

The Islamist Alliance for Europe

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورازم

The Islamist phenomenon, understood as the political use of Islam to pursue goals that often embrace an extremist view clashing with pluralism, human rights and constitutional values, has been present and active in Europe for decades, with dynamics and strategies that can change in relation to the context of interest, may it be national or local. The political and social dynamics in Europe are very different from the ones in Middle-Eastern countries and so are the strategies implemented by Islamists for their lobbying.

One interesting story that recently emerged in Italy is a local alliance between Sunni and Shia Muslim representatives. As exposed by European Eye on Radicalization, in a meeting of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue at Regione Lombardia, Ali Faeznia, president of the Imam Ali Cultural Centre (Shia) entrusted Mohamed Asfa (Sunni imam of Via Padova Mosque), and Ali Abu Shwaima (Sunni imam of Segrate Mosque) as his delegates. Shwaima and Asfa have also been designated by Mili Gorus.

The Milan-based "Imam Ali" Islamist Center, on its Instagram account, does not hide its Khomeinist ideology, with a series of posts praising Ayatollah Khomeini and another dedicated to the celebrations for the second anniversary of the death of the general of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Gassam Suleymani. In November 2021, the Center advertised a conference on "Islamic resistance to US hegemony" where the Iranian consul participated as a speaker. Other posts of the account also invoke the support for the Palestinian cause. It is important to take note that the "Imam Ali" center is not simply Shia, but it is clearly Khomeinist in its ideology. At this point, it is worth taking a look at the two individuals that were entrusted as representatives by the "Imam Ali" Center.

Mahmoud Asfa, a Jordanian with Italian citizenship, is the actual president of the Milan-based House of Islamic Culture (Casa della Cultura Islamica or CCI). Previously with UCOII (indicated by the Secretary General of the Great Mosque of Rome as linked to the Muslim Brotherhood), Asfa moved away from the organization in 2008.

As exposed by the previously cited report of the European Eye for Radicalization and by the Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies/Catholic University of Milan, in May of 2020, during an interview with the Italian online newspaper *Il Giornale*, Asfa made some controversial statements regarding Hamas, which he claimed to know extremely well and defined as "an organization recognized throughout the Arab Muslim world that is fighting for the liberation of its country".

Asfa was also photographed at pro-Palestinian rallies next to Mohammed Hannoun, president of the Charitable Association for Solidarity with the Palestinian People (Associazione benefica per la solidarietà con il popolo palestinese or ABSPP). ABSPP, which the Israeli domestic security agency Shin Bet classifies as the Italian emissary of the Hamas-linked Union of Good, had its Unicredit bank accounts shut down in December 2021 due to a series of suspicious transactions possibly directed to Hamas. A little over a year earlier, in December 2019, Asfa's son-in-law, Suleiman Hijazi, was caught in the eye of the storm for praising Hamas: "Our resistance movement that fought and continues to fight in Palestine (Hamas) is considered in Egypt as a terrorist movement, as it is for Israel, these acts against the resistance continue to show that Gaza is our only way to get to freedom and it shows that unfortunately we have an enemy who is a monster and takes orders from Israel and America, the usual dog that takes orders, al-Sisi “.

Hijazi is also an activist of the already cited Charitable Association of Solidarity with the Palestinian People (ABSPP) and appeared alongside its president, Mohammed Hannoun, as also reported on the Iranian Islamist website "International Information Agency of the Holy Quran". Regarding Abu Shwaima, he has a history of membership in organizations that have been indicated as linked to the Muslim Brotherhood: he was a founding member of the Union of Muslim Students in Italy (USMI) and the Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy (UCOII). He was also president of the FIOE-linked Islamic Waqf, a founding member of the European Institute of Human Sciences (Institut Européen de Sciences Humaines or IESH).

In Italy, Abu Shwaima is known for claiming that it's "indecent" for women to ride a bicycle, for endorsing polygamous marriages and he has also been investigated over illegal child circumcisions carried out at the Segrate Islamic center in Milan.

In 2013 he had risen to the news for having accused the parliamentarian Daniela Santanchè "of having offended Mohammed and the Islamic community" and "of deserving the fire of the Day of Judgment" during an unauthorized anti-Burqa protest in Milan for which Santanchè was also convicted.

In the Spring of 2011, during the local administrative elections in Milan, Abu Shwaima had advised Muslims not to vote for the left-wing part SEL because his leader was gay, and that would go against Islam. The reason for which the "Imam Ali" Islamic Center entrusted Asfa and Abu Shwaima as representatives is very likely due to the very limited presence of practicing Shia Muslims in Italy, between 4 and 5% according to the

latest figures. In Milan, there is now a project to obtain a new great mosque, and the Shias might want to join the group. However, the specific choice could also very well indicate a common ideology.

The European Eye for Radicalization report also outlined the relations between Sunni and Shia Islamism in Germany, specifically regarding the Islamic Centre of Hamburg (IZH), whose chairman (who claims to have been part of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards) was in fact invited as a guest speaker at the 4th annual conference of the Imam Ali Centre in Milan. While the IZH is (in the words of the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution) “an instrument of the Iranian government”, it is also part of the Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland, which has been defined as “the umbrella organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in Germany”. Furthermore, IZH founder Abdul-Karim Grimm was married to Fatima Grimm, who edited the newspapers of the MB-linked Islamic Centre of Munich.

The Connections between Ikhwani Islamism and Khomeinism

The Syrian civil war, which saw a galaxy of Sunni Islamist groups such as Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham (former Jabhat al-Nusra), Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, and many more, facing the Iran-Backed Shia axis, which included Hezbollah, in support of Bashar al-Assad, provided the general idea that Sunnis and Shias are eternal sworn enemies.

After all, it’s not just Syria; in Yemen the Houthi Shia militias, backed by Iran, have been fighting against the central government supported by Saudi Arabia since 2015, while in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Shias have often become a target of Sunni militants. Additionally, in June of 2013 a Sunni mob attacked a group of Shias praying in a private house in Cairo, dragged them through the streets and tried to set the building on fire. Among those killed was local Shia leader, Hassan Shehata. This was the first case of an anti-Shia pogrom in the history of Egypt and it occurred during the year of Muslim Brotherhood Islamist rule led by Mohamed Morsy.

Indeed, such a rivalry has deep roots that go back centuries, all the way to the assassination of Ali ibn Abi Talib in 661. However, Islam is not and never has been a monolithic block, things are not all black and white and especially when dealing with political issues.

Some situations might seem particularly absurd, for instance, during the year of Islamist government in Egypt, while the hatred against Shias was on the rise, Morsy worked on solidifying relations with Iran; he visited Tehran in August 2012 and the then Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, joined the Islamic Summit in Cairo in February of 2013. Iran also took action for economic and commercial support to Egypt in exchange for support on the nuclear issue.

However, relations between the two countries went much further, to the point that after the collapse of the Islamist executive, Morsy was tried on a series of charges including that of high treason, of having supported Hamas, Hezbollah and of having provided confidential information to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, thus putting Egypt's security at risk. Regarding Hamas, it is a perfect example of Muslim Brotherhood-related Islamist extremist supported by both Shia Iran and Sunni partners in Turkey and Qatar in order to target their common enemy, Israel.

In 2011, shortly before the Arab Springs erupted, Ayatollah Khamenei met in Teheran with former spokesman of the Muslim Brotherhood, Kamal al-Helbawy, where they discussed the resistance against the Mubarak government in Egypt. The relation between the Muslim Brotherhood and Khomeinism should not come as a surprise, considering that the approachment between the two date back to the 1940s, when Hassan al-Banna tried to reduce the gap between Sunnies and Shias. ¹

In 1953, Sayyid Qutb and Nawab Safavi, founder of the Shia Islamist group Fedayeen al-Islam, met in Cairo. As explained by the Syrian researcher Mohammad Sayed Rassas, author of the book "The Muslim Brotherhood and Iran", two had good relations and stayed together through the time Safavi spent in Egypt, as Qutb himself arranged and supervised the Iranian cleric's visit as he was in a leading position in the Muslim Brotherhood at that time. It was around that time that Safavi stated: "Whoever wishes to be true Ja'fari (Shia), then let him join the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood". Safavi strongly influenced the thought of Ayatollah Khomeini and that of Khamenei, while Qutb was strongly influential among Iranian revolutionaries and had a consistent role in shaping the narrative of Islamism in pre-revolutionary Iran. ²

Among those strongly influenced by Qutb was Khomeini who, just a few years after the execution of the Egyptian ideologist, wrote a book entitled "The Islamic Government",

1 Abdelnasser, Walid M. "Islamic Organizations in Egypt and the Iranian Revolution of 1979: the experience of the first few years". Arab Studies Quarterly, vol. 19, no. 2, 1997, pp. 25-39

2 Ünal, Yusuf. "Sayyid Qutb in Iran: Translating the Islamist Ideologue in the Islamic Republic." Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies, vol. 1 no. 2, 2016, p. 35-60.

strongly inspired by Qutb's thought. Dr. Hani Nsera, an expert in radical Islamism, has highlighted how the Muslim Brotherhood and Khomeinism have in common not only a series of ideological concepts including the Caliphate, the jihad against misbeliever rulers, the implementation of Sharia, but also the organizational system, the strategic approach to achieve power and worldwide expansionism.

Therefore, we should not be surprised to see potential alliances in Europe between Sunni Islamism and Khomeinism, not only due to common objectives, but also because the ideology has many common denominators

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