



THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN COMBATING EXTREMISM CASE STUDY: ITALY

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Violent extremism is today a potential threat to social cohesion in Italy; while, in other European countries, the impact of which seems to be more severe and far-reaching. Although cross-border jihadism has not affected this country yet, we find that public institutions have sounded the alarm calling for the development of appropriate preventive plans. The current article aims to explain the method in which the problem of training Islamic clerics in Europe has been raised, while clarifying the original elements of the Italian approach to preventing extremism, which emerges in a pioneering project funded by the Italian government. The project considers that the solution lies with the academic bodies and websites of knowledge and sciences of universities, making up a network of Italian universities and private universities in certain countries in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Prevention First

Unlike repressive and intelligence measures, the Italian authorities attached great importance to the preventive measures spearheaded by counter-narrative that refutes extremist propaganda. Furthermore, alternative visions for the propositions of terrorist groups also came into play. Simply put, an approach that adopts these goals should consider seriously adopting a multi-level and active multi-party formula (Battistelli, 2013) in that not only does it facilitate better coordination among government institutions, but also among important sectors of civil society.

Hence the need for extensive consultations among the influential institutional bodies, specialists in the humanities and social sciences and representatives of civil society closest to the environment that is likely to be affected by the phenomenon; they are well able to propose a concept that links events with the factors that have contributed to

their production, and stimulates overcoming reactions and adopting cautious and open positions towards the issues that shape the social scene.

The importance of religious communication and the impact of religious authorities in this field are now taken for granted in addressing extremism, which claims to have a true interpretation of Islam. Twenty years ago, the influence of imams, their scholarly, cultural and social presence and their relations with politics became issues that were worth of studying. With the emergence of the jihadist threat, what they do against this phenomenon has become very crucial.

Violent extremism is today a potential threat to social cohesion in Italy. Therefore, the training of Muslim clerics is an important question in terms of the positive development of the reality of Islam in Europe.

Imamship in Europe

Training imams in Europe seemed to be important before the 9/11 Attacks, 2001, and the first experiences of training sessions for religious guides were reported in the eighties in England and Belgium (Peter, 2018), where the percentage of Muslims is high. The issue became then critically important in the past twenty years. The impact of imams on the development of Muslim communities is constantly seen as a topic that requires intervention to promote the integration of Muslims into host societies (Peace, 2018; Ghazali, 2018), prevent problems and most significantly properly present Islam, in such a manner that is different from what is shown in propaganda of extremist groups.

When Muslim countries send imams to help their citizens, or when they come from the immigration communities themselves, such imams begin offering services that gradually lead them to leave the purely religious sphere, address wider problems such as helping patients and prisoners, manage family conflicts and represent their religion and society in official and popular forums (Hashas, de Ruitter, Valdemar Vinding, 2018). It seems that such development gradually provides an unprecedented room for the empowerment of women (Ghazali, 2017). In the context of the multiple functions of the imam in the fields of social, scientific and cultural mediation, the female guides confirm their role in this area, and in some cases criticize the male model exclusively for the leadership of society.

Hence the need to adapt to the new cultural and social reality seems necessary, and training religious staff and community leaders is also urgent. This affects the positions that the Islamic presence requires naming in European institutions, relating to respecting the principles of freedom of worship guaranteed by law, and responding to the currently established roots of Islam in the social and cultural realities of these countries.

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Therefore, training Muslim employees (Schiavinato, 2017) or mentors should be understood as an issue of concern to the independence of the Muslim community. The state should remain neutral, but on the other hand, it has implications that seem to go beyond the borders of Muslim societies that attract the attention of public opinion and overlap with the interests of political institutions and departments.

Universities and Combating Extremism

The Group of Seven Interior Ministers meeting was held in Ischia on October 20, 2017, with the participation of the European Commissioner for Migration, Internal Affairs and Citizenship, the European Union Security Commissioner, the Secretary-General of Interpol. The field of university scientific research and the internet identified a major area for counterterrorism in cooperation with major technology companies to exchange technologies and experiences, use the best innovative technologies to suppress terrorist content and enable civil society partners to develop alternative speech.

Hence, the recommendations of the European Union and the Study Group Committee Report on extremism and jihadist extremism were distinguished by the call for the establishment of specialized programs to combat violent extremism (CVE), through a multidisciplinary and a multi-party approach, with the participation of a group of public and private entities, in addition to the bodies of the system, intelligence, the judiciary and public entities and other active civil society destinations.

The Italian government launched an initiative in 2019 to establish projects undertaken by the Italian Ministry of Education, universities and scientific research centers (MIUR

Call – OIC, 2018), with the aim of encouraging university training and higher studies projects between Italy and the countries participating in the OIC to understand extremism and to develop social integration in Italy (Executive Decree No. 3089 of 11/16/2018, ID 82382). This project includes the (prevention and interaction) project in the trans-Mediterranean region. Interestingly enough, this measure is unprecedented, as it is the first time in Europe that a ministry has allocated for universities and research public resources to finance a project to prevent violent extremism, which is an area usually within the competence of the Ministry of Interior or the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

The importance of religious communication and the impact of religious authorities in this field are now taken for granted in addressing extremism, which claims to have a true interpretation of Islam.

National and local public institutions and players active in civil society have long experimented with a number of projects in cooperation with Islamic associations in society (training religious workers, courses for clerics, intercultural courses) and outside the community (interfaith initiatives in schools and prisons).

Italian Experience

In line with the work produced by universities, the Italian experience is distinguished by providing advisory and consultation to institutions on this phenomenon, through cooperation with local communities on the basis of their experience gained in this field. This also includes producing areas of public facilities that allow institutions to implement projects aimed at promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence among the social groups that make up Italian society. Universities produce active and essential work in this framework, and they have become an important reference in the diverse international scientific community, as well as for Muslim religious active actors, through the FIDR, which includes eight research units, and is now the nucleus of the PriMED network that includes 22 universities, including 12 Italian universities, and 10 universities of the OIC countries: Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco ranked first in the MIUR-OCI ranking.

Two university majors were established: Master Degree in “Studies on Islam in Europe: Knowledge and Practices”, and an “Advanced Training Course for Imams and Guides” for individuals working in Italian Islamic societies.

Among the innovations that characterize and feature the PriMED project, related to the training activities chosen in the field of FIDR, including more than one hundred users in recent years, there is much related to the education and methods envisaged for Islamic sciences. Along with the presence of a large international network of researchers in issues of religious sciences, an important nexus was developed between the scientific cooperation and the training of religious staff. This was achieved by conducting religious scientific research in Muslim countries in neutral academic environments.

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Building an Islamic incubator in Italy is a very complex process, with various competitors, and those working in the academic research field cannot do without the need for training based on the complex context in which they move and act, even if they enjoy full support and participation for organized Muslim citizens (de Matolli, 2017).

These courses were developed to be part of the postgraduate training for employees active in this field. Such development was initiated from the early stages of project preparation and implementation, assisted by the main active Islamic organizations in Italy that actively participate in the development of science and knowledge.

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In addition to this basic section, the educational project provides an analysis of the participation of Islam in Europe and Italy, especially in the general development of society, and examines critically the concepts and theoretical systems that have enabled it to represent its society so far.

Conclusion

The training of Muslim clerics is an important question in terms of the positive

development of the reality of Islam in Europe. If the presence of religious guides is culturally inconsistent with the speech and practice of violent extremism, then it appears to be a critical element to counter the spread of propaganda of violent extremism. The associated contributions to the general growth of the religious and civil quality of the societies in which it operates and to integrate it better in its broader context may shape and make the success of the first goal. To this end, the problem of training should be placed in a broad and long-term perspective, so that the process of prevention and interaction with jihadist abuses is in a generally coherent context.