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Young Muslims and Islamophobia in Italy: What is at Stake?

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Abstract

The objective of the paper is to highlight the complexity of Islam in Italy, between first and second generations, the role played by the media in depicting Islam as the ultimate otherness, discussing whether the success of Islamic fundamentalism in the world has resulted in new forms of Islamophobia in the Italian society and if and how Islamic communities reacted to that and what are the risks for the second generations and the Muslim communities at large. Thanks to a varied and extensive desk literature review analysis and qualitative interviews carried out in Italy with key informants (representatives of mosques and Islamic centres, presidents and directors of Muslim organizations of first and second generation, academics and experts on Islam in Italy), the contribution will outline the complex relationship between media, immigration and Islamophobia and the debate around it considering a national security perspective and the importance of social inclusion to prevent radicalism and to foster counter-terrorism policies.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Migration, Media.

1. Immigration and Islam: first, second and third generations

In Italy, religious affiliation as a sensitive data is not collected at the national level, but analysis and estimates now agree in describing the Muslim presence in Italy as of January 1, 2020 at around 1 million and 574 thousand individuals (ISMU, 2020) equal to 29.2% of the all foreign residents. Once an agreement on the number has been reached, however, it is important to try to understand who are the Muslims in Italy nowadays, what are their characteristics. In order to do so it is first of all fundamental to clarify what we mean when we talk about Islam.

In the public debate among experts and in the mass media, two antithetical positions are often confronted: an essentialist vision, which considers religion as a fixed and immutable entity and, consequently, thinks that Islam has been defined once and for all in a series of sacred texts, generally the Quran and the Sunna, and an existentialist vision, which instead considers religion as something fluid, always in the making. From this point of view, Islam does not exist, but Muslims do exist: the actual contents of the Islamic religion are therefore completely determined by socio-economic, political and cultural elements. Obviously neither of these two views is 100% correct and, since the truth is always somewhere in between, it is important to understand that in Islam (as well as in many other religions) there is a core of beliefs, but many ways of living and practising it.

In particular, considering the Muslims living in Italy we can identify some distinctions at various levels: first of all the confessional distinction between Sunnis and Shia; secondly, the geographical origin of the Muslims and, therefore, all those traditions and cultural and social elements which, over the centuries, have been intertwined with the Islamic faith and practice - Islam practiced in Albania has different characteristics from that of Pakistan and so on (Hannachi, 2018); affiliation

in certain groups and communities (from the more mystical-esoteric Sufi brotherhoods to the Salafis, who practice a more literalist interpretation of Islam) and, lastly, increasingly important, generational differences, the Islam practiced by a father or a mother, who immigrated in the 90s from Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan is different from the one experienced and practiced by a young man and a young woman born and raised in Italy.

In the Islamic communities in Italy we are witnessing today a great challenge, a confrontation, sometimes a clash, which is permeating all aspects of life. And it is neither the clash between Sunnis and Shia nor the one between fundamentalists and “moderates”, but it is between different generations, between fathers and mothers and sons and, above all, daughters. The young are questioning the religion and religiosity of their parents. This process, often gives rise to unprecedented paths, negotiations and re-appropriation of spaces, times, rituals and habits which unfortunately are not given any prominence by the media and the society as a whole. While, instead, it is more common to find news and articles where Islam is linked to security and social issues. There have been and unfortunately it will continue to be clashes with dramatic endings inside the Muslim community as well as security issues linked to groups or specific individuals, but there is also a whole other world of non-violent negotiations and creative mediations and practices that take place daily in Muslim families and communities. Looking at them closely, many of these dynamics do not appear so different from the processes that have been witnessed even within many Catholic families, of other religious denominations or even secular ones.

The adherence to religion changes, the way of practicing that religion also changes: for the first generations, in fact, the prayer rooms were also a meeting place for people of the same country and culture, the language used was the language of the country of origin, going to the mosque on Friday was a way of maintaining the link with their country, with their origins, of showing that the community of origin and its values had not been betrayed (Sayad, 2002). Islam for young people represents a form of cultural innovation: participation in a democratic context, the use of a language different from that of their own community of origin, the socialization in Italy influence their choices, significantly contributing to a critical questioning of their religious affiliation (Premazzi & Ricucci, 2014).

Faith is not abandoned, but revised and adapted to the context of everyday life, resulting in a pluralism of values that claims its own recognition (Cesari & Pacini, 2005). The socialization of young people in Italy gives rise to autonomous paths of relationship with the sacred: new reflections are born on their own personal identity and personal and collective religious affiliation. Young people often choose “their own way, seeking compromises and new syntheses, asking questions about the traditions they have inherited, living the faith in a personal and authentic way and not with uncritical adherence” (Granata, 2010, p. 92).

Considering the idea that children have of the family religious context, we have been witnessed a process of revision and reinvention of religious practices, which reflects a growing subjectivity in relation to the inherited tradition. If for the first generations living their faith in emigration often means also maintaining the religious-cultural traditions of the country of origin, in the children religion acquires greater autonomy with respect to these elements. There are many adaptation strategies and in some cases there is a certain interest in deepening the fundamental contents of their faith, to react to a context in which secularization and religious pluralism coexist, phenomena that question traditional values and principles.

There is a progressive detachment from an “ethnic” Islam and the affirmation of

a personal relationship with the religious dimension. Young Muslims no longer see Islam as the reproduction of religious practices of their parents' country of origin in a new context; the religious belonging of the second and third generations is rather as a lifestyle linked to a choice: a choice that helps to understand oneself and feel part of a community (Premazzi, 2017).

Often for the first generation the fact of being in a different society, without familiar linguistic-cultural references, contributes to a perception of religion as an element of identity recognition and strengthening, but also as an antidote to loneliness and isolation. This is above all because going to mosques and places of worship allows meeting with people of the same country of origin with whom to share experiences and needs. Therefore, building prayer rooms, mosques and cultural centers has been guided not only by spiritual needs, but also by other needs such as meeting and transmitting the culture of origin to their children (Bastener & Dassetto, 1993). Mosques and prayer rooms in Italy continue to be a point of reference for the first generations, carrying out those typical functions of religious organizations in emigration, not only for spiritual and religious support, but also for preserving their identity, values and sense of community (Portes & Hao, 2002).

For the second generations, believing is a conscious and autonomous choice and, therefore, sometimes practice does not go through places of worship, too tied to the countries of origin, often led by imams who don't know the Italian language and culture. Religious affiliation moves to another level, more global: second generations belong to associations of young Italians of Muslim religion, sharing the relationship with Italy and the experience of children of migrations and believers of a minority religion (of these the most famous is the Young Muslims of Italy – *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia* (GMI) association, created after 11 September to present a different face of Islam and try to counter the image of an Islam linked to terrorism), and, at the same time, they feel to belong, also thanks to the massive use of new technologies, to the Umma, the great community of Muslim believers around the world (Premazzi, 2016).

At the local level, the main objectives of first-generation Muslims concerned basic needs such as the allocation of spaces to be dedicated to places of worship and recognition of their rights and cultural practices (Allievi, 2009). Muslim associations therefore focused on some requests for the observance of the Islamic practice (Castro, 1996) (for example the authorization for the opening of halal butchers or slaughterhouses, the allocation of building areas for the construction of mosques and places of worship, the provision of areas dedicated to the burial of the dead of Muslim faith, the possibility of having food conforming to the Islamic diet in public canteens, religious assistance by ministers of worship for hospitalized, military and prisoners, etc.), requests that were addressed first to local authorities and only subsequently to the central state institutions. In this process, the associations represented an important point of contact, both for the members of the communities and for the local institutions (Premazzi & Ricucci, 2015).

As various researches confirm (Abis, 2004; Frisina, 2007), Muslim associations have helped young people, for whom Islam was not a central daily reference, to reappropriate of their history, their culture, and to assimilate and internalize those principles that had not passed through the family of origin. On the other hand, however, the second generations appear to be well aware of the difference existing with respect to their parents in relation to the religious and cultural context in which both of them grew up and above all on the fact that, in these contexts, religion is not something that should be explained or transmitted systematically because it is already an integral part of life.

The difficulty of being Muslim in a context that is not Islamic also strengthens the children of immigration in the perception of themselves as “true believers”, who have made a personal choice of adhering, an autonomous daily choice that require continuous confirmation and negotiations. Furthermore, the second generations are increasingly aware of their multiple identities and of the possibility of making them coexist, of the possibility of being young, Italian (European) and Muslim (Premazzi, 2017).

2. Parents and children: challenges of the Muslim communities in Italy

Islam nowadays cannot count on any kind of agreement with the Italian state. The main cause of this situation lies in the lack of a unified and recognized leadership among the different Muslim organizations. This difficulty is further aggravated by the presence of multiple national groups of Muslim immigrants on the Italian territory. The ethnic, national and doctrinal diversity of the groups is reflected in the practical organization on the territory and has meant that no group or association has managed over the years to represent the Muslim community in Italy as a whole.

The differences in Islam are to a large extent rooted in the cultural and ethnic-national background of immigrants (Hannachi, 2018). Local, national and international organizations of Muslims in Europe, and not only in Italy, grouped around ethnic-national characteristics and each group or sub-group has founded its own associations and built its own religious center. This is obviously linked to the propensity of immigrants to look for familiar forms of religiosity, often referred to the countries of origin, in the new non-Muslim society, but also to the profound heterogeneity of beliefs, which range from radical or strictly observant versions of Islam to others more secularized, as is generally the case of Muslims from the Balkans. Various attempts have been made at all levels to increase cooperation between Muslim organizations, sometimes even promoted by the national government of the host society, but these attempts have often been hampered by ethnic-national and doctrinal particularities and consequently by the difficulty to find a single, recognized and representative representation. Furthermore, many associations and organizations of the first generation have a marked transnational orientation, which leads to their involvement in religious and sometimes political activities in the countries of origin and vice versa to the involvement of the countries of origin in issues concerning Muslims in host countries (Salzbrunn, 2008).

As for Islam, then, issues such as authority and representation have strictly to do with intergenerational dynamics, also in relation to the way in which the first generations will consider the Islam of their children: if confined to youth associations of “eternally young”, if co-opted to influence their orientations or if recognized as a “third way” capable of expressing authority and representation (given the competences relating to the Italian context, culture and language and that of origin).

One of them concerns the choice and creation and training of the leaders: it was initially compromised by the lack of suitable candidates among migrants, belonging, in Italy, above all, to low social classes. The desire of some members of the second generations to act as a leader using the best knowledge of the Italian language and of the context by proposing an Islam different from the one of their fathers has highlighted some difficulties since it is not taken for granted that adults recognize the role of community representatives in young people a role that threat-

ens to obscure figures that have for long held roles of responsibility. The challenge still to be played will concern the ability of Islamic associations to develop transparent processes of leadership formation, capable of guaranteeing independence and pluralism.

At the moment, the creation of a leadership is one of the most important issues that Islam is facing in Italy (Allievi, 2018). The selection process, in particular with respect to some youth associations, risks to be characterized by nepotistic drifting, especially as regards the theological and cultural education, still remaining too oriented towards (and influenced by) the countries of origin.

Another critical point concerns the boundaries within which the second generation was placed by the Italian society: the second generation seemed in fact to have contributed to breaking down the wall of mistrust raised towards Muslims after 9/11. The attacks in New York, in fact, constituted a watershed, in the Italian society, and in Western society in general. One of their effects was the reconstruction of an ideal of “we”, as opposed to “they”, the Muslims (Pogliano & Premazzi, 2014).

In the years following 2001, the border seemed to have shifted including the second generations in the “we community” through, however, the radical exclusion of the first and the creation of a new border, the one between first and second generations. However, this border was again questioned by ISIS and by the attacks in Europe as well as by the departure from Europe of foreign fighters, second generations, for Iraq and Syria from 2014 onwards, risking to bring back the second generations as well within that “they” whose religion is perceived as dangerous and irreconcilable with “our” culture and society.

Finally, the link between the Islamic religion and terrorism strengthened with the 9/11 and, in recent years, with ISIS and the series of attacks in Europe, do not play in favor of Muslims, but contribute to increasing prejudice and suspicion up to explicit forms of Islamophobia (Premazzi & Ricucci, 2017). However, we must be careful that these fully understandable worries and fears do not turn into a boomerang. The difficulties in accessing citizenship for the children of foreigners (law still based on *ius sanguinis*) (Premazzi, 2018), as well as the persistence of forms of discrimination in various areas, from access to work to religious practice, against young Muslim, the fact of feeling kept under watch, of being considered “terrorists” only for their own religion are all elements that can, in fact, determine dynamics of rejection, social isolation, feelings that can threaten the sense of community.

This situation can leave the floor to violent radicalization processes. If it is true that radicalization has multiple causes (Vidino, 2014; Leiken, 2012), not only discrimination and the perception of rejection, and can be linked to weaknesses, sometimes even personal ones, of individuals who end up embracing violence and international jihadism, because in search of “meaning” for their life and of belonging to a group. It is also important not to create second-class citizens, real or perceived ghettos, because these are just a time bomb ready to burst. On this aspect, a fundamental role is played by the mass media to which we often rely for information on what we do not know and what worries us: the more traditional media (TV, newspapers), however, often present Islam through generalizations, feeding stereotypes and prejudices. On the other hand, internet and social networks convey various images of this religion, but in a space that is absolutely not under control.

It follows that public discourse, especially that disseminated and fed by media channels, often find itself between excessively moral and benevolent behavior, blind to the objective problems of certain phenomena, and an a priori condemnation feed by stereotypes, which can create the ground for feelings of revenge. After all, there is a risk that only the politicized or mythicized aspects of Islam will be

shown, far from the reality experienced daily by Italian Muslims. In this terrain, not only prejudices can proliferate, but also political exploitation and consequent choices based on the emotion of those subjects who only partially grasp the complexity of the Islamic reality. The challenge must therefore be to deconstruct prejudices and to account for the complexity and true challenges of Islam in Italy (Premazzi, 2017).

As it appears already evident from this introduction, Islam in Italy is highly complex and changes are underway due to the national composition of the Muslim population and the international scenario. The role played by the media is fundamental. Their action in depicting Islam as the ultimate otherness, promoting Islamic fundamentalism as the only way of living and practising Islam risks to result in new forms of Islamophobia. The Muslim communities are reacting to that, taking a stand against integralism, radicalization and violence, with training, education and interreligious dialogue activities at the local level as well as at the national level. At the same time, the second generation are trying to find their role in the Italian society, promoting themselves as representatives on an Islam compatible with citizens' activism marked by pluralism and democracy.

For this article, key informants (representatives of mosques and Islamic centres, presidents and directors of Muslim organizations of first and second generation, academics and experts on Islam in Italy) were contacted and interviewed in two Italian cities: Milan and Turin.

The various key informants were asked if they have seen a change of attitude in the Italian society since the proclamation of the Islamic State and other episodes of terrorism and violence happened in Europe. They were asked to consider both the media discourse at national level and the local level and the collaborations and projects developed with other organizations in their city. They were also asked to describe activities and initiatives undertaken to fight against Islamophobia and the potential radicalization of their members (also in response to Islamophobia, perceived in the European societies).

3. Islamophobia

Islamophobia refers to the negative attitude of feelings towards Islam and Muslims (Bleich, 2011). A report by the Runnymede Trust (1997) entitled "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All" defines Islamophobia as "unfair" (pp.1-4) dread or hatred of Islam. Additionally, the recent influx of refugees has become another reason for the rise of Islamophobia, a classic case of symbolic threat. Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon (Modood & Ahmad, 2007; Poynting & Mason, 2007). There is still no consensus on its global recognized definition. Dekker and van der Noll (2009) have pointed out the attitudinal and behavioural dimensions of Islamophobia. As they explain: "The behavioural dimension concerns discriminatory practice and violence towards Muslims, while the attitudinal dimension refers to the unfavourable opinions about them" (Duman, 2021). Akgönül (2018) presents a similar classification; he limits Islamophobia with opinion-based leanings, and he defines discrimination and even physical attacks as Muslimophobia. Newcomer Muslims have become the "other" as the source of tension employed by rising populist movements in Europe (Duman, 2021).

Islamophobia was defined by Miles and Brown (2003) as hostility specifically directed towards Muslims as such. According to scholars, we may talk about Isla-

mophobia when some of the following elements are present: Islam is seen as monolithic, static and insensitive to change, separate from and without shared values with other cultures, irrational, sexist, violent, aggressive and supporting terrorism. All of these elements would therefore naturally imply a clash of civilizations. But the term Islamophobia may lead us astray because it reminds us of the fear of Islam historically rooted in Western Christian culture since the time of the Crusades, for which reason some scholars have tried to substitute other terms such as anti-Muslim or anti-Islamic.

According to the Islamophobia in Europe Report,

Islamophobia is about a dominant group of people aiming at seizing, stabilising and widening their power by means of defining a scapegoat – real or invented – and excluding this scapegoat from the resources/rights/definition of a constructed “we”. Islamophobia operates by constructing a static “Muslim” identity, which is attributed in negative terms and generalized for all Muslims. At the same time, Islamophobic images are fluid and vary in different contexts as Islamophobia tells us more about the Islamophobe than it tells us about the Muslims/Islam (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2016, p. 7).

In recent years, anti-Muslim feelings have been fueled above all by the association of Islam with terrorism, especially in the wake of the proclamation of the so-called Islamic State and renewed attacks and violence undertaken “in name of Islam”, re-activating the barely-forgotten Muslim-terrorism and immigrant-terrorism associations started with the 9/11 and that has the effect of de-humanising the Muslims, but also by the idea of a Muslim invasion due to the high birth rate of the Muslims compared to other groups (El Ayoubi, 2018). Terrorism has reinforced the symbolic idea of Islam as the ultimate otherness (Allievi, 2018; Duman, 2021), which is to say those who practice a religion and follow values and ways of behaviour perceived as being distant from our ways of thinking and acting, and remarkable for their power of penetration. With regard to Islam, however, repeated public representation of the fact that such a cultural and religious structure cannot be assimilated, or is incompatible with democracy, threatens to stress the clash of civilizations element, unleashing a self-fulfilling prophecy (Premazzi & Ricucci, 2020).

4. Media, Immigration and Islamophobia

As Alain Touraine (2009) writes, “Contemporary racism makes the Other and anti-Subject in order to express one’s own discontent and one’s shame at no longer being the same Subject” (p. 1). In addition, the media often fuel opposition between a positive “we” and a negative “they”, and migrants are portrayed as a collective rather than as individuals. This seems particularly true in the Italian case where, with the increase in immigration and the association of immigration with crime over the past three decades, various national, ethnic and religious groups have become targets for more or less explicit and violent forms of racism, phobias and anti-feelings. According to Ernesto Calvanese (2011), author of the volume *“Media e immigrazione tra stereotipi e pregiudizi. La rappresentazione dello straniero nel racconto giornalistico”* (Media and Immigration between Stereotypes and Prejudice. The representation of foreigners in the media), “not a day goes by when immigration is not talked about by the media, and not a day goes by without hints of danger, of crime, of social alarm, of the annoyance correlated – ineluctably and deterministically – with this topic”. This was also confirmed by the last report by

Carta di Roma “Notizie in transito” (News on the move) (2020). This helps to self-fuel and reinforce the same stereotypes and prejudices. The press (and consequently the online versions of the main Italian newspapers) publish a lot of articles about immigration but, in most cases, they do so in terms of conflict and social problems, over-emphasizing foreign citizens involved in crime.

In the 1990s the association of immigration and crime mostly concerned Albanians, at the time the most numerous immigrant national group in Italy. As a result of this stigmatization, Albanians chose an assimilation strategy of integration (Romania, 2004).

Subsequently – after 9/11 and a visible growing Muslim presence in Italy – feelings of hostility, partly fueled by commentators, writers and journalists, were directed towards this specific group. In most surveys of the media, the predominant image of Islam is that of a threat to security, culture and basic Western values. Then it was the turn of the Roma (and, by extension through ignorance, Romanians in general), as a result of some violent episodes involving some of them, pounced upon by the press and leading to outright attacks on some of their settlements.

In recent years, partly as a result of the economic crisis, general racism has grown against the vast category of “immigrants” without any distinction between new arrivals and those already settled, some even holding Italian citizenship. The situation has deteriorated in the last years, finding a new target in refugees and asylum-seekers. In this context, the proclamation of the Islamic State and the attacks carried out by its adherents have shone the racism spotlight on the “Muslims” question, re-activating the barely-forgotten Muslim-terrorism and immigrant-terrorism associations. Indeed, hostility towards immigrants overlaps with animosity shown towards Islamic extremism, justified by accusations of disloyalty towards the countries where numerous, variegated Islamic communities reside, constituting an internal enemy threatening to perpetrate violent attacks against their host countries.

One headline after another warned of the potential presence in Italy of what the press termed “the terrorists next door,” creating a climate of fear in public opinion. Specifically, there was increasing attention on this topic and a growing number of articles dealing with Islam and Muslim communities in an accusatory, aggressive, attacking tone. The Pulitzer Prize winner, Glen Greenwald, commenting on coverage of the January, 2015, Paris attacks, notes that: “It’s absolutely the really scary climate that has emerged in the wake of Paris, an extremely anti-Muslim strain of animosity that we’ve seen historically in the past and that is both ugly and really dangerous”. Italian newspaper *Libero* got sued because of its front-page headline “Bastardi Islamici” (Muslim Bastards), published after the attack to Charlie Hebdo (Siino & Levantino, 2015; Allievi, 2018; Moual, 2018). Television news programmes, newspapers and magazines play – sometimes contradictory – variations on the Muslims-terrorists, Islam-terrorism theme. In particular, many headlines screamingly demanded that Italian Muslim communities should take a stand against terrorists and terrorism, almost as a provocation or necessity to defend themselves against the public accusation of complicity by collective responsibility or connivance with terrorist activity. Less publicity was given, however, to campaigns promoted in various Italian cities, for example, *Not in My Name*, explicitly distancing themselves, by word and deed, on the part of prominent representatives and spokespersons from Italian Muslim communities.

Yet in recent years much has been done to improve media attitudes to immigration. In 2008, the Rome Charter (Carta di Roma) came into effect, a code of professional ethics regarding migrants, asylum-seekers and victims of trafficking, signed

by the national council of journalists' union and the national federation of the Italian press in collaboration with the UNHCR. In 2012, guidelines for applying the Rome Charter were drawn up, a practical tool helping information operators who agree with the need for greater care in professional practice when dealing with the topics of immigration and asylum. And in 2015 the Leone Moressa Foundation, with the support of the Open Society Foundation, issued a handbook about correct communication regarding immigration, with the aim of combating widespread stereotypes and resulting discriminatory. More recently, in 2017, the UNESCO published a handbook for journalists about "Terrorism and the Media" to give guidelines regarding the use of some problematic words in the Media and especially the nexus migration-Islam-terrorism.

Among the migrants, since the 9/11, Muslims and the Muslim identity on the media, has been pictured as The Other, eternal guests and a threat to security (Salihi, 2004), an ideal homogeneous "they", the Muslims, opposed to "us" (Duman, 2021).

On the other side, journalists and academics strive also then to frame new figures with whom they can talk, that the society can "integrate" or that are already "integrated" and that can cross that border "we versus they": the "moderate Muslim", the "European Muslim" (Coglievina & Premazzi, 2015; Hannachi, 2018; Peta, 2018). To these Muslims is generally requested, although they have not always been reported or highlighted by the mass media, to make public statements of condemnation of terrorism and religious extremism, often used to "reassure" the society in which Muslim migrants live

Especially during 2014 after the self-proclamation of the so-called Islamic State, some of the Islamic organizations, principally those which had acquired a role and an importance at national level, clearly stated their non-involvement in fundamentalist and violent interpretations, considering them a deviation from the correct interpretation of Islam. In particular, many reiterated that Islam does not justify violence against believers of other religions and that those who commit acts of extremism, war and oppression are just using religion for political aims and power¹.

5. A role for Muslims' associations

In this context, it is interesting to mention the reference to the second generations contained in the "Patto Nazionale per un Islam Italiano" (National Pact for an Italian Islam) signed in February 2017. The document was part of the Italian national strategy to promote security against the Islamic terrorism, but seeking also to meet the need of the Muslim communities that signed the pact (11 associations), to obtain official recognition, a signing of commitment from both parts, the government and the Islamic community, towards the long-awaited agreement (Intesa). The prevention of the terrorist threat and the fight against Islamophobia (or, rather, to the culture of the suspect that generates it) were, therefore, the ground on which the agreement was built, an agreement that, for the first time and unlike previous initiatives (for example, the Carta dei Valori della Cittadinanza e dell'Integrazione (Chart of Citizenship Values and Integration)), envisages not only a commitment requested to the communities, but also of the Ministry itself. The pact is thus configured as a mutual recognition of values and activities already established by the Is-

¹ Events and declarations can be found in Coglievina and Premazzi, 2015.

lamic communities. In the final part of the pact an explicit reference is made to the planning of “one or more meetings of national and public relevance between the institutions and the young Muslims” recognizing the importance of these youngsters for the future of the Italian Islam and the dialogue with the national institutions (Premazzi, 2017). The pact, however, also brings with it the risk for Muslims and in particular for the young “moderate”, “European” “integrated” Muslims that is never enough and they are always under surveillance and have to prove every time to be true believers and good citizens. If one of the objectives, repeatedly called by the former Minister of Interior Minniti, was to dissociate immigration and terrorism without, however, underestimating the link between lack of integration and terrorism, the same term “lack of integration” was perceived by many already integrated Muslim - and in some cases also Italian citizens - as a treatment for “second-class citizens”. Citizens who found themselves, once again, to receive an exceptional and unique treatment still waiting to sign the official agreement with the Italian State (Intesa), that will provide them with full legal and social recognition in the country. The feeling of being “treated unequally” and being persons under special surveillance especially emerged from the comments to the paragraph in the pact dedicated to mandatory accessibility and guaranteed by the Ministry of the Interior of the places of worship to non-believer visitors. If this commitment arose from the need to counteract Islamophobia through knowledge, responding to the concerns of Italian society towards a religion that continues to be considered and perceived as mysterious, incomprehensible by language and threatening for the use made by terrorists and propaganda of the Islamic State, on the other hand it was perceived by the Muslims as a condition of “protection but also surveillance” and of subordination with the risk of facing the feeling of mistrust and stigmatization and to trigger reactions of ethnic and religious identification.

Statements against terrorism and violence in the name of religion do not belong only to this historic moment. Muslim communities were already called, in previous years, to confront this problem.

For many respondents, the real turning point, the most difficult and tragic moment, but also that led to concrete and operational responses to a new role of Muslims in the West, was 9/11; especially since that time, Muslims believe they are the main victims of certain actions depicting Islam as a violent religion and incompatible with the West and modernity.

Many of the interviewed associations have begun to be active since then and to insist on the role and contribution that Muslims can make to society, not only in explaining their religion to Muslims and non-Muslims, but also in building peaceful coexistence between faiths and cultures.

Many informed us of training activities already in place, regardless of the phenomena of fundamentalism and terrorism taking place in other parts of the world, arising from the duty of Muslims to learn about their religion. The education and training of young people are also used to convey a certain kind of interpretation of the Qur’ān that contains, according to respondents, messages of non-violence.

It makes no sense. It’s like asking a Sicilian whether he’s for or against the mafia. We know what the mass media are saying. We are responsible for what we say and do, not what we have heard about. If there should be a movement advocating violence and fundamentalism, we would be the first to denounce it. What is happening is not our fault. The guilty must pay.

We support any movement backing peace and civility (...) What people do not yet understand is that even if we come from different countries, we are trying out a new way of establishing an Italian Islamic faith. We have to think about ourselves, our

generation in Italy, we who live and work in Italy. (Key informant, Muslim community leader, first generation, Turin)

6. Media, Islamophobia and the risk of radicalization: a social security issue

Media have an important role in the construction of stereotypes and generalizations that are likely to lead, as a response to discrimination, racism and Islamophobia, perceived and experienced, to the formation of reactive identities and the risk of radicalization.

Incidents of violent fundamentalism, along with the sensationalist approach of the media to the issue, are a likely risk of fueling exploitation, populist tendencies and of giving support to forms of anti-Islam political propaganda, and anti-immigration feeling in general, at the local level, which may, in turn, hinder the process of integration and the commitment of the associations on the ground to the recognition of their rights. As highlighted by one of the respondent:

Of course, there is a flaw: let's say that when something happens, everybody runs to the mosques. For example, journalists wanting to talk about ISIS. But there is no ISIS here. It is far away, belonging to another world. If they want to talk about other things, ok, but we do not talk about ISIS because it does not concern us. They come to talk to us about things that not only do not concern us, but for us do not exist. (Key respondent, Imam, first generation, Milan)

At local level, due to the work done over the years, despite the sensationalist media campaign about ISIS and radicalization, there have not been changes in the relationship with the territory and the institutions and other associations and organizations, but rather, according to the respondents, if something has changed, it has been in the direction of greater collaboration between the different Islamic centres and local institutions to condemn all forms of violence and extremism and to promote inter-religious dialogue.

To tell the truth, no, those I work with, or rather the associations to whom we have proposed these days of dialogue, we have never worked with so many associations as we do now. What happened has also had a positive aspect in that, it drove us to meet, to talk, to understand one another. Its weight is most certainly felt in the media, for example a lot of nonsense is said on talk shows, creating this climate where people come up to you and ask: "And what do you think about ISIS?", yes, that happens, but on the personal level we have not observed any substantial change of attitude. Rather has there been even more coordination with the security forces. Perhaps the only positive thing all this has given us is the fact that it has driven us to converse, to collaborate and to get to know one another better. There has never been such collaboration and dialogue before. There is also talk about a conference of religions here in Turin, different projects which are being worked out. So in reality there are no problems in Turin. (Key respondent, Community leader, second generation, Turin)

7. What is it at stake?

It was regularly underlined that the lack of integration and forms of discrimination - emphasized, in fact, by the media - can feed fundamentalism and that the construction of stereotypes and generalizations can lead, as a response to discrimi-

nation, racism and Islamophobia, perceived and experienced, to the formation of reactive identities and the risk of radicalization. As stated by a representative of one of the Islamic Associations in Milan:

Fundamentalism occupies a small space which grows with injustice: the more injustice grows, the more this space grows because it fuels fundamentalist ideas. What I mean is this: when there are feelings like Islamophobia accompanied by, say, an attack in the newspapers, the mass media, prejudices et cetera against Islam and Muslims...when the Muslim, for example, is investigated and “blacklisted” only because he is a Muslim, he feels under attack and his calm, responsible, civil tone begins to crack. That is where cultural aggressiveness, the aggressiveness of prejudices, grows; where there is a risk of feeding integralism, even within the community (Key informant, Imam, first generation, Milan).

ISIS and the series of attacks in Europe have therefore not played in favour of Muslims and the recognition of their presence in the public space and, consequently, of the enjoyment of rights, but have contributed to increasing prejudices, suspicions and forms of Islamophobia that, amplified by the mass media, risk to determine or increase, especially among young people, the dynamics of rejection, social isolation, resentment that can lead to adherence to extremist messages and radicalization processes in reaction to a situation that is no longer judged bearable.

Let's say that in my opinion rather than revealing changes in attitude we have witnessed the usual exploitation, when we see phenomena of this type. Obviously, they then become part of the public political discourse of groups who use them to try to deny some rights, it becomes a political argument of those who were against... (Key informant, Community Leader, second generation, Milan)

Exclusion and difficulty in becoming citizens, in being recognized with the same rights together with certain security measures such as expulsions can therefore worsen this perception and lead to the risk of forms of radicalization and violent extremism. The fact that the citizenship reform wasn't approved risks to have the undesirable effect of intensifying the feelings of frustration and anger and even the sense of revenge, at the individual level and not only for Muslims as it affected second generations of all origins and religions, forcing them to find an alternative to the feeling of belonging to the state they were born in but where they feel excluded.

The best among the possible endings, which is already taking place significantly, is a new migration, often following the acquisition of citizenship, years after the first submission of the application, to other European countries. The worst is, as repeatedly pointed out, the development of forms of reactive identity that can activate radicalization processes and up to join terrorism groups. The path of the citizenship reform continues to seem not an easy one, despite the promises of various representatives of the national institutions, but at the same time it is increasingly needed because the lack of recognition is a time bomb that could sooner or later burst into our hands and then we could only say that “soon was yesterday” as the slogan of one of the citizenship reform national campaigns (Premazzi 2016). As one of the respondents highlighted:

I am moving to London now that I got the citizenship because there there are a lot of Muslims but there is less discrimination. It is not like Italy, there you have opportunities, everyone can have a chance (Key respondent, association member, second generation, Turin)

To avoid this, media could actually play a fundamental role if they could consider to include among their articles also the contribution of Muslims to civic life, promoting the idea of active citizenship, while also finding a space for the religious dimension, as well as progress in many fields to balance the negative coverage. The second generations in particular are extremely active at the local level and they are demanding to participate in decision-making process and not only with regard to young people of Muslim faith, and in doing this to strengthen the idea that Islam is compatible with citizens' activism marked by pluralism and democracy. As Ricucci (2015) highlights:

The purpose has not been so much the recognition tout court of their specificities, but their right to diversity and the promotion of intercultural policies where religious difference is one of the elements of the city and not a reason of conflict (p. 76).

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