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Pressure is growing on Muslims in Italy

by Elisabeth Rosenthal

International Herald Tribune (25.07.2005) / HRWF Int. (08.06.2005) Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - As a second wave of London bomb attacks hit the news Thursday, Imam Khaldi Samir clicked nervously at his office computer, next to the prayer hall at the Alhuda Islamic Cultural Association on the outskirts of Rome. Bombs in London, he has seen, produce fallout for him.

Just two days earlier, with Italy stepping up surveillance after the first round of London attacks, 10 plainclothes police officers with a search warrant turned up at 7 a.m. at the imam's home in Latina, 70 kilometers, or 40 miles, south of Rome. During a three-hour raid, while his children slept, they scoured the home he shares with his Italian wife, and then downloaded numbers from his cellphone.

The police explained that they were looking for clues related to the London bombings, although they found nothing, said the imam, who preaches to up to 800 mostly poor immigrant worshipers each week. The search warrant did not indicate that the imam himself was suspected of a crime. Instead, the police politely explained, the search was "preventive" - the warrant stating he might have "unknowingly" had contact with people connected to terrorism. Five other leaders of the Italy's Muslims were searched the same day, he said.

"The state is punishing its best links to the Muslim community - we never expected that the Italian state would do something like this," said Samir, a soft-spoken man in a shirt and slacks, clearly shaken by the course of events.

"Every day I stress the need for moderation and integration," Samir said, "but these searches bring into question my credibility in our community. People will say, 'This is your payback for your moderation.'"

He said such events served to radicalize young people.

As antiterrorism officials across Europe are intensifying their hunt to root out sleeper cells, they walk a delicate line between thwarting terrorists and radicalizing innocent Muslims who are already largely isolated and marginalized in many European nations.

The challenge of controlling terrorism without creating new terrorists is particularly acute in countries like France and Italy.

In those two countries, large and growing Muslim populations are kept by law and by custom on the fringes of mainstream society. There are an estimated 1.5 million Muslims in Italy, a country of about 58 million people. The vast majority of the Muslims are immigrants, who have little chance of getting citizenship. Less than 10 percent have an Italian passport.

An official at Italy's law enforcement agency, the Ministry of the Interior, said that he did not know specifics of recent raids, but that he was "not surprised" that such searches were occurring. "This is an ongoing process," he said.

On Friday, Italy's Council of Ministers adopted a series of new antiterrorism provisions, which are likely to take effect soon. These include new registration requirements for Internet cafés and cellphone users, new limits on pilot's licenses, and quick expulsions for foreigners considered a danger to national security or who assist in terrorist activities.

But the search on the imam's house occurred legally under the current rules, which give judges wide leeway in issuing warrants.

"What if I had reason to believe that a terrorist had gone to your house and was worried he left something - some documents or even a suitcase?" said a senior Italian antiterrorism official, explaining the search.

In 2001, the police searched the Alhuda centre, which includes a prayer hall and a cultural centre and where Arabic and Islamic culture is taught to children. Last year, they searched the home of Ben Mohamed Mohamed, the center's president.

But since the attacks in London, the Italian government has beefed up security measures and has also attempted to reach out to Muslims. In Michelangelo's beautiful Campidoglio, on the afternoon of the second London bombings, the city of Rome invited prominent Muslims to convey a message of coexistence.

"Rome is a city that is open to everybody," said Giuseppe Mannino, chairman of the City Council. "You are our brothers."

He shared the podium with Mahmoud Hammad Sheweita, imam of Rome's only official mosque, the Grand Mosque - an architectural masterpiece filled with light and soaring arches, which operates with the permission and cooperation of the Ministry of the Interior.

Samir and Mohamed listened from the back row.

Unlike the Alhuda centre, a subterranean former warehouse where young men wander in and out all day, the luxurious official mosque is open to worshipers only on Friday.

For the rest of the week, its primary function is to serve as a sort of liaison between Islam and the Italian government. From here, Mario Scialoja, a former Italian diplomat and convert to Islam, who is head of the Italian branch of the World Muslim League, meets with Islamic ambassadors and lobbies Italian politicians, pushing them to allow Muslims better access to citizenship, and religious education for Muslim children.

Scialoja said that the worshipers in his mosque, filled on Fridays, were typical Italian Muslims - poor immigrants who come to Italy for a better existence.

He said that "99.7 percent of them couldn't care less about fundamentalism" and that only 4 percent of Italy's Muslims attend mosque on a regular basis.

While he has noted some acts of intolerance since the London bombings, he praised Giuseppe Pisanu, the interior minister, whom he meets with regularly, and he called Italy's new antiterrorism proposals "very responsible." And though he blames the U.S. invasion of Iraq for creating terrorism, he does not support an immediate withdrawal. Italy has troops in Iraq in support of the U.S.-led invasion.

"To stay is to feed this anger, but to leave now would create a mess," he said.

But his official version of Islam seems to have little resonance or even connection with Samir's prayer hall, where many worshipers speak halting Italian and the lingua franca is Arabic.

When Scialoja tried to form a national association of Muslim groups five years ago, "the experiment was a failure," he said, "since some groups had views I couldn't support."

In 2003, when the Grand Mosque expelled its new Imam for a fiery sermon that justified Palestinian bombings in Israel (though not in Italy), Alhuda's Web site posted an article defending his right to free speech.

In part because Italy does not recognize Islam as a religion, Samir's flock does not have a real mosque. Italian Muslims must work on their religion's holy days. As aliens, the vast majority have no right to vote.

"Now, with the increasing security, they search our houses - this is a very bad sign," Samir said. "We hear all about the policies on integration, but we never seen any concrete measures."

They remain largely outsiders and, especially now, visitors to the Alhuda center and the surrounding Islamic shops were greeted with intense suspicion. Requests to interview the Imam were met with deflections and questions: Where are you from? Why do you want him?

Samir, a Tunisian who has lived in Italy for 15 years, insists that he would report suspicious activity to the police.

Asked if anyone from the Alhuda had attended the religious schools in Pakistan that have been a breeding ground for terrorists, he said: "Not that I know of, but they certainly wouldn't tell me if they had."

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Categorization of religions and institutional discrimination

Legislation

- Lateran Treaty (*Patti Lateranensi*, 1929) regulating the relationship between the State and the Catholic Church, amended in 1984
- State Agreements with six religions

- Art. 3, 7, 8, 19 and 20 of the 1948 Constitution
- Parliamentary Act on hate speech and racist propaganda (1993)
- Immigration Act introducing an equal treatment without distinction of religion (1998)
- Directive 78/2000 containing detailed rules about discrimination in employment and occupation(2000) and Governmental Decree to transpose it into the legal system (2003)
- Standards on Religious Freedom and Abrogation of the Legislation on “Admitted Religions” (Culti ammessi): Draft law pending at the Parliament

Categorization of Religions

In Italy, the categorization of religions is essentially based on some form of recognition by the State.

The Catholic Church has a special status as it has concluded a Concordat with the State.

Six denominations have concluded “Agreements” (Intese) with the State. These agreements guarantee access to a number of additional rights for all religions of this category, and also to a number of rights specific to each religion.

The State has discretionary power to grant (or not) the status of “ente di culto”¹ (religious community) to a group that requests it. A religious community is recognized as a legal personality with civil effect by a Ministry of Interior decree.

Religious groups which have not been granted the status of “ente di culto” can operate under the status of non-profit associations or common law associations, regulated by the Civil Code.

Category 1: Catholic Church, about 87% * (Concordat with the State)

Category 2: State-recognized religions (Intese)

- Union of the Jewish Communities in Italy, about 30,000*
- Union of the Waldensian and Methodist Churches, about 30,000*
- Assemblies of God, about 100,000²
- Lutheran Evangelical Church, about 7,000
- Church of the Adventists of the Seventh Day
- Baptist Church

Category 3: Enti di culto” (recognized confessional communities mainly linked to the following faith communities):

- Muslims (various denominations), about 1,000,000*
- Orthodox Churches (various denominations), about 527,800³

¹ Official statistics about the number of « enti di culto » with legal personality are conflicting. S. Berlingo and G. Casascelli (Codice del diritto ecclesiastico, Milano Giuffrè 2003) list 27 recognized religions. According to the Italian Home Ministry (<http://pers.mininterno.it/deds/compendio/zip2002/provvedimenti.pdf>), there were 34 in 2002.

² <http://www.cesnur.org/recens/ADI.htm>

- Jehovah's Witnesses, about 400,000⁴
- Hindus (various denominations), about 25,000⁵
- Buddhists(various denominations), about 60,000*
- Protestant groups (various denominations)
- Baha'i Faith

Category 4: Non-profit associations and common law associations

- Sahaja Yoga
 - The Family
 - Christian Science
 - Church of Scientology
- etc.

* *Statistics from the U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report: Italy, 2004, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35462.htm>*

Institutional discrimination

Confessional communities and other religious (common law) associations do not benefit from the same rights as the Catholic Church and the religions which have concluded an agreement (intesa) with the Italian State. For example, they are :

- not eligible to be part of the “otto per mille” system which allows the members of the religions which have an agreement with the Italian State to finance the religion of their choice through the income tax system;
- not permitted to teach religion at public schools (consequentially, their children are denied appropriate classes) but non-Catholic religion with an agreement (intesa) have the right to send their teachers to public schools, even if they rarely do so;
- only allowed on request by a co-religionist to send their ministers as chaplains to the armed forces, prisons, centers for refugees, hospitals or other social or health care facilities, and religious confessions with an agreement (intesa) are in the same situation while the Catholic Church has officially accredited stable chaplains in these institutions;
- subjected to specific regulations with regard to visas requested by missionaries or religious workers, even though volunteers.

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Minister urges fine for burqa

by John Hooper

³ <http://www.cesnur.org/2004/immigrati.htm>

⁴ http://www.jw-media.org/region/europe/italy/english/releases/religious_freedom/ita_e000321.htm

⁵ http://www.cesnur.org/recens/hindus_sir.htm

The Guardian (06.06.2005) / HRWF Int. (08.06.2005) Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Women wearing burkas in Italy should be reported to the police and fined, Silvio Berlusconi's justice minister said at the weekend. Roberto Castelli said the garment was at odds with an Italian law that forbids masks.

The burka is rare, though not unknown, in Italy. But commentators yesterday noted that the minister's ruling against masks could be applied to other garb more commonly worn by Muslim women, that leaves only the eyes visible.

Mr Castelli told a meeting in the northern town of Como: "No one may break the law."

He was referring to a decision by the local prefect to overturn fines imposed last year on an Italian convert to Islam from nearby Drezzo, who wears a burka. Two other women have been fined for wearing the garment elsewhere. Mr Castelli's remarks were condemned by leftwing parties. Marco Rizzo of the Communist party said they were "at the threshold of incitement to racial and religious hatred".

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Fallaci charged in Italy with defaming Islam

by Crispian Malmer

Reuters (25.05.2005) / HRWF Int. (26.05.2005) – Website: www.hrwf.net – Email: info@hrwf.net - A judge has ordered best-selling writer and journalist Oriana Fallaci to stand trial in her native Italy on charges she defamed Islam in a recent book.

The decision angered Italy's justice minister but delighted Muslim activists, who accused Fallaci of inciting religious hatred in her 2004 work "La Forza della Ragione" (The Force of Reason).

Fallaci lives in New York and has regularly provoked the wrath of Muslims with her outspoken criticism of Islam following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on U.S. cities.

In "La Forza della Ragione," Fallaci wrote that terrorists had killed 6,000 people over the past 20 years in the name of the Koran and said the Islamic faith "sows hatred in the place of love and slavery in the place of freedom."

State prosecutors originally dismissed accusations of defamation from an Italian Muslim organization, and said Fallaci should not stand trial because she was merely exercising her right to freedom of speech.

But a preliminary judge in the northern Italian city of Bergamo, Armando Grasso, rejected the prosecutors advice at a hearing on Tuesday and said Fallaci should be indicted.

Grasso's ruling homed in on 18 sentences in the book, saying some of Fallaci's words were "without doubt offensive to Islam and to those who practice that religious faith."

Muslims hail decision

Adel Smith, a high-profile Muslim activist who brought the original law suit, hailed the decision.

"It is the first time a judge has ordered a trial for defamation of the Islamic faith," he told reporters. "But this isn't just about defamation. We would also like (the court) to recognize that this is an incitement to religious hatred."

Justice Minister Roberto Castelli, who has a prickly relationship with the Italian judiciary, said the ruling represented an attack on freedom of expression.

"In Europe we are seeing the birth of a movement that is looking to silence those who don't follow a single mindset, within which it is forbidden to speak ill of Islam, of homosexuals or of the children of homosexuals," Castelli was quoted as saying in an interview with Radio Padania.

"In Fallaci's book there is very strong criticism but not defamation," Italian news agency ANSA quoted him as saying.

There was no immediate comment from Fallaci who is in her 70s and suffers from cancer.

Just weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks, Fallaci published "La Rabbia e l'Orgoglio" ("The Rage and the Pride"), in which she said the West was superior to Islamic society and complained that Muslim immigrants had "multiplied like rats."

The book sold more than one million copies in Italy and at least 500,000 elsewhere in Europe.

Fallaci received numerous death threats following its launch and "La Forza della Ragione" was billed as her response to the outpouring of anger.

No date was set for the opening of the defamation trial.

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