

19 In and around the mosque

Profile and territory of the Italian imam

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Abstract

This chapter presents an assessment of the main trends directing the evolution of an understanding of imams in Europe, with a particular focus on the sociocultural profile of those who assume this role in Italy. The number of profiles of imams studied in this research project was one hundred from all over the country. The chapter also offers some updated figures based on the results of another research project, originally conducted between 2011 and 2013, on places of Muslim worship in the country.¹

Keywords: European imams, Italian imamate, Imams and mosques in Italy, institutionalization of Islam

¹ This contribution originates from the outcomes of two different research projects. The first is a qualitative and quantitative study entitled 'Socio-religious leadership of the imam in Italy: a European perspective' (*La leadership socio-religiosa dell'Imam in Italia in prospettiva europea*). The first of its kind in Italy and financed with internal funds by the University of Padua, the project aimed at analysing the transformations of Islamic religious authorities and community leadership figures in Italy, with particular attention given to imams. The research was conducted on a sample of 100 imams who were active throughout the Italian territory. The second project was carried out between 2011 and 2013 in the context of a PRIN-MIUR (National Interest Program of the Italian Ministry for Education, University and Scientific Research), which connected five Italian Universities (Padua, Bologna, Rome, Turin, and Palermo) to conduct a national study entitled 'Religious pluralism in Italy: mapping and interpreting the different socio-religious entities in Italian society' (*Il pluralismo religioso in Italia: Per una mappatura e un'interpretazione delle diverse presenze socio-religiose nella società Italiana*). The author was the coordinator of the interdisciplinary research unit (sociologists, psychologists, lawyers) for this second project that analysed the Muslim presence in Italy, and in particular the role of mosques and Islamic centres.

1 The European imam: Current status

Social science researchers have been using different approaches to elaborate a typological framework of Muslim leadership in Europe. Within this broader picture, they also have sought to identify the core features of an imam. Brigitte Maréchal (2003) has written a pivotal review of the research on Muslim leadership in Europe in which she identifies some fundamental issues: the autonomy, even within constraints, of the majority of mosques and their leaders; the recruitment and education levels of imams; the consequences of some countries' initiatives to organize worship opportunities for their compatriots; and finally the relationship between imams and European countries, which are sometimes keen to formalize their religious and community role, but are also afraid of the possibility of links between mosques and radical groups.

The studies by Wasif Shadid and Sjoerd van Koningsveld (1999, 2002) and Nico Landman (1992) describe imams' religious authority and role in the Dutch context, which Welmoet Boender and Meryem Kanmaz (2002) compare with that of Belgium. Some link the imams in each European country to a specific religious doctrine and ethnic background. Thus Philip Lewis (2004) considers imams in Great Britain in relation to the Deobandi tradition, while Sabine Kroissenbrunner (2002) analyses the role of Turkish imams in Vienna. Ural Manço (1997) touches upon Turkey's political outlook towards Europe, and Landman (1997) on the politics of the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Turkish imams have been an important part of the subject of many studies, such as the work of Kadir Canatan (2001) in the Netherlands and that of Gerdien Jonker (2002) in Germany. Then there are studies that focus on specific urban areas, like the one by Jordi Moreras (1999) describing imams in Barcelona, and by Felice Dassetto (2011), which touches on imams in the context of a comprehensive analysis of Muslim presence in Brussels. In 1998, Franck Frégosi edited a volume dedicated to the juridical profile of Islamic authorities from a historical and sociological perspective. Michel Reeber (2000, 2004) has focused on *khuṭbas* ('sermons') in France.

There is also research on the sociocultural profile of the imam as a social agent. The same Frégosi (2004) has sought to characterize the imam as a figure bridging the role of worship ministers and sociocultural mediators: on the one hand, the imam shows Muslims' participation in the public sphere, where citizenship is performed; on the other, he maintains the role of an *ʿālim*, the lawyer-theologian, custodian, and recognized interpreter of the sharia. Jocelyne Cesari (2004) sketches a fourfold classification of

imams: leaders that have been put in place by institutions of so-called Muslim countries; parish leaders, who manage activities within the mosque or within an Islamic centre or association in a defined area or neighbourhood; transnational preachers, who are nearly always connected to major Islamist currents or organizations such as the Tablighi Jamaat Movement, Wahhabites, or Sufi confraternities; and lastly, well-respected intellectuals that share their views on Islam, are legitimized by their cultural prominence, and are supported by a large audience of followers. In Cesari's perspective, an imam can assume more than one of these roles, even if his most prominent identification seems to be as a parish leader. Solenne Jouanneau is the author of the insightful monograph *Les Imams en France* (2013; also see her contribution in Part I), which proposes a variety of imam typologies from a historical perspective, from the invisible imam of the colonial period to the imamate as a real profession from the 1990s onwards.

A framework for interpreting the Italian reality has been proposed by Chantal Saint-Blancat (2008), highlighting the plurality of strategies practiced by imams and community representatives, and drawing attention to the creative religious *bricolage* with which they try to mediate the need for inclusion and the intent to keep their ethical and religious viewpoint alive. I have studied contexts outside of the mosque that involve imams (Rhazzali, 2014, 2015b), and have noted an interesting interweaving, still in the making, between the theme of religious assistance (to patients of terminal illnesses in hospitals and to detainees in jail) and the practices of intercultural mediation that are supported by the public administration.

While it also highlights significant differences, this comparison between different countries indicates the need to identify, at least in its essential traits, a sociological profile of imams that would refer to the entire European Union context. One attempt at this is outlined in a study commissioned by the Policy Department of Structural and Cohesion Policies of the European Parliament in 2007 (Dassetto, Ferrari, and Maréchal, 2007).

2 Imams in Italy: Figures with changeable contours

Compared to other European countries, the phenomenon of migration in Italy has occurred over a relatively short period of time and has been marked by considerable internal differentiation due to the diverse cultural and national origins of the migrants. However, the history and current reality of imams in the Italian context are closely linked to the features that characterize the Islamic presence in Europe.

Muslim communities, especially in the initial and middle phases of recent Italian history, have experienced an uneasiness in their interactions with Italian society, which approaches them with a mix of attitudes that oscillate from ideologically or religiously inspired solidarity, to the most aggressive mistrust, in the context of an extreme caution of public policies, which sometimes borders apathy. Islam is newly experiencing the phenomenon of being a minority, in which it must build a 'credibility structure' (Berger 1969) that will make its presence tolerable for both Muslims and those who interact with them, in a context characterized by marked sociocultural differentiation and rapid changes.

Thus, if an imam comes to fulfil the role of a guardian of the religious tradition, he *de facto* accepts the role of leader of an organization as well as the organization's link to the authorities. Above all, he takes on himself, often precariously and without juridical basis, at least some of the functions that were traditionally associated with an organized system of different roles such as *'ālim*, *adūl*, qadi, and mufti (scholar, notary, judge, and fatwa-giver) (Hallaq, 2004), as well as some new functions deriving from the need to create relationships with the local context – similar to the roles assumed by Christian religious authority figures in the context of the relationship between church and state (Allievi, 2010; Rhazzali, 2014, 2015a; Roy, 2008).

The history of the Italian imam mirrors the path that Italian Muslims have taken and are still treading to furnish themselves with the necessary cultural resources for interacting effectively with the sociocultural and political fabric of which they now claim to be a part, notwithstanding difficulties relating to the legal recognition of the Islamic 'cult'. Conducting a study on the figure of Italian imams requires their specific profiles to be differentiated from the more general background of the overall evolution of Islamic leadership forms. For this reason, the aim of this investigation was to reconstruct the interplay of factors that have most significantly contributed to imams' current, unique features.

3 The first steps of the institutionalization of Islam in Italy

In the 1970s and 1980s, the first wave of Muslim immigration into Italy – mainly constituting students of Middle Eastern origin – gave birth to the *Unione degli Studenti Musulmani in Italia* (Union of Muslim Students in Italy, USMI), an association that first proposed giving a stable structure to Islamic religious presence in the country. The political and cultural aspects of this group coexisted with a more strictly religious ethos that would manifest more fully

in the following years with the birth of the *Unione delle Comunità Islamiche d'Italia* (Union of the Islamic Communities and Organisations in Italy, U.CO.I.I). This is the background of the formation of the first wave of religious agents.

At the very beginning of Italian Islam, the individuals steering the organization of mosques and working as religious guides were university students, professionals, doctors, and engineers originating mostly from Syria, Egypt, and Somalia, often with Italian citizenship. This group has continued to play a central role in the running of associations at the national level. In the wake of the rapid growth of immigration after 1990 – mostly from the Maghreb, and widely distributed throughout Italy –, the protagonists of the life of the mosques, especially at the national level, were often factory workers from industrial estates and businessmen connected to the so-called 'ethnic' economy. In those same years, Italy was experiencing a growth of local autonomy and a crisis of traditional ideologies and political parties. This might have limited the attractiveness of secular political and trade unionist associations, and in turn stimulated the initiative of religious players – particularly grassroots initiatives in which religion played a key cohesive role.

Amongst the promoters of religious bodies, among whom roles tend to continuously overlap and further diversify, some actors were 'elected' as religious guides of the community and assumed, somewhere between acclamation and self-proclamation, the title of imam. The decisive factor is often what can be termed 'religious entrepreneurial charisma', which is particularly evident in cases where a single or restricted group autonomously produced their own organization. In the Italian context, this element was no less important than the position of the imam as the guardian-preserver of 'Islamic social actions' (Dassetto, 2011). These imams, who sometimes stand out from and sometimes blend in with other community leaders, bring together different functions that are necessary to ensure an organized religious framework for their community and often also to respond to needs that are connected with religious themes in different ways, due to the not-so-simple relation between Islam and the problems of everyday life in Italian society.

4 Imam profiles

In the complex and changing scene of Islam in Italy, the individuation of the socio-cultural profile of the imam makes a definition indispensable. In this section, I present an obviously idealized typology based on the case studies analysed in the two research projects I have taken part in.

First, there is the 'imam of the mosque'. As a place of worship, mosques require a figure that will, to some extent, identify with it and with the important activities that take place there, a guide for religious events, who therefore represents the continuity between the religious tradition and the organization that the community gives itself in a precise historical moment at a specific place. This essential element can mix with the most diverse roles. The imam can act as a teacher of Islamic doctrine and as an Arabic language tutor, but as soon as the mosque becomes a conspicuous size, as has happened in some metropolitan areas, these additional roles are allocated to others and the imam tends to be defined by his more 'pastoral' role. As a guide to prayer and as the *khātib* ('person in charge of giving the Friday sermon'), the imam becomes the 'spokesman' of the mosque, so to speak – and through this he becomes the *de facto* representative of the human community that surrounds the mosque. This is an activity that the imam mostly carries out in a voluntary capacity: 85 per cent of the interviewed imams declared that they fulfil their role without receiving any payment, although in some cases they receive monthly reimbursements, sometimes as a proper wage and sometimes on an occasional basis – but most of the time unofficially. For the vast majority of cases, therefore, the position of the imam as a worker is precarious. Even in cases where the imam is paid, he does not benefit from a defined juridical framework that would give him a professional status.

The essential requirements for recruitment as an imam are the willingness to carry out voluntary work and the possession of theological knowledge, preferably acquired in the context of an academic course, together with the ability to communicate effectively and, in particular, to give public talks. Knowledge of Arabic is also a decisive factor, as the most important part of Islamic worship is conducted in that language. Knowledge of Italian is also considered important, but is not obligatory; a translator is frequently required for rendering at least the Friday sermon into Italian for those members who do not speak Arabic. Given the current demographic composition of Italian Muslims most sermons are in Arabic, though recently there have been cases of ethnically specialized mosques where the language used is Urdu, Bengali, or Albanian. A more complex aspect is represented by the (in)compatibility of the imam's 'theological-political' and sharia-legalistic views with those prevailing in the mosque and especially amongst its steering group. The imam does not always cover all the most relevant religious roles, either; sometimes he specializes in Friday sermons, relying on the presence of an imam-custodian that provides the other services during the week. Sometimes a 'travelling imam' can also substitute for the mosque's.

This second type of imam (the 'travelling imam') is not permanently linked to a mosque and makes himself available to mosques only for Friday sermons or other specific occasions, thereby displaying some traits of being self-employed. He operates in a freelance fashion, sometimes with a background at a bigger or more famous mosque, and displays a level of competence that is deemed of such quality to justify a payment (at least to cover expenses). For 'travelling imams' references relating to a theological education are required, together with a reputation for social skills, elocution, and communicative abilities. As happens amongst self-employed individuals, there is competition between 'travelling imams'. For this reason, an important role is played by the imams' 'marketing' activities – especially a familiarity with computers and social media – and publication output, which is often characterized by a certain flexibility in dealing with the various doctrinal orientations of the contexts where he performs his services.

If his knowledge of Italian allows it, a 'travelling imam' can access a particularly rich 'market' by acting as an essential reference point for information agencies and making himself available as an experienced spokesperson for local and national institutions, which also provides him with access to media platforms such as television programmes. This media aspect is equally, if not more, important in transnational Islam, where the figure of the preacher (clearly analogous to that of the travelling imam) is taking on an ever-more-prominent role. To keep up with the competition, it becomes indispensable for the imams to possess rhetoric abilities and communication know-how, for example regarding to the formalities that regulate interreligious dialogue. These qualities become as important as doctrinal competence, and enable the imam to assume the cloak of a Muslim representative in competition with other leaders and imams who are more directly linked to mosques.

Third is 'the seasonal imam', who is particularly important for liturgical occasions such as Ramadan. In recent times, this type of imam is not infrequently seen entering the life of Italian mosques from abroad for short periods of time. In some cases they are sent by Muslim majority countries and in others they come through their own initiative or with the support of foundations or associations. Endowed with a high level of theological education acquired by following the models recommended by the country of origin, this kind of imam acts mostly in the context of ethno-national communities. This type of imam deserves independent study because of its many implications for the evolution of Italian Islam.

The fourth and last kind is the 'imam as religious assistant'. The need for a figure that represents religious symbolic power arises at certain moments, such as life stage transitions like births, weddings, and deaths.

These are circumstances in which the imam is called to intervene. Imams may also be called upon in situations of heightened difficulty or great emotional involvement, such as in the case of losing a job or a house, or experiencing discomfort in family relations. In this case, part of the activity of the imam is defined through the interweaving of religious assistance and social and psychological help – similar to the role of priests in the life of Catholic parishes.

5 Interactions between Islamic and state institutions

The imam and those in charge of the mosque struggle to fulfil their commitments if places of worship are geographically spread out, if they require numerous visits, and if they include institutions such as jails and hospitals that require a specific knowledge of their 'logic' and their languages for appropriate intervention to take place. This type of interaction puts the representatives of Islamic religious authority in touch with secular state institutions. Often the institutions themselves ask for the intervention of an imam for tasks that are equivalent to those performed by a parson or chaplain. After receiving such a request, and if they have the capacity to fulfill it, mosques send an imam or a delegate of his – who is automatically considered an imam in the context of the interaction. Alternatively, the mosque could give way to independent professional 'travelling imams' or to intercultural mediators with sensitivity and some religious understanding. A space therefore opens for the imam to develop new expertise in providing religious/spiritual assistance within secular contexts, which has been experimented with for a long time in the European context, but is relatively new to the Muslim world, where it has only recently started to take shape through the *murshid* and *mushida* ('male and female guide'; see Borillo, Part I). In Italy, these religious assistants are voluntary (as far as we know); if they are paid, it is as intercultural mediators.²

It is especially through the figure of the intercultural mediator that female religious figures emerge for the first time. Women often end up carrying out the majority of the functions that are associated with the imam-religious assistant, often starting from a significant theological knowledge interwoven with university studies in the humanities, law, or

2 Systematic studies of this type of imam are hardly available. The author has conducted a study dedicated to Italian prisons (Rhazzali, 2014), but so far assistance in hospitals has produced only a qualitative research study limited to the theme of end-of-life care (Rhazzali, 2014).

social sciences. In fact, women are predominant in the field of intercultural mediation, including Muslim women (Luatti, 2006, 2011; Rhazzali, 2015b). During our research, I had the opportunity to observe women carrying out – even though informally – a religious and welfare responsibility in jails that is extremely significant, covering tasks that otherwise would not be fulfilled through the resources of the mosques or the aid of voluntary services. These women performed the role of an imam, offering spiritual guidance to inmates, training the prison staff about specific issues that are sensitive to the Muslim community, and donating books on Islam to the prison library.

The four types of imam presented in Section 4 have one major point in common: the quality of the theological education of the imam and therefore his (or her) religious legitimacy. This is connected with an even more important issue that is by now an established theme within the debate surrounding European Islam: the elaboration of a doctrine that is able to interact with current reality in a genuine way. The tangible nature of this issue becomes more evident when one considers the challenges that imams and Islamic organizations find themselves dealing with, such as the political and ethical confusion of young Muslims and the new and in many ways revolutionary sphere of the Internet, which accelerates the processes of transformation by overturning traditional styles of religious communication.

Depending on the position from which one considers the current scenario, Italian Islam appears both precarious and rooted: integrated into the public space but to this day not recognized; simultaneously reconciled with Italy and an object of resentment. If the imams are bearing the weight of these contradictions, their ‘mosques’ carry all the signs of this as-yet-unsettled transition.

6 Prayer places: Physical spaces and organizational aspects

Offering an overall representation of the territorial distribution of Muslim places of worship in Italy together with an overview of the activities that are undertaken there and of the organizational forms they take is not an easy task because of the limited pool of data and bibliographical resources available for a sociological analysis.

When we first undertook our research, only two studies had been carried out, the first conducted by Stefano Allievi and Felice Dassetto in 1992 (1993), the second by Maria Bombardieri between 2008 and 2011 (2011). There was also the data on information policy for security published by the

Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza (Department of Information Security, DIS, 2007),³ operating as part of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and the data published on the site of the *Centro Studi sulle Nuove Religioni* (Centre for Studies on new Religions, CESNUR), which relates to the monitoring of new religions in Italy.⁴

The notion of 'places of worship' in the Italian context entails the adoption of classification criteria that are difficult to define in the case of Islam. In Italy, both in media and everyday communication, the word 'mosque' is used to indicate a place where the social religious life of Muslims takes place. However, there are only a handful that can be strictly defined as mosques: one can mention with certainty the grand mosque in Rome, together with those of Milan (Segrate), Catania (currently inactive), Ravenna, and Colle Val d'Elsa. To this very limited catalogue can be added the many building attempts that were interrupted for various reasons before completion.

Indeed, the term 'mosque' is, in a strict sense, reserved for buildings that reproduce the architectural structure of a mosque, which, even though it displays forms that are very different depending on the time and place of construction, does maintain some common features, such as a courtyard for ablutions and a great prayer room that is able to host the faithful for the Friday prayer and the most important festivals in the Muslim calendar. A third element that has been the subject of heated controversy in some European countries, such as Switzerland, is the minaret, which Italian Muslims have never really claimed to be indispensable (Rhazzali, 2013). The mosque undoubtedly has a symbolic significance, evoking the public centrality of religious practices for Muslims and therefore of the cultural horizon to which the practices are connected. This in part explains the hostility of political parties, movements, and widespread forms of populism – which are generally diffident regarding the Islamic presence – towards the birth of full-fledged mosques.

Worship places in Italy can be more appropriately defined as *muṣallayāt* (sing., *muṣallā*): simple prayer rooms that in general re-use and adapt pre-existing spaces for to the most essential needs of religious service.⁵ They constitute the nearly always temporary attempt of Muslims to find spaces and times for group prayer in the immigration context, a difficult and

3 <https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/sisr.nsf/chi-siamo/organizzazione/dis.html>.

4 Cf. <http://www.cesnur.org>.

5 In Muslim majority countries, this term currently indicates spaces in public structures such as airports, motorway service stations, universities, and hospitals that are set up as prayer facilities for religious people in transit and are based upon self-organization in the absence of an imam.

sometimes painful quest that continuously faces political or bureaucratic resistance – which are strengthened by the generally lukewarm attitude towards the principle of religious liberty in Italy. This translates into a scenario of worship in garages, industrial warehouses, and better if situated on the edges of motorways, basements, or spaces that were originally designed for commercial activities. These spaces are constantly under threat of eviction, suspended leases, and disputed terms of use, even if they are sometimes made accessible through the local solidarity of individual secular or religious organizations as a result of the sensitivity towards interreligious dialogue that is fairly present in civil society. It must be remembered that, in the absence of an agreement with the state or any other legal recognition, Islam does not enjoy the legal status of an ‘accepted form of worship’. This entails that the so-called ‘mosques’ cannot be formally recognized as worship places or gain access to the relevant benefits that are granted to religious premises by law (see also Alicino, Part II).

Therefore, except for the case of the mosque of Rome (which is based on an agreement that dates to a time before the unfolding of immigration in Italy and was signed between the Italian State and the diplomatic representatives of Muslim countries), all the other Islamic places for prayer or religious assembly legally present themselves as the headquarters of individual associations that are established with various social and cultural aims. The religious nature of the practices carried out there remains the private choice of the members; the local administration and State authorities can view this with respect and a willingness to collaborate, or, as has often happened, can favour the restrictive interpretation of laws and regulations to make the life of the mosque difficult if not impossible, with the ensuing swarm of legal controversies and the most diverse use of political rhetoric. Considering their size, their location in urban contexts, the national origin and linguistic features of those who frequent them, and the worship practices associated with them, aside from the few ‘real’ mosques previously mentioned, Italian mosques can be understood through the following typology:

Islamic cultural centres. In many cases, the group that leads the mosque describes itself as an ‘Islamic cultural centre’. However, this definition technically only pertains to the limited number of cases where, aside from the space designated for prayer, there are also other rooms where other educational and cultural activities for a specific target audience can take place. These activities may include: a Quranic school; Arabic courses for the children of the congregation members or for Italians who want to know more about Islam; initiatives conceived for women or youths; and conferences and public meetings. The organizational level of the main ‘mosques’, which are

mostly located in urban centres, allows more consistency and continuity in the elaboration and implementation of activities such as providing assistance in jails and hospitals or supporting families in returning the bodies of the deceased to their homeland for burial, although these services are also available in smaller mosques with less resources to a certain extent.

Nationality-based mosques. Until the recent past, people who attended mosques in Italy could hardly be traced back to a single ethno-national origin. The leading groups themselves were of mixed backgrounds. More recently, however, there is a tendency to organize along ethnic lines. Mainly located on the urban periphery and in small provincial towns, these mosques are progressively becoming the most common models. The difficulties of running so-called ecumenical mosques, together with the enduring legislative silence of the Italian State, has certainly not encouraged the institutionalization of an 'Italian Islam'.

Mosques of modest size. This is currently the most common type of mosque in Italy. They are sometimes unable to guarantee the traditional division of space between male and female worshippers, or to adequately host the Friday gatherings for the faithful to hear the *khutba*. Located in buildings that are adapted with great zeal to the most essential needs of prayer, they represent a point of reference for local Muslims and often become the location of organized events ranging from economic activities aimed at the self-financing of the mosque through, for example, halal trade, to the setup of forms of micro-welfare aimed at benefitting the community.

Sufi fraternities. Another case is the places that are run by Sufi fraternities. Sometimes characterized by ethnically homogeneous participation, these groups are often preferred by Italian converts, who arrive at Islam through intellectual and existential interest in Sufism. The relationship of the group with their physical setting is often tied to the most diverse circumstances and therefore tends not to stabilize, resulting in limited visibility of the Sufi 'mosques'.

7 Mapping Italian mosques

To produce an accurate mapping of Italian mosques, we have combined several data-gathering strategies, taking into consideration the extremely volatile nature and changeability of the situation under study. First, we reconstructed the relationship between the mosques and regional and national Islamic organizations, and asked for the direct involvement of the latter in the research project. Significant help was provided by the

Unione delle Comunità Islamiche d'Italia (Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy, U.CO.II), the *Confederazione Islamica Italiana* (Islamic Confederation of Italy, CII) and the *Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana* (Italian Islamic Religious Community, CO.RE.IS), in combination with access to a catalogue of imams and community leaders created in during the action-research project 'New religious presences in Italy' (see also Pallavicini, Part II).⁶

The data thus gathered needed to be integrated with the outcomes of other investigations, such as verifying whether previously identified mosques were still active; searching local and national news and the Internet in order to identify mosques that had not previously been recorded; and contacting local administration offices and non-Muslim religious associations operating in areas where the information about the existence of places of worship was imprecise.

As of February 2013, the number of mosques in Italy was 655. This number is smaller than that provided by the *Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza* (Department of Information Security, DIS, 2007), which stated that there were 774 mosques, and that given in Bombardieri's research (2011), which counted 746 mosques. The differences can be ascribed to a partial discrepancy in the criteria adopted by individual researchers. In the case of the DIS report, the research aims were presumably guided by the needs of the intelligence services; the report does not contain a methodological note and does not indicate the criteria used in the investigation. In other words, it seems to have tried to capture the presence in Italy of any form of Muslim association in the most comprehensive way possible. Bombardieri's research (2011) a few years later seemed to confirm the final number provided by the DIS, from which it deviates only slightly. Bombardieri counted all Islamic entities mentioned in the media, thus including halls used for only brief periods, private apartments sporadically used as worship places, Sufi brotherhood spaces open only to members, and ethno-national associations for which religious activities were secondary. In this study, we deemed it necessary to conduct our research on the basis of a definition of 'mosques' that, even comprising the extreme variety of actual cases, would pinpoint some features of both a sociocultural and legal nature. We therefore chose to include only those places that were established with some formality, with some at least basic level of advertising, and which constituted their own legal entity.

6 The project was promoted by the Forum Internazionale Democrazia & Religioni (FIDR)—cofounded by the University of Padua—between 2010 and 2013, under the sponsorship of the Ministero degli Interni and the Ministero della Cooperazione. Cf. http://www.fidr.it/progetto1_eng.asp.

The geographic distribution of mosques in Italy mostly follows that of Muslim immigration, which in turn has been dictated by the territorial development of productive activities over the last few decades. For this reason, mosques are most numerous in Northern Italy.

We then conducted an analysis of mosque distribution by province, which demonstrates how the area mosques are more common in the big cities and their peripheries, such as Milan, Turin, and Bologna and their extended peripheries, as well as provinces such as Bergamo, Brescia, and Vicenza where the presence of manufacturing and commercial activities is particularly sizeable and widespread.

In the northern regions of the country, there have been manifestations of solidarity between the civil society and the Muslim communities. Still, the institutions and political world of these regions have not been very welcoming to a wider dialogue concerning the needs of Muslim communities. Attitudes inspired by mistrust – sometimes covert, sometimes explicit – have significantly inhibited attempts to advance mosque projects in Milan, Brescia, and Parma. Furthermore, there has been a opposition in the Veneto region against any attempt by Muslim communities to gain access to suitable places of worship. The Lombardy region even formulated a law in 2015 in which religions that are not qualified as ‘accepted forms of worship’ are given less ability to acquire their own space. Going down the peninsula the relative number of mosques diminishes, with the at least partial exception of Tuscany – where the mosque of Colle Val d’Elsa project, conceived in agreement with the local administration as both a mosque and an intercultural centre, has been completed – and of Rome, where in addition to the atypical grand mosque, there is also a varied landscape of Muslim religious organizations. Sicily is different than the rest of Southern Italy because the Islamic presence on the island derives from historically stratified relations with its neighbours on the other side of the Mediterranean (Branca and Scidà, 1990, pp. 43-44).

This description of the territorial distribution of mosques in Italy be decidedly incomplete without highlighting the importance of the relationship between most of local institutions, however small they may be, and the nationwide Islamic organizations. In the course of the last few decades these relations have started to assume an ever-more-important role in the elaboration of doctrinal orientations that guide the life of mosque communities, in the creation of a public forum discussing the meanings of Islam in the evolution of Italian sociocultural and political reality, and in maintaining a dialogue with State institutions.

8 Conclusions

There appears to be two fundamental tendencies in the complex internal dynamic that characterizes the emergence of both imams and mosques in the Italian public space. On the one hand, there is an evident attempt to give life to an Italian Islam. Some groups of Muslims are making a concerted effort to integrate the prevailing part of their social and cultural experience that is now Italian, aiming to redefine their religious identity based on the specific location they now live and interact. The contribution of Italian converts to this effort cannot be neglected, especially due to their cultural activism (Allievi, 2009; Rhazzali, 2013). On the other hand, there has also been a growth in a new form of valorization of ethno-national themes in recent years with the birth and growth of organizations of Muslims who share the same national origin, which are often economically and politically assisted by their respective 'home' countries.

Within these communities it has to be made clear that an intent to guarantee the continuity of relations with the country of origin does not necessarily contrast with the promotion of full participation in the life of the host country. Quite the opposite, in fact: amongst the most interesting aspects of this type of experience is the positive acceptance of what can be called a multiple identity. At the same time, one should not forget that the relationship with the country of origin is, in part, a substitute for the delays and reticence of the Italian State in regard to reaching a legal agreement with Muslim communities on the issue of religious practice.

The future will show whether Italy's political system and society are able to interpret the will of a rooted and complex Islamic reality to interact with the overall dynamics in which the country is evolving – a reality in which the Islam of the immigrants, of the so-called second and third generations, of the Italian converts, and of the imams all weave together to find both chances of participation and fundamental challenges within the shared Italian public sphere.

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