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MADRASSE JIHADISTE IN ITALIA: I PRECEDENTI

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The anti-terrorism operation carried out today in Foggia, Southern Italy, marks an important moment for Italy's counterterrorism. The raid comes as the culmination of a longer investigation initiated by Bari's DIGOS (the national police's special unit, which was monitoring a small, unauthorized place of worship named Al Dawa, located near Foggia's railway station. Indeed, two recently arrested jihadists – including a former Chechen foreign fighter – were known to have regularly attended the mosque. However, extremist activities did not solely involve adults. As the investigation showed, Egyptian national Abdel Rahman Mohy – a key figure inside Al Dawa – sought to proselytize children, making use of IS propaganda materials during lessons he held inside the mosque. Children were taught to loathe "disbelievers", and some of them were encouraged to swear an oath of allegiance (bay'a) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

This incident brings into focus jihadist indoctrination of children and adolescents, as well

as the places – be they virtual or physical – where this process takes place. How does the incident fit into Italy's jihadist landscape? Is it something novel?

In recent years – in tune with trends spotted in many other European countries – a home-grown scene has begun to emerge in Italy, featuring an extensive presence on the Internet. Jihadist supporters have thus created a number of Italian language blogs or accounts on social media, to get in touch with like-minded individuals, disseminate and consume extremist propaganda. These homegrown networks have generally lacked substantial ties with local mosques and cultural associations – which, by contrast, are in many cases an adverse environment for jihadist militants¹. As a matter of fact, at times – even when jihadist sympathizers attend places of worship – the leadership of the

¹ For an in-depth analysis of the evolution of jihadism in Italy, see L. Vidino, *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy: Birth, Development and Radicalization Dynamics*, Foreword by Stefano Dambruoso, Milan, ISPI and European Foundation for Democracy, 2014.

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mosque may not be aware of their extremist views. Likewise, on several occasions, some radical individuals get in contact with fellow extremists at mosques, but indoctrination and planning of violent acts are conducted elsewhere, in more confined settings.

While this holds true in general terms, there are also a few, yet notable, exceptions — that is, cases in which key figures gravitating around (or even leading) places of worship have been involved in jihadist proselytism and recruitment. Very young individuals may occasionally be implicated in this kind of activities.

In Italy, few known incidents have to do with “jihadist schools” for children and youngsters. Two of them are worth mentioning. The first and perhaps most significant episode occurred in Ponte Felcino, near Perugia (Central Italy): in July 2007, authorities dismantled a terrorist cell revolving around the local mosque, Al Nour. The clique had set up a sort of “terrorist school” to train jihadist militants. A leading role was played by the mosque’s imam, Moroccan national Mostafa El Korchi² — a charismatic figure who managed to win the trust of the local Muslim community. Indeed, El Korchi — thanks to his skills and his position — was the “catalyst” of the small town’s jihadist scene, able to influ-

² Besides El Korchi, also Mohamed El Jari, Driss Safika, and Noureddine Oumaadane were subject to an arrest warrant. Oumaadane — who eluded the arrest — was El Korchi’s cousin. They were investigated under art. 270 quinquies of the Italian Penal Code (pertaining to training for terrorism offenses, “Addestramento ad attività con finalità di terrorismo anche internazionale”). Source: pre-trial detention order against Mostafa El Korchi, Mohamed El Jari, Driss Safika, and Noureddine Oumaadane. “Ordinanza di applicazione della misura cautelare della custodia in carcere contro Korchi El Mostafa, El Jari Mohamed, Safika Driss e Oumaadane Noureddine”, Tribunale civile e penale di Perugia – Ufficio del giudice per le indagini preliminari, July 18, 2007.

ence psychologically weak individuals and those with cultural deficits, as well as to detect the most receptive ones.

As audio and video surveillance displayed, the most acutely radical activities and speeches occurred within a close-knit clique of followers. Besides training fellow militants — including practicing martial arts —, the preacher proselytized jihadism and spread hate messages. For instance, he watched, downloaded, and showed his cohorts various kinds of jihadist contents: propaganda, but also instructions to fight and execute attacks, to build explosives and prepare poisons, as well as to elude surveillance. The cell’s ultimate goal was to radicalize the whole local community, unifying all the mosques in the area under a single leadership, and even opposing other religious figures — regarded as too appeasing. El Korchi also incited his followers to travel to Iraq to wage jihad against “disbelievers”. In effect, some foreign fighters who ventured to Afghanistan or Iraq had entertained links with the Ponte Felcino mosque before leaving. The case of foreign fighter Mounir Ben Abdelaziz Ouechtati is telling: while fighting abroad, he regularly communicated with the imam. What’s more, a preacher operating in Perugia and in a nearby municipality (Corciano) was deported last summer; he, too, had ties with El Korchi³.

In the case of Ponte Felcino, crucially, indoctrination was not only geared towards adults, but — rather — it also targeted children. First and foremost, while holding Arabic language and culture classes for children, the imam sought to convey extremist ideas. On one occasion, he urged pupils to assail their Italian peers — since they were “disbelievers”, he

³ “Terrorismo, espulso un altro Imam: predicava a Perugia e Corciano”, *Perugia Today*, July 14, 2017.

asserted. “On the Day of Judgement, every Muslim will attain Paradise, while Italian disbelievers will burn in Hell”, he would thunder in front of children. Moreover, during private meetings with his disciples, he attempted to expose his own (very young) children to jihadist ideology. On several times, he watched jihadist videos in presence of his son and his daughter — for instance, clips celebrating jihad, and others detailing the killing of a group of Iraqi police officers and an attack on a US military convoy in Iraq.

A more recent example of “terrorist schools” is provided by the jihadist cell operating in Merano and Bolzano, Northern Italy, dismantled in November 2015⁴. It was a node within a far wider transnational network, called “Rawti Shax” and guided by Kurdish leader Najmaddin Faraj Ahmad (better known as Mullah Krekar) — founder of radical Islamist group Ansar al-Islam and currently detained in Norway. Anti-terrorism operations were not only aimed at the Italian cluster, but also at many other European countries, including Norway, the United Kingdom, and Finland. An arrest warrant was issued against 17 suspects, 7 of whom in the region of Trentino Alto Adige, Italy⁵. The terrorist cell members — based in a range of countries —

⁴ On the Merano–Bolzano cell, see G. Foschini and F. Tonacci, “La madrasa sul web per addestrare i ‘quadri’ della Guerra Santa”, *la Repubblica*, November 14, 2015; P. Matteucci, “Terrorismo, 17 arresti: Merano crocevia aspiranti jihadisti”, *la Repubblica*, November 12, 2015; F. Poletti, “Nauroz, una vita invisibile a Merano per reclutare i martiri della guerra santa”, *La Stampa*, November 13, 2015; A. Conti, “Terrorismo a Merano, in un appartamento la scuola di attentati e sequestri jihadisti”, *Alto Adige*, November 12, 2015; M. Bertoldi, “Bolzano: il gruppo jihadista organizzava corsi di odio per bambini”, *Alto Adige*, November 18, 2015.

⁵ The members of the Merano–Bolzano cell were: Abdul Rahman Nauroz; Hasan Saman Jalal; Hodza Eldin; Hama Mahmoud Kamal; Abdula Salih Ali; Mohamad Fatah Goran; and Ibrahim Jamal.

communicated online, while Mullah Krekar oversaw their activities from prison.

The Italian clique was a crucial hub for recruiting foreign fighters and potential attackers, with the purpose of fighting and committing attacks in the Middle East and in Northern Europe; they contemplated kidnapping Norwegian diplomats alike, hoping to secure Mullah Krekar’s release. Within the Merano–Bolzano cell, the central figure was Abdul Rahman Nauroz, who engaged in migrant smuggling and recruited militants: for example, he assisted foreign fighter Eldin Hodzain traveling to Syria, before the latter returned to Italy. New would-be jihadists were recruited on the Internet and offline as well, as Nauroz taught lessons in his apartment. Furthermore, members of the group were supposed to receive a basic “jihadist education” by enrolling in the online school “Ibnu Taimiyya”, overlooked by Mullah Krekar. The platform catered various courses and exams arranged by different levels, with the support of Abdullah Salih Ali (a.k.a. “mamosta Kawa”), who was acting as a teacher.

Besides Nauroz’s lessons and online courses, the group provided other educational activities, specifically addressing children: a “school of hate” was set up in the residence of Hasan Saman Jalal, Nauroz’s follower. Children and youngsters received lessons on how to kill enemies, and were shown videos depicting executions by IS soldiers—portrayed as ideal models to emulate, in order to advance the jihadist cause. Once again, underage individuals became the prime target of extremist indoctrination.

If these are the only cases publicly known in Italy’s jihadist panorama, at a Europe-wide level such incidents are more common, with charismatic figures attempting to radicalize

and mobilize under-18 individuals. The recent case of London-based Umar Haque — who on March 2, 2018 was found guilty of terrorism-related crimes by a jury at the Old Bailey — is illustrative in this respect. While teaching in the Islamic school “Lantern of Knowledge” and in the madrasa located at the Ripple Road Mosque, he tried to radicalize over 100 pupils, pursuing to build an “army” of no less than 300 soldiers.

The investigation started in April 2016, when Haque was stopped as he was about to board a flight to Istanbul. Besides plans for attacks in the UK, authorities discovered he also proselytized his pupils, forcing them to watch videos of executions or terrorist attacks, as well as to stage role plays, enacting attacks on police officers⁶.

⁶ J. Grierson, "[Isis follower tried to create jihadist child army in east London](#)", *The Guardian*, 2 marzo 2018.