analysis of the cases of home-grown jihadists in both Europe and North America has shown that many, if not most, have not been subject to socio-economic disenfranchisement. Many are indeed drifters, individuals who have suffered problems ranging from substance abuse to chronic unemployment. But many are university students or relatively successful professionals, often faring much better than most of their peers. Moreover, the theory linking radicalisation to the lack of socio-economic integration is flawed because it does not explain why only a statistically insignificant minority of the many European Muslims that unquestionably live in condition of disenfranchisement become radicalised. It is obvious that other factors must determine the phenomenon.

While it is impossible to provide answers that are applicable to all cases, it can be argued that socio-economic disenfranchisement, while playing a role, is not a determining factor in the radicalisation of the vast majority of European Muslims. Perhaps the answers lies in another kind of integration, more difficult to assess but arguably more important. Integration in the sense of a sense of belonging to a certain society, irrespective of one's socio-economic conditions, appears to be a more important factor. Many European Muslims who radicalise are individuals confused about their identity and that find a sense of belonging in a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam rather than in a European identity.

Moreover, traditionally, many young men of all socio-economic conditions have been attracted by radical ideas. Limiting the analysis just to Italy, many of the individuals that joined both left- and right-wing militant groups that bloodied the country's streets in the 1970s and early 1980s were university students and scions of middle (and, in some cases, upper) class families. The personal desire for rebellion, meaning, camaraderie and adventure are factors that are not secondary when analysing radicalisation patterns.

The argument that the roots of radicalisation should be sought in an individual's psychological profile and his search for a personal identity is supported by the analysis of the few cases seen so far of Italian home-grown jihadists. Neither Jarmoune nor El Abboubi can be considered to be poorly integrated from a socio-economic perspective. Both lived with their families in more than decent dwellings in small towns in the province of Brescia. Jarmoune worked for a company that installed electrical systems and had a permanent contract, a luxury lacked by many of his Italian peers.²³ El Abboubi studied at a local school. The families of both individuals are described by most as well integrated.²⁴

²³ Fernando Reinares, '¿Es que integración social y radicalización yihadista son compatibles?: una reflexión sobre el caso de Mohamed Jarmoune en Brescia', ARI nr 27/2012, Elcano Royal Institute, 17/IV/2012.

²⁴ It should be noted that several of El Abboubi's relatives who live in the Brescia area have extensive criminal records.

This argument can be applied to Delnevo's case with an even greater significance. Born in a middle-class Italian Catholic family, Delnevo had none of the integration problems attributed by some to European Muslims who become radicalised. It is obvious that in the Delnevo's case –but no differently from Jarmoune and El Abboubi– the roots of his radicalisation are in his personal traits and his unwillingness, rather than his inability, to fit into Italian society. All three young men struggled to find an identity and flirted with various alternative ideologies (it is in this regard interesting that Delnevo had a fascination with fascism and El Abboubi with hip hop) before embracing jihadism. But this trajectory seems to be clearly dictated by an intellectual development determined by personal choices and not by any kind of socio-economic disenfranchisement.

Conclusion

Comparative analyses have only a limited value, as each country presents unique peculiarities. Yet it is arguable that, historically, both Muslim communities and jihadist networks in Italy and Spain present similar characteristics. It is therefore not far-fetched to consider the possibility that the shift towards forms of home-grown jihadism seen in Italy could also be seen in the near future in Spain, as in both countries it is only now that a second generation of Italian and Spanish born/raised Muslims is coming of age.