

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, CULTURAL NORMS, AND WOMEN'S ISLAMIC ATTIRE: AN OPEN LETTER TO THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN MONFALCONE, ITALY

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Abstract

During the summer of 2023, a noteworthy incident unfolded in Monfalcone, Italy, as several Muslim women entered the sea while remaining clothed. This event captured significant attention, triggering a widespread debate involving ordinary citizens—both Italians and foreigners residing in Italy—and political entities represented in the Italian Parliament. Mayor Anna Maria Cisint addressed the matter by sending a letter to the city's Muslim community, expressing concern that the practice of foreign Muslim women entering the water clothed was deemed unacceptable and indecent. Cisint contended that such behavior ran counter to the decorum and culture of Italy, causing confusion among beachgoers and infringing upon the principles of coexistence between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Employing an impartial and analytical approach, this paper scrutinizes whether the conduct of these Muslim women can be deemed "indecent" and in violation of Italian culture, from both legal and socio-cultural perspectives. The study also delves into the freedom of the Islamic religion in Italy, considering not only its ritual aspects but also the broader consequences stemming directly from the religion itself. Furthermore, it explores the status of the relationship between local Italians and residents in Italy who adhere to the Islamic faith. The findings indicate that while Italy acknowledges and safeguards the freedom of religion for all, not solely its citizens, discussions surrounding Muslims and their religion are intensifying and increasingly involving national institutions and political parties. This paper, contextualizing these local headlines, assesses the degree to which Muslim individuals are seamlessly integrated into Western Italian society. The study concludes that the issue of Islam and its adherents is frequently exploited as a political tool in ideological battles unrelated to the constitutional right to practice this religion, or any other, in Italy. To address these complex issues, this qualitative research paper analyzes and interprets documents from the Italian Government and lower institutions, along with interviews featuring prominent politicians, scholars, imams, and other religious leaders, conducted across various media platforms, and scrutinizes recent articles published by Italian newspapers.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2023, a noteworthy incident sparked extensive discussions, both within Italy and across Europe. Within the city of Monfalcone, Italy, a group of Muslim women spent time at the beach while adhering to their customary practice of being fully clothed - an occurrence that routinely takes place in various Italian seaside towns every summer. In response, the mayor deemed it necessary to address the Muslim community through an open letter, wherein she expressed disapproval of the tradition of fully clothed beach outings and urged adherence to the decorum and sensitivities of the local populace. Furthermore, she announced an impending administrative measure aimed at proscribing such conduct.



Figure 1: Illustration of Muslim women enjoying the beach. Monfalcone, Italy, summer 2023.
(Source: <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/nazionale/tutte-acqua-vestite-provocazione-trieste-favore-burkini-2198581.html>)

To comprehend the full context of this occurrence, it is imperative to cite key passages from the mayor's letter. According to her, individuals arriving in Italy are expected to uphold the customs and regulations of the locale. She expressed strong disapproval of any perceived "Islamization of the territory", asserting that the diffusion of practices from the countries of origin of foreign Islamic communities - where, in her view, women still endure conditions of mortification and subjugation - is deemed unacceptable (Galici, 2023).

Monfalcone, with a population of thirty thousand people, is home to thirty-two percent foreigners, the majority of whom - around ten thousand - are of the Muslim faith. "A significant portion of Italian citizens expresses discontent with the beach attire chosen by Muslim women, viewing it as incongruent with Western norms, a breach of decorum, and a symbol of degradation. The proliferation of full veils and even gloves among women in recent years is seen as indicative of a marked rise in religious fundamentalism. Critics argue that Muslim women, by donning attire perceived as incompatible with local customs, not only disregard established traditions but also breach the principle of reciprocity. The contention is made that, akin to how a Western woman refrains from wearing a bikini on certain beaches in other countries out of respect for local norms, Islamic foreigners should display similar consideration. While emphasizing the importance of unrestricted access to public beaches, proponents underscore the need for adherence to prevailing cultural traditions". The mayor contends that "true integration between the Muslim community and the citizens of Monfalcone hinges on mutual willingness". The act of swimming in the sea while clothed, she argues, runs counter to this spirit of integration. "While Monfalcone embraces diversity, there is a firm stance against the perceived Islamization of its territory, rooted in the defense of the dignity of Italian citizens". The mayor asserts that meaningful integration

necessitates a reciprocal exchange, and without this, achieving harmonious coexistence among people of varied cultures and religions remains elusive (Carnieletto, 2023).

Mayor Anna Maria Cisint's letter addresses the Islamic religion for three specific reasons:

- 1) Freedom of Religion and Attire: The discussion encompasses the freedom of religion, extending to the choice of women's clothing.
- 2) Integration of Muslim Foreigners into Italian Society: The letter delves into the challenges and considerations related to the integration of individuals practicing the Islamic faith into Italian society.
- 3) Compatibility of Islamic Faith with European Liberal Democracies and the risk of their "supposed Islamization".

While the first two points are the focus of the present research, the third aspect will be the subject of analysis in a future study.

This missive has ignited extensive debates among the political factions in the Italian Parliament and within the broader spectrum of society, including ordinary citizens, associations, NGOs, cultural centers, journalists, and writers. Some politicians from opposing factions to the mayor of Monfalcone derisively labeled her as racist. They emphasized that in Italy, a democratic nation, individuals enjoy the freedom to go to the beach and swim as they please, asserting the absence of a dress code mandate in public spaces, in contrast to private ones (Garau, 2023). The ICS association, dedicated to advocacy for asylum seekers, refugees, and individuals with subsidiary or humanitarian protection in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region – where Monfalcone is situated - highlighted that Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights prohibits restrictions on clothing based on religious grounds. They argued that the act of wearing clothing while bathing at sea poses no threat to safety or public health, constituting an expression of inviolable freedom safeguarded by the Italian legal system (Galici, 2023). The president of the Union of Islamic Communities in Italy rightly observed that while women in Italy have the freedom to dress as they choose, this liberty, according to the mayor, does not extend to Muslims. This discrepancy raises the question of why there is no similar controversy (Adinolfi and Carrantù, 2016) when Catholic nuns, who are also attired in specific clothing, frequent public beaches.



Figure 2: Illustration of Catholic nuns at the beach. Ostia Lido, Italy, summer 2022. (Source: <https://canaledieci.it/2022/09/23/ostia-spiaggia-veste-allegria-spensierata-gruppo-suore/>)

Other associations proposed the establishment of dedicated beaches for Muslim women (Dazzi, 2023). However, concerns were raised that such a measure could result in a form of isolation and ghettoization of women practicing the Islamic faith.

The battle against wearing clothes, including the "burqini" (a swimsuit-like garment covering the entire body) while entering beaches and swimming pools is not a recent concern. The ongoing debate in Italy

and other Western European country revolves around whether the prohibition of such attire constitutes

a measure aimed at safeguarding hygiene, public health, and women's rights, or if it represents a form of discrimination against women practicing the Islamic faith (Martegani, 2023). In Italy, any administrative directive from the mayor of Monfalcone mandating women to disrobe at the beach and adhere exclusively to a “Western-style” swimsuit would starkly contradict Article 19 of the Constitution. This constitutional provision recognizes and protects the freedom of religion in a comprehensive sense, extending beyond merely the rituals of prayer to encompass the entirety of consequences, including clothing, stemming from religious beliefs (Rolli, 2020). However, a pertinent observation deserves emphasis. The Monfalcone mayor’s allusion to the concept of decorum concerning clothed individuals, irrespective of their location, appears somewhat perplexing when juxtaposed with certain practices prevalent in Western societies. Examples include nudism on select public beaches, instances of homosexual kissing featured on popular TV programs - such as those witnessed at the recent San Remo music festival (Manca, 2023) - or the provocative protests of eco-activists who, in drawing attention to climate change, engage in public nudity in major cities (Intanto, 2023). Notably, it is not considered unconventional for men to stroll down the street attired in women’s clothing, a manifestation of the rights acknowledged for fluid or genderqueer individuals (Fuori dal Coro, 2023).

RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

As Italy is now composed of people of different races, religions, cultures, and backgrounds, this paper aims to analyze how freedom of religion is experienced by individuals of the Islamic faith. The study seeks to critically examine the incident in Monfalcone, Italy, involving Muslim women’s fully clothed beach outings during the summer of 2023, and to assess the impact of the mayor’s response on the integration of Muslim individuals into Western Italian society. Additionally, the research endeavors to analyze the level of integration achieved by foreign Muslim residents in Italy. The primary objectives of this work are to address the following research questions concerning the daily lives of Muslim individuals:

- 1) What are the legal and socio-cultural perspectives surrounding the behavior of Muslim women engaging in fully clothed beach outings in Monfalcone, Italy, and how does it align with Italian cultural norms?
- 2) How does the mayor’s response, as expressed in the open letter, contribute to the discourse on the freedom of religion, and what implications does the “Pact for an Italian Islam” have for the integration of Muslim foreigners into Italian society?

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research employs a multi-faceted approach combining document analysis, interviews, and media scrutiny to comprehensively understand the incident and its implications.

- 1) Document Analysis: Scrutiny of the Italian Constitution, documents from the Italian Government, lower institutions, and the mayor’s letter to discern legal and political stances. Examination of recent articles, mostly from Italian newspapers, to gauge public sentiment and media portrayal.
- 2) Interviews: In-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including prominent politicians, scholars, imams, and other religious leaders, conducted across various media platforms. Qualitative analysis of interview content to capture diverse perspectives on the incident and its repercussions.
- 3) Exploration of the “Pact for an Italian Islam” signed in 2017 to understand the extent of freedom of religion for Islamic communities in Italy.
- 4) Analysis of places of worship, educational institutions, and religious centers to assess the practical implications of the legal framework.

- 5) Literature Review: The five books cited in the Literature Review section - exploring stereotypes, migration experiences, and perspectives of individuals of Muslim origin in Europe - provide readers with an opportunity to delve deeper into diverse perspectives and opinions expressed by authors discussing Islam and its followers and the dynamics of Western societies and their interaction with the Muslim population. This methodology ensures a comprehensive analysis of the Monfalcone incident, incorporating legal, cultural, and social perspectives, as well as capturing the opinions of key stakeholders involved in the debate.

List of newspapers employed in this paper

Names	Website
Il Giornale	https://www.ilgiornale.it
Mediaset	https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it
Il Tempo	https://www.iltempo.it/
La Repubblica	https://www.repubblica.it
Il Gazzettino	https://www.ilgazzettino.it/
Clio	https://blog.cliomakeup.com/
Islam Italia	https://www.islamitalia.it/
Giustizia	https://www.giustiziainsieme.it
Bollettino	https://www.bollettinoadapt.it/
Secolo d'Italia	https://www.secoloditalia.it/
Radio Radicale	https://www.radioradicale.it/
Washington Post	https://www.washingtonpost.com/
Il Giorno	https://www.ilgiorno.it/
Vanity Fair	https://www.vanityfair.it/
L'Opinione	https://opinione.it/
Istat	https://www.istat.it/
La 7	https://www.la7.it/
Legge per tutti	https://www.laleggepertutti.it/
Fanpage	https://www.fanpage.it/
Rai News	https://www.rainews.it/
Lenius	https://www.lenius.it/
Quotidiano Libero	https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/
Italia Oggi	https://www.italiaoggi.it/
Diritto	https://www.diritto.it/
Lavoro	https://www.lavoro.gov.it/

Prospettiva	https://www.battei.it/
Capodistria	https://www.rtvsllo.si/capodistria
Salvis Juribus	http://www.salvisjuribus.it/
HuffPost	https://www.huffingtonpost.it/
Malpensa	https://www.malpensa24.it/

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Italy, discussions and writings about Islam only gained prominence after 2010. Before that year, it remained a niche subject confined mainly to the academic sphere. The influx of Muslims in Italy has witnessed a notable rise since 2015, leading to an increased focus on the topic of Islam. Currently, there exists a substantial body of literature on the subject, which can be broadly categorized into two often contrasting perspectives (Iafrate, 2018).

On one hand, certain non-Muslim Western writers approach Islam exclusively from political, cultural, sociological, and identity standpoints. On the other hand, authors from the Islamic faith, hailing from non-Western backgrounds, produce texts aimed primarily at a Muslim audience. These texts equip believers with the necessary knowledge to navigate life in Italy while adhering to Islamic principles. The topics covered span a wide range, including clothing, dietary practices, interpersonal relationships, as well as male and female homosexuality (Marsonet, 2023). However, in the context of the present research, only a limited number of publications are considered. These specifically address Islam not from a theological standpoint, but rather from political, cultural, and social perspectives. It is noteworthy that authors from the Islamic faith concentrate on shared elements between Muslims and non-Muslims. For instance, they advocate for the Muslim community to integrate with the broader Italian population while preserving their faith and culture. In contrast, Western writers frequently underscore the perceived incompatibilities between Islam and the West. Another subgroup of writers engaging with Islam encompasses individuals who, in adulthood and after settling in Europe, have forsaken the Islamic faith for another belief system or embraced atheism. These writers portray Islam as an unequivocal evil that must be confronted and vehemently rejected (Hamouyehy, 2022)

Il tradimento. Globalizzazione e immigrazione, le menzogne delle élite (The Betrayal: Globalization and Immigration, the Lies of the Intellectual Elitist Groups) is a book authored by Federico Rampini (2016). Globalization and immigration instill fear in Westerners, who were led to believe that these forces, along with new technology and other supranational aspects, would bring prosperity and enhance their quality of life. The intellectual elites, however, have advocated for mass immigration to the West without recognizing the potential threat from the Islamic world and its divergence from Western values. Their pursuit of a multi-ethnic society has disrupted the lives of Western people. The author proposes potential solutions: Western Europeans need to liberate themselves from the coercion of multinational corporations that benefit from uncontrolled immigration for cheap labor. Immigration should be managed and regulated, and those wishing to settle in a Western European country must not only respect its values but also adapt to them.

Riccardo Redaelli, the author of *Islamismo e Democrazia* (Islamism and Democracy, 2015), argues that the widely perceived failure of the so-called “Arab Springs” has triggered disillusionment in the Western world, leading many to assert that the compatibility between Islam and Western democracy is unattainable. Redaelli emphasizes the crucial point that Islamic religion is not a homogeneous entity; rather, it exhibits historical diversity shaped by various ethnic groups and cultures. Furthermore, the concepts of democracy and nation-state, grounded in Western systems and predicated on individual freedom, pose challenges when applied to Islamic societies due to their divergence from established traditions.

Maria Bombardieri's *Capire l'Islam. Mito o realtà?* (Understanding Islam. Myth or Reality?), published in 2019, is directed at Westerners residing in cities with a significant Islamic population. The author poses thought-provoking questions, including: 1) is there an Islam-related emergency in Europe? 2) Why is this religion frequently regarded as radical by a specific subset of individuals, making it one of the least understood and most stereotyped? 3) Why do certain religious attire, like long beards on men and full veils on women, evoke discomfort, if not alarm? 4) Why does Islam attract the most discussion and analysis among the various religions practiced in Europe? Bombardieri delves into the historical, sociological, and anthropological dynamics that compel Western societies to grapple with Islam on a daily basis, given its status as the second most prevalent faith, in terms of numbers, in all of Western Europe.

Magdi Cristiano Allam, a journalist-writer who relinquished his Islamic faith upon moving to Europe, authored *Islam. Siamo in Guerra* (Islam. We are at War, 2015). Allam portrays Islam as a global menace, characterized by violence and oppression, necessitating relentless opposition. He contends that Islam is the sole religion endorsing hatred, violence, and promoting death against “unbelievers”, encompassing all non-Muslims. Due to its inherent nature, Islam cannot be deemed “moderate” but instead pursues the objective of subjugating all Western nations. To achieve this, Muslims purportedly establish Islamic strongholds in Europe, construct mosques, advocate for equal status of the Islamic religion, promote the influx of Muslim illegal immigrants, lobby for the criminalization of Islamophobia, and exploit European liberal democracies to impose sharia law. Allam's writings are characterized by anti-Islamic extremism and are politically leveraged by leaders of certain European political parties capable of influencing a segment of the population.

In response to Allam's theses, writer Fausto Cardini presents *L'Islam è una minaccia. Falso!* (Islam is a threat. That is fake, 2016). Cardini refutes the claims of a few extremist fanatics, labeling them as untrue, such as assertions that “Muslims are invading the West”, “The Koran is a book of war”, “Europe and Islam have always been enemies”, and “Muslims hate Westerners”. He attributes widespread Islamophobia in the West to the manipulation of terrorism, incidents of anti-Christian persecution in certain parts of Africa, and the issue of migrants to Europe by cynical politicians. Cardini refutes the notion that migrants will rapidly transform Europe into “Eurabia”. He explores the Muslim world with an unbiased perspective, asserting that fundamentalism is not a religious or political-religious movement driven by a desire to subjugate the West, but rather a form of “politicization of religion”.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The statement made by the Mayor of Monfalcone concerning the attire of Muslim women at the seaside lacks legal and factual basis

From a legal standpoint, it is essential to acknowledge the absence of any legal mandate imposing a dress code in public spaces such as beaches, streets, parks, gardens, and forests. Conversely, private establishments like theaters, restaurants, schools, swimming pools, and means of transportation reserve the right to enforce specific dress codes for entry. For instance, educational institutions, such as schools, may impose regulations during the summer period, prohibiting students, teachers, and school staff from wearing attire such as short pants, tank tops, flip-flops, and ripped jeans. These regulations hold legal significance and are obligatory. Schools, being educational and institutional environments, command due respect, necessitating that individuals present themselves in attire that is both modest and respectable (Aliverti, 2022).

Article 19 of the Italian Constitution articulates the right of all individuals to openly profess their religious beliefs in any form, whether individually or collectively, to propagate these beliefs, and to privately or publicly engage in religious worship, provided such practices do not contravene commonly accepted standards of decency. Despite the secular nature of the Constitution, it acknowledges the intrinsic human instinct for religious expression - an inclination that predates the development of legal

systems. Throughout history, humanity has always sought a higher power to govern earthly existence. Consequently, even within a secular framework, the Constitution acknowledges this fundamental human need. The state, however, maintains a stance of neutrality and impartiality toward all religions. Article 19, affirming the right of every individual to freely profess their religious faith, whether in solitude or within a group, safeguards the freedom to embrace a chosen religion and identify with its principles and values. It extends the right to change one's religion, profess and adhere to its precepts and customs, pray in public or private spaces, disseminate and proselytize it, and establish places of worship for public religious rites or in locations accessible to the public. Implicit in Article 19 is the acknowledgment of the right to conscientious objection, allowing individuals to abstain from activities inherent to a specific profession or trade if they conflict with their religious beliefs. These rights are universally applicable to members of any religious faith, without discrimination (see Bombardieri, 2019). Both the state and private individuals are barred from engaging in discriminatory practices. Therefore, individuals professing different religions, such as a believer in Allah or a Catholic, must be treated with equal regard in any public or private establishment, and they enjoy the freedom to don their personal religious attire in the workplace, unless stipulated otherwise by uniform regulations. For this reason, in Italy, the use of accessories such as *Hijab*, *Al-Amira*, *Chador*, *Khimar*, *Niqab*, *Shayla*, or *Burqa* is unrestricted, in contrast to France, where Muslim female students are prohibited from wearing attire that visibly reflects their religious beliefs (Coluzzi, 2023).

In recent years, the practice of wearing headscarves has become the focal point of intense legal, political, social, and cultural debates. However, this issue surpasses the current scope of our research as it warrants further investigation and may serve as a potential focus for future studies. Article 19 safeguards the freedom of religion in all its manifestations, encompassing attire; nevertheless, this protection does not confer unrestricted rights upon believers. Religious freedom remains unimpeded only when it aligns with other constitutional rights and criminal laws. For instance, the Italian Constitution upholds the right to freedom of expression, permitting criticism and satire of religions as long as it avoids vilification. Unlike Sweden, burning a holy book such as the Koran or the Bible in a public space is not permissible in Italy (Boffa, 2023). Additionally, followers of Indian Sikh religious beliefs are prohibited from carrying the *kirpan*, a symbolic weapon against evil but also a tangible instrument capable of causing harm; Italian criminal law prohibits the possession of any weapon. Furthermore, Article 19 of the Constitution imposes another crucial limitation: religious rites are deemed free unless they run contrary to common decency (Greco, 2021). What does this concept entail? It refers to the prevailing morality and decency predominant at a specific historical juncture. As a result, practices like orgiastic rites, sacred prostitution, ritual sacrifices, self-mutilation, and clandestine sects are proscribed.

In point of fact, the assertions articulated in the letter written by the mayor of Monfalcone do not appear well-founded. In numerous Italian seaside resorts, a multitude of women, both Muslim and non-Muslim, opt for beach attire divergent from the traditional Western bikini, as substantiated by statements from the mayors of Grado, Ischia, Rimini, Lignano, and Jesolo. The idea that a freely chosen attire could be deemed “unseemly” has never been widely entertained (Babbo, 2023). Many fashion platforms actively promote a variety of beachwear, underscoring the complete acceptance of wearing garments beyond the conventional bathing suit (Team Clio, 2020). The analysis underscores the lack of foundation in the argument presented by the mayor of Monfalcone regarding the clothing choices of certain Muslim women for their recreation at the beach.

The Integration of Islamic Communities into Italian Society

In 2017, when the Muslim population in Italy surpassed 2.5 million, the Italian government found it appropriate to formalize agreements with various Islamic communities within the nation, guided by the following principles: the preservation and protection of the inviolable rights of individuals, both in their personal capacities and within the societal structures where their identities unfold; the equality of all religious denominations under the law. Recognizing the significant presence of religious pluralism, encompassing numerous associations, citizens, and residents adhering to the Islamic faith in accordance with the Constitution, the State endeavors to cultivate a harmonious and constructive coexistence among

diverse religious communities. This effort is aimed at reinforcing social cohesion and advancing processes of integration. Collaborating with Islamic associations, the state actively endorses public initiatives designed to fortify and deepen the dialogue between institutions and the Islamic communities while also amplifying the contribution of their spiritual, cultural, and social heritage to the nation. In 2017, a significant milestone was achieved as the Italian state, in collaboration with major Muslim communities within its borders, formalized a pivotal agreement (Costa, 2017) known as the *Patto per un Islam Italiano* (Pact for an Italian Islam). This document has proven to be forward-thinking and efficacious in generating positive outcomes, particularly in fostering the integration of the expanding population of Muslim believers residing permanently in Italy (see Redaelli, 2015). Additionally, it serves to maintain an ongoing dialogue between secular state institutions and the diverse Islamic communities. However, the question arises: what is the precise tally of Muslims permanently residing in Italy? The quantification of adherents to a particular religion is a nuanced undertaking due to the absence of comprehensive databases detailing individuals' religious affiliations. Estimates regarding the number of Islamic believers encompass those who predominantly observe the faith during holidays, individuals for whom religion holds primarily cultural and identity significance, and the category of "non-practicing". The latter comprises individuals identifying as Muslim yet not actively adhering to its tenets in their daily lives (Ciocca, 2023). The ensuing tables delineate the aforementioned estimations and provide insights into the nationalities constituting the largest Muslim communities (Istat, 2023). It is pertinent to note that Italy's total population stands at sixty million people.

Table 1. Expansion of the Islamic Faith Population. Timeframe: 2017-2023. (Data Source: Italian National Institute of Statistics, Istat 2023).

Number of Muslim people, residing in Italy	JAN 2017	JAN 2020	JAN 2023	% of the total population
With a foreign nationality	1836.00	2187.00	4394.00	4.20
With Italian nationality	700.00	2738.00	4602.00	7.60
TOTAL	2536.00	4925.00	8996.00	11.80

% Percentage

Table 2. Top Ten Foreign Muslim Communities in Italy (2023). Number of Legal Residents. (Source Italian National Institute of Statistics, Istat 2023).

Foreign Muslim Communities in Italy	Number of Legal Residents
Morocco	1058.00
Albania	897.00
Bangladesh	721.00
Pakistan	514.00
Tunisia	427.00
Egypt	214.00
Senegal	202.00
North Macedonia	136.00
Kosovo	122.00
Gambia	103.00

The Pact for an Italian Islam encompasses mutual obligations between the Italian state and Islamic associations representing the community of believers (Scalabrin, 2017).

State Obligations:

- 1) Economic support or the construction of new mosques and centers of Islamic culture upon requests from one or more communities in the territory.
- 2) Recognition of Islam as a formal religion, acknowledging its significance within the nation's social fabric.
- 3) Provision of Islamic religious education in public schools upon requests from students or their families.
- 4) Adherence to Article 2 of the European Convention on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights concerning the religion of Islam. However, imposition of the religion or some of its tenets on anyone, including minors, is not permissible.
- 5) Commitment to disseminate knowledge of Islam among all Italian citizens through the promotion of open debates.
- 6) Initiatives to combat Islamophobia.
- 7) Promotion of "inter-religious" dialogues to facilitate harmonious coexistence among various faiths.
- 8) Sustained and open dialogue with Islamic communities for the resolution of potential issues.
- 9) Recognition of the Islamic religion as the second-largest in Italy in terms of the number of followers, with the right to celebrate Islamic holidays, even if not officially recognized as such by the official calendar.
- 10) Acknowledgment of the freedom to establish political parties.
- 11) Provision of "halal food" in schools and company cafeterias.

Obligations of Islamic Communities:

- 1) Full compliance with state laws.
- 2) Recognition of the secular nature of public institutions.
- 3) Use of the Italian language within mosques for Friday sermons, unless non-Italian-speaking foreigners are present.
- 4) Commitment to the principles of Article 2 of the European Convention on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and respect for the right to change religious belief.
- 5) Financial transparency regarding funds received from foreign countries for the construction of Islamic centers or mosques, with cooperation with Italian monetary authorities (Bank of Italy and Ministry of Treasury).
- 6) Adherence to current safety and construction norms for places of worship, which must be open to the public.
- 7) Commitment to make the laws of the state known to their worshippers.

Over the years, the positive outcomes of this agreement have become evident, with Italy showcasing a more deeply rooted and harmonious integration of Muslims into society compared to other European nations (Governo, 2022). In countries such as France, Sweden, and Belgium, distinct "parallel societies" have emerged. These communities are predominantly inhabited by Muslims who tend to isolate themselves from the native population and, notably, do not fully acknowledge the laws of the host state. Termed as "no-go zones", these areas serve as poignant examples of the tangible shortcomings of multiculturalism and the challenges associated with integration. (Leante, 2021). Unlike countries such as Sweden or Belgium, Italy stands out for its successful integration efforts. Despite these positive results, certain segments of the U.S. press have propagated authentic fake news, revealing a profound ignorance of the actual situation in Italy. The Washington Post stated, "In Italy, Islam doesn't officially exist. Unlike Christianity and Judaism, Islam isn't formally recognized in Italy. This means that mosques cannot receive public funds, Islamic weddings have no legal value, and Muslim workers aren't entitled to take days off for religious holidays" (Momigliano, 2017). Regrettably, an internationally renowned U.S. newspaper disseminates information about the Italian situation without adequate knowledge and without conducting proper fact-checking. This publication overlooks the fact that the "Pact for an Italian Islam" was established after Islamic associations had achieved a certain size and had organized themselves structurally. Before 2017, these associations were merely private entities without legal

recognition, and their membership numbered only a few hundred. This American news has been discredited as misinformation by Muslim individuals residing in Italy, such as Sumaya Abdel Qader, an Italian-Muslim politician elected to the City Council of Milan and a member of the “*Partito Democratico*” (Italian Democratic Party), and Izzedin Elzir, an imam in Florence and president of UCOII, the country’s largest Muslim association. Sumaya Abdel Qader appraised the Pact for an Italian Islam as “a positive step”, while Izzedin Elzir expressed gratitude to the Italian Government for recognizing and accepting Islam as the second religion in the country. Elzir asserted that Italy has publicly acknowledged that Islam is fully compatible with the Italian state because Islam opposes any theocratic state. The Pact for an Italian Islam, facilitated by dedicated tables for interreligious dialogue, has allowed Islamic communities to foster robust relationships with the Catholic Church, various Christian denominations, the Jewish community, other religious faiths, and the broader civil community. This inclusive approach extends to individuals who do not align with any particular religion (Rame, 2020).

The Washington Post’s fake news

“In Italy, Islam doesn’t officially exist”

In Italy, the presence of Islam predates the “Pact for an Italian Islam” agreement. As early as 2015, there were eighty-eight Islamic schools in the country, and this number continued to rise annually. These schools adhere to the curriculum established by the Italian educational system, employing the Italian language as the primary medium of instruction. Additionally, they incorporate subjects such as the Arabic language and the study of the Quran into their programs. Some of these Quranic schools are tailored for students whose families anticipate a short-term residence in Italy, allowing them to use a language other than Italian (Tempo, 2015).

“Mosques cannot receive public funds”

Each religious community possesses the right to request financial support from regional and municipal institutions. The aforementioned U.S. newspaper evidently overlooks the regulations governing the allocation of public funds for the construction of places of worship, including mosques, churches, synagogues, and temples. In the budgets of Italian regions and municipalities, specific spending chapters are allocated for such funding. Moreover, territorial entities have the authority to contribute their buildings for use as places of worship. A notable example is in Milan, where the mosque on *Via Esterle* (Esterle Street) was constructed through the municipality’s donation of the property to the *Casa della Cultura Musulmana* (House of Muslim Culture), a prominent Islamic association actively operating in Milan (Mingoia, 2023).

“Islamic weddings have no legal value”

The norms of private international law constitute a fundamental component of the Italian legal system, overseeing the application of the legal systems of other nations and the recognition of their jurisdiction in cases arising in Italy involving individuals of nationalities other than Italian. The framework of private international law is delineated by Articles 17-31 of the Preliminary Provisions to the Civil Code and Law No. 218 of May 31, 1995, which “determines the scope of Italian jurisdiction, lays down the criteria for identifying the applicable law, and regulates the effectiveness of foreign judgments and acts”. These rules of private international law are applicable across various domains, encompassing:

- People’s rights and their legal capacities
- Legal entities

- Family relations
- Adoption
- Protection of incapacitated persons and maintenance obligations
- Successions
- Donations
- Contractual obligations

Based on the aforementioned regulations, both Muslim and non-Muslim foreigners residing in Italy have the legal capacity to contract matrimony in the country. Marriages conducted abroad in adherence to the laws of the individual's country of origin can be transcribed in Italy, receiving full recognition. Particularly for Muslims with citizenship in a country where marriage requirements mandate a union with a person of the same religion, the Italian legal system fully recognizes the validity of the "proof of conversion to the Islamic religion" as stipulated by the foreign state (Concas, 2020). A notable case in Italy involved a woman of Egyptian nationality who intended to marry an Italian citizen in the country. In this scenario, the woman's consulate, to issue her marriage clearance, required a certificate of "conversion to Islam" from the Italian groom, issued by an Italian Islamic center recognized by the consulate. Private international law principles acknowledge the legal validity of such consular requests, with the provision of a right to challenge them in court if they are perceived as prejudicial to personal interests (Causa, 2020)

"Muslim workers aren't entitled to take days off for religious holidays"

The 2017 Pact between the Italian state and Islamic communities duly acknowledges the entitlement of Islam's followers to observe their two major holidays, *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha*.



Figure 3: Muslim people celebrate Eid-al-Adha in Florence (Italy) on June 28, 2023. (Source: <https://luce.lanazione.it/attualita/eid-al-adha-festa-sacrificio/>)

For the former, Muslims are granted a three-day holiday, and if these days coincide with working days, they are not deducted from their allotted leave. As for the latter, they have the right to enjoy a two-day respite. These rights (Pigliararmi, 2023) find acknowledgment in all collective labor agreements endorsed by the three preeminent Italian labor unions (CGIL- *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* - CISL - *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* - and UIL - *Unione Italiana del Lavoro*). For holidays other than *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha*, the employee has the right to request leave for religious reasons. The employer, in alignment with the needs of the entire company, is obligated to accommodate such requests.

Political Engagement: The Right to Establish Islamic Political Parties under the Pact

Article 49 of the Italian Constitution states, “All citizens have the right to associate freely in parties to compete with a democratic method to determine national policy”. Consequently, there is no impediment to the establishment and operation of Islamic-inspired parties. The noteworthy *Movimento Islamico Italiano Democratico* (Italian Democratic Islamic Movement), founded on April 8, 2021, is a prominent example (Corda, 2021).

Open to all, its political agenda is centered on the following objectives:

- 1) Mitigating social inequalities, enhancing living standards, and ensuring the comprehensive implementation of the Italian Constitution.
- 2) Providing a platform and representation for all Italian citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation, in the spirit of “brotherhood”.
- 3) Actively participating in the Italian political landscape to contribute to the formation of a more cosmopolitan society.
- 4) Cultivating an Islamic religiosity harmoniously integrated with Italian cultural traditions.
- 5) Advocating for interreligious dialogue and mutual tolerance among various faiths through meetings, proposals, and other political initiatives.
- 6) Establishing a religion of genuine Italian origin while adhering to Italian laws.

Despite the establishment of political Islamic parties, not all Muslims have chosen to align themselves with these entities. The presence of individuals professing the Muslim faith in Italian politics is diverse, with representation spanning across numerous parties. For instance, Khalid Chaouki (Palazzolo, 2023) is a member of the Democratic Party, while others have aligned themselves with so-called sovereigntist and populist parties (De Lorenzo, 2019). However, the subject concerning the inception and organization of Islamic-inspired political parties could serve as a prospective avenue for future research.



Figure 4: The symbol of the Italian political party *Movimento Islamico Italiano Democratico* - Italian Democratic Islamic Movement - (Source: <https://iari.site/2021/05/12/miid-nasce-il-movimento-islamico-italiano-democratico/>)

CONCLUSION

The analysis undertaken in this research reveals that the 2017 Pact for an Italian Islam has:

- 1) Acknowledged Islam as the second-largest religion.
- 2) Affirmed the full validity of Article 19 of the Italian Constitution.
- 3) Demonstrated a positive integration between Muslims, whether Italian citizens or foreigners residing in Italy, and the rest of the population.

Muslims live in Italy as free citizens and residents, engaging in various activities such as work, study, and participation in politics. Men and women from the Muslim community actively contribute to diverse aspects of Italian society. Mosques and Islamic centers are distributed across every region of Italy. Representatives of the Muslim associations that endorsed the Pact for an Italian Islam in 2017 prefer to be identified as “Muslims” rather than “Islamists”, despite the frequent interchangeable use of these terms. In reality, there exist fundamental distinctions between “Islam” and “Islamism” as well as between “Muslim” and “Islamist”. The terminological and substantive differences are elucidated by Wael Farouq (2020), Professor of Arabic Language and Culture at the Catholic University of Milan. A person who adheres to or converts to Islam is a Muslim, while an Islamist is an individual who adopts a political perspective on society. Islam itself is a religion, and Islamism is the study of the religion. Muslims are individuals who follow the Islamic faith. On the other hand, Islamists are those who transform religion into an ideology and actively strive to establish its dominance. While a Muslim is characterized by adherence to practices such as prayers, fasting, and the observance of religious traditions, an Islamist perceives his religious tradition as a political undertaking aimed at reforming other traditions deemed corrupt. The distinction lies in the fact that a Muslim believes in God’s protection, whereas an Islamist may perceive himself as the protector of God. The focus of a Muslim is on his faith, yet an Islamist is concerned with the faith of others.

A Muslim refrain from engaging in actions he does not love, while an Islamist, in such cases, prohibits others from doing so. The Muslim openly expresses his faith to others, whereas the Islamist passes judgment on the faith of others. Essentially, political Islam represents a choice to impose beliefs on others. In Italy, individuals practicing Islam prefer to be identified as “Muslims”, reflecting their full integration into the society in which they reside, without any desire to alter the state’s laws. Italian Islam is characterized by its liberal, inclusive, and pluralistic nature, aligning with the ethos of European societies. Muslims residing in Italy embody these principles, demonstrating a liberal mindset and effective integration into a democratic society that upholds the rights and freedoms of every individual, regardless of their religious beliefs or observance. Italian Muslims offer an alternative interpretation of Islam - one that champions the separation of politics and religion, embracing the secular nature of the state. Consequently, Muslims in Italy condemn any attempts to impose Islam or its tenets on others. The Islamic communities in Italy reject the perception of their religion as something forced upon others and consistently denounce any harassing behaviors exhibited by some of their members. Islam symbolizes peace, and the imposition of religion or its dictates, even within familial contexts, is considered a form of violence, a principle vehemently rejected by Islam itself (El Hachimi, 2023). Therefore, if it can be affirmed that Italian Muslims, whether citizens or resident foreigners, have seamlessly integrated into Italian society, it is crucial to acknowledge how the broader society has reciprocated by embracing Muslim culture in many aspects.



Figure 5: Illustration of a fashion show by *Dolce e Gabbana* (D&G). Milan, Italy, 2019. (Source: <https://blog.modacabbigliamento.it/fashion/tendenze-moda/dolce-gabbana-italia-islam-collezione-abaya.html>)

An evident manifestation of this acceptance is observed in Italian fashion, where prominent designers, from Armani to Dolce and Gabbana, create collections inspired by the traditions of Islamic countries. This fashion, in turn, is embraced and appreciated by a diverse audience. Nevertheless, the situation in Italy, as well as in other European Union countries, is not uniformly positive. Islam is frequently linked with illegal immigration, a concern that has attained alarming proportions (see Rampini, 2016). Not all undocumented migrants, upon arriving at Italian shores, secure refuge in state-provided facilities. A substantial number of them find themselves compelled to endure life on the streets without any formal protection, relegated to the fringes of society. Frequently engaging in criminal activities, encountering challenges in obtaining legal residency permits, and facing eventual repatriation, these individuals encounter insurmountable barriers to integrating into society. This represents a colossal challenge that the European Union appears either unable or unwilling to address. The annual influx of irregular migrants continues to escalate, giving rise to issues of societal degradation, heightened insecurity, xenophobia, and, notably, Islamophobia, as a significant proportion of them hails from Islamic nations. Regrettably, illegal migration remains unchecked, and the incidence of crimes perpetrated by irregular migrants is alarmingly high. (Parbuoni, 2023). For these reasons, albeit with a certain degree of ignorance, Islam, in its entirety, becomes entangled with the criminal actions of these illegal immigrants. Certain political parties strategically exploit this issue for political leverage. Furthermore, capitalizing on the growing unease and profound insecurity experienced by ordinary citizens for electoral advantage, they overtly propagate the notion of a perilous “Islamic invasion”.



Figure 6: Illustration of a public speaker during the Italian TV program *Fuori dal Coro*, broadcast on October 11, 2023. The man says: “Violent Islam wants to wipe out the freedoms of the West”. Source: https://mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/video/fuoridalcoro/puntata-dell11-ottobre_F312803501000601)

This narrative seeks to convince the populace that Islam employs migrants as a means to invade and destabilize Europe (see Cardini, 2016). Consequently, Islamic immigration is perceived by some Europeans as a tangible threat to national identity and security (Esposito, 2023). In certain television programs, speakers overtly hostile to Islam explicitly assert that “a violent Islam aims to eradicate the freedoms of the West”. It is noteworthy that while the number of individuals characterizing Islam as a perilous religion seeking to undermine Western freedoms is relatively small, these ideas exert influence over significant segments of the population, particularly those with limited education and who are adversely affected by illegal immigration (see Allam, 2015).

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The authors affirm that there is no conflict of interest in this article.

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The author declares that generative AI tools were not used in the creation of this article, except for text paraphrasing and cross-checking references. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of this work.

RESEARCH ETHICS STATEMENT

The author(s) declare that this study did not involve any human biological samples or data, or animal subjects. Consequently, formal ethics committee approval and informed consent were not required for this research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to institutional and ethical requirements.

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