

Dismantling Prejudices on Muslim Communities in Italy in Times of Pandemic: not just Religious Fundamentalism

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Abstract

This contribution aims to offer a reflection on the role that perceptions and cultural aspects of a crisis, such as that cause from the Covid-19 virus can generate in ethnic communities such as the Muslim one. Through a qualitative methodology of online research, the chapter explores the dynamics of perception and interpretation of the relationships between possible exploitation of the pandemic by Islamic extremism and the way in which the Muslim community in Italy is facing the crisis from Covid-19.

Keywords: Covid-19 crisis, Religious fundamentalism, Terrorism threat, Crisis Management

1. Introduction

The current pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus has put in place important reflections on the latent and previous vulnerabilities and criticalities of the affected societies.

A pandemic as a global crisis highlights the many social, cultural and political characteristics of the management system that must deal with health security. Management systems in each country are affected by the organisational and cultural differences through which the pandemic has been addressed. In this context, Lakoff reminds us that:

“The objective of global health security is to detect and contain the outbreak of a novel pathogen before it can spread to become a global catastrophe. But the various technical and administrative measures gathered together as part of this diagram should not be understood simply as direct responses to a growing num-

ber of emerging disease outbreaks; rather, these measures function to constitute a given situation as an emergency, one that requires an urgent and rapid collective response. In other words, it is not the inherent characteristics of a given disease outbreak but rather the classificatory schema as it combines with the techniques and politics of global health security that makes the vent a candidate to become an official emergency.”¹

This statement highlights that crisis management systems, particularly those arising from a type of health risk such as the one from Covid-19, have important cultural influences and an impact on the previous vulnerabilities of the affected societies.²

Moreover, the current situation of global crisis underlines how an important role in the definition of the concepts of emergency and crisis is also dictated by the subjective perception of the various actors involved, which in turn is influenced by social characteristics and cultural factors.

In this sense, the interpretation of the threat is long a continuum that has at its extreme opposites, the sense of security and the perception of vulnerability.

In accordance with this general perspective of crisis management, it becomes interesting to explore and understand how perceptions of both in and out groups had a specific influence on the definition and perception of religious fundamentalism in Italy in time of pandemic.

Since the end of February 2020, Italy has been one of the European countries most affected by the epidemic caused by the Covid-19 virus.

At the same time, a few days after the first epidemic wave and a convulsive initial emergency management, some news proposed by the media, focused on international scenarios and in particular on how ISIS could exploit this moment of criticality, perhaps planning attacks in Europe.

The theme was very interesting because it shifted the cultural attention of the audience from the national level, of the contingent crisis and located in specific territorial areas, to the international one, while relating two different types of threats, the health one linked to the Covid-19 virus and the one linked to the ISIS organization.

For these reasons, it was considered important to explore the dynamics related to the perception and construction of certain public images, with particular reference to the Muslim community in Italy, with the ultimate aim of understanding whether the association ISIS, terrorism and Muslims were still present or if new narratives present in the different pandemic context had taken place.

1 Andrew Lakoff (2017). *Unprepared: Global Health in a Time of Emergency*. Oakland: University of California Press, p. 6

2 Cf. Ilan Kelman (2020). *Disaster by Choice: How Our Actions Turn Natural Hazards Into Catastrophes*. Oxford: OUP.

This exploration and analysis used a qualitative methodology, with specific reference to the virtual ethnography framework. This approach has been chosen for a variety of reasons, including: having a strong multilayer and multi-sited connotation; to focus on the cultural aspects of the definition, representation and interpretation of the pandemic and its side or collateral threats such as those related to extremisms.

The added value of this writing is to explore the dimensions of perception and interpretation of the same phenomenon, at the time of a global crisis such as the pandemic from Covid-19: understanding socio-cultural dynamics: collective perceptions and interpretations is an indispensable tool of analysis to govern a global crisis and its times of uncertainty.

2. Italian Muslim Community, the Covid-19 Pandemic and its features

The situation of the Italian Muslim community is one of the most complex to delineate, as it serves the double nature present in much of the collective imagination, for which Muslim means terrorism.

Unfortunately, historical references take root on September 11, 2001, when the first associative narratives of being Muslim with being a terrorist settled down³.

Following that dramatic event, acts of Islamophobia and prejudice against the Muslim community took place, in the United States, but also in other European countries.

In Italy this happened time later, as the largest presence of Muslims was of Moroccan origin, but still first generation.

In 2018 in Italy, it is estimated that there were about 2.6 million Muslims or about 4 percent of the total population. These data come from estimates between different agencies and statistical institutes⁴, as the complexity of the legal situation (immigrants, asylum seekers, Italian citizens) of Muslims leads to some different systemizations.

According to the same Author⁵ most Muslims come from: Morocco, Albania, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Tunisia, Senegal, Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia. In particular, there has been a greater presence from Eastern Europe in recent years.

As regards the image of public opinion, it is based on the following socio-political and cultural lines:

3 Cf. Lori Peek (2010). *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans After 9/11*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

4 Cf. Fabrizio Ciocca (2019). *Musulmani in Italia: una presenza stabile e sempre più italiana*. See: <https://www.lenius.it/musulmani-in-italia/>

5 Ib.

- a) a political component that has developed narratives that promote the vision of Muslims as invaders and promoters of a cultural clash between the West and the East
- b) a part of the population, which has instead promoted a pervaded vision of welcome, solidarity and coexistence, considering for example in this group those who Italians have converted to Islam and have become a bridge between the various ethnicities and religions as well as part of this group supports the vision of the centrist political component and the radical left wing and
- c) a part of the population supporter of the more far-right political component, which supports the invasion and vision of Muslims as largely terrorist people.

This latter orientation is particularly present when new arrivals of migrants or how many terrorist attacks are needed, especially in Europe, as the perception of attacks abroad is different also due to different media coverage.

In this context of public narratives, their perceptions and interpretations, the demands carried out by Muslims in Italy are essentially three:

- a) the recognition of certain places of worship and cultural associations as religious bodies
- b) to which the construction of new mosques is associated and
- c) the contrast to forms of Islamophobia.

With regard to the first two points, various representatives of the Islamic cultural associations and mosques present in Italy, are in dialogue and seeking a solution for the recognition and reference legislation aimed at the management of this issue. This is not an easy action, as is the community, places of worship and mosques appear extremely fragmented and difficult to define legally.⁶

The third point, on the other hand, relates to the socio-political dimensions of the relationship between the indigenous population, Muslim immigrants and converts.

The data presented by the Vox-Osservatorio italiano sui diritti, concerning the Map of Intolerance project, shows us how the theme of Islamophobia expressed mainly through social networks (Twitter in particular) is crucial for the realization of a more tolerant and inclusive society.

The data collected and analysed by Vox-Osservatorio italiano sui diritti related to islamophobia in Italy, practiced through online intolerant and hateful messages

6 Cf. Antonio Cuciniello (2017). Luoghi di culto islamici in Italia: tipologie e dati. *Fondazione ISMU Iniziative e Studi sulla Multietnicità*. See: https://www.ismu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Cuciniello_paper_luoghi-di-culto_aprile-2017.pdf

via Twitter, highlights how Muslims are the most affected category after women.⁷ Later versions of this working progress project show that the trend related to Islamophobia is constantly on the rise, with specific spikes when dramatic events such as terrorist attacks or crimes committed by Muslims both in Italy and abroad occur.

At the geographical level, the most violent online messages of an Islamophobic nature are present throughout the country, with a greater presence in large cities and a lower spread in the south.

What is interesting to note is that the intolerant or hateful words associated with the interpretation of Muslim as a threat are the following but fundamentalist: jihadist, Moroccan, cutthroat, Bedouin, Abdullah. These words reveal how some part of the collective perceptions on Muslims are based on the cultural interpretation of news and experiences rather than a reflection from a more general perspective or a geopolitical level where it was supposed to place the definition of fundamentalist.

From this overview we can understand how the Muslim presence in Italy is characterized by a multiplicity of currents of perceptions and interpretations, which are partly the mirror of the complexity and multidimensionality of the Muslim community more generally.

An interesting perspective about the sense of Muslim community is provided by Guolo:

“Making community is the most immediate response to the need to reproduce Islam in a cultural and religious context different from the original; but it is also the product of the social construction of groups that self-represent themselves as guardians of tradition and oppose the individual paths of individual Muslims, destined to lead, according to those same groups, to secularization.”⁸

According to this definition, the Author⁹ also highlights the relevant matter of representativeness of Islam in Europe and it is also valid for Italy and for its political dimensions.¹⁰

7 See: <http://www.voxdiritti.it/islamofobia-musulmani-terroristi/>

8 Cf. Renzo Guolo (2016). *Sociologia dell'Islam. Religione e politica*. Milano: Mondadori. Original text in Italian: “La comunitarizzazione è la risposta più immediata alla necessità di riprodurre l'Islam in un contesto culturale e religioso diverso da quello originario; ma è anche il prodotto della costruzione sociale di gruppi che si autorappresentano come custodi della tradizione e si oppongono ai percorsi individuali dei singoli musulmani, destinati a sfociare, secondo quegli stessi gruppi, nella secolarizzazione.” Cf. Renzo Guolo (2001). Il campo verde: strategie islamiche in Italia. *Limes*. See: <https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/il-campo-verde-strategie-islamiche-in-italia?prv=true>, 2001

9 Cf. Guolo (2016).

10 Fabrizio Ciocca (2019). *L'Islam italiano: Un'indagine tra religione, identità e islamofobia*. Mimesis. Milano: Sesto San Giovanni.

Furthermore, Guolo offers a systematization of the multidimensional complexity of Islam such as follow:

»Islam of States«, promoted by the governments of Islamic countries and associations linked to them; That of the »Islam of mosques«, promoted by transnational organisations that are often opposed by the governments of many Crescent countries or who have no close ties to them; »Fraternity Islam« that is structured around the figure of a master or a tradition.¹¹

Another specific point of view about the relationship among Muslims, their identities and Italian State is that proposed by Cahouki¹² who reflect on the sense of identity of the Muslim community in Italy, which it recognizes to be complex and fragmented. An important aspect that the Author emphasizes is the relationship with the Italian State, for which he wants continued respect from the Muslim population in Italy, as a religious duty for Muslims.¹³

In these national frameworks it becomes interesting to explore how the perception of “threat” linked to the image of the Muslim was contextualized during the period of the pandemic and what narratives were produced to the virtual environment of social networks and national mass media.

The consideration of transcultural and trans-geographical perceptions makes it clear that the overlapping of the image of the Muslim with that of the terrorist is predominantly determined by the exposure to information related to ISIS and its possible attacks: from a socio-psychological perspective it is interesting to note that this form of prejudice is born not spurious but in the overlap of two images and interpretations such as that of the Muslim and the belonging to ISIS.

A push and driving factor in this overlap has been the focus on the more or less resilient strategies put in place by ISIS as well as statements about Islam's interpretation of the pandemic.¹⁴

Just as the scientific community appeared divided about the origin, evolution and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, even experts and geopolitical analysts have been at odds about the concrete possibility of ISIS using the pandemic to organize and carry out attacks around the world.

11 Cf. Guolo (2016), p. 190: Original text in Italian: «islam degli stati», promossa dai governi dei paesi islamici e da associazioni a esse legati; quella dell'«islam delle moschee», promossa da organizzazioni transnazionali che spesso sono all'opposizione dei governi di molti paesi della Mezzaluna o che non hanno stretti legami con essi; quella dell'«islam delle confraternite», che si struttura attorno alla figura di un maestro o di una tradizione.

12 Khalid Chaouki (2018). *I musulmani d'Italia vogliono essere italiani*. Roma: Limes, Gedi.

13 Ib.

14 See: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-offensive-exploits-pandemic>

For instance, Hanna¹⁵ sustains the effective exploitation of pandemic and its consequences by ISIS, depicted also a sophisticated level of the attacks in Iraq and Syria.

The same was valid for Williams looking at a wider international framework and capacity of exploitation:

“A U.S. Department of Homeland Security bulletin in late March warned that the Islamic State’s newsletter had called for attacks on U.S. and European health care targets that are strained by the pandemic. The Islamic State has ordered its followers not to travel to Europe, where the virus outbreak is far worse than in the Middle East. But the group has suggested that its followers who are already in Europe exploit the chaos, calling for “new strikes ... similar to the strikes of Paris, London, Brussels and other places” where followers have used bombs and firearms to kill dozens of people in recent years.

The Islamic State is even suggesting that killing “infidels” could be a way for followers to protect themselves from the virus, stating, “They should also remember that obedience to God – the most beloved form of which is jihad – turns away the torment and wrath of God.”¹⁶

From the opposite perspective, Depretis¹⁷ highlighted the fact that ISIS was ineffective to exploit the pandemic and its related vulnerability at international level, to plan and carry out deadly attacks.

This view of the issue of ISIS and international Muslims is also reflected in the public image and media coverage during the pandemic in Italy.

An interesting analysis through google trends in the time span 21/02/20 – 23/06/2020¹⁸ shows how the spike in interest in the ISIS and pandemic issue occurred on March 13, when the national press focused on the spread by ISIS of a leaflet for the prevention of contagion.

It is useful to note that the correlation was reported using the word jihadist and therefore connoting according to a precise meaning the news itself and its interpretation.

15 Cf. Andrew Hanna (2020). *ISIS Offensive Exploits Pandemic*. See: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-offensive-exploits-pandemic>

16 Cf. Brian Glyn Williams (2020). *Islamic State calls for followers to spread coronavirus, exploit pandemic and protests*. See: <https://theconversation.com/islamic-state-calls-for-followers-to-spread-coronavirus-exploit-pandemic-and-protests-136224>

17 Cf. Daniel Depretis (2020). *No, ISIS Isn't Resurging Amid the Coronavirus Pandemic*. See: <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/05/no-isis-isnt-resurging-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/165401/>

18 See: <https://trends.google.it/trends/explore?q=isis%20coronavirus&date=2020-02-21%202020-06-23&geo=IT; cf.: https://trends.google.it/trends/explore?date=2020-02-21%202020-06-23&geo=IT&q=musulmano,covid-19,ISIS; cf.: https://trends.google.it/trends/explore?date=2020-02-21%202020-06-23&geo=IT-72&q=isis%20coronavirus>

The same was true on 12 May 2020, where news about ISIS, Iraq and Covid-19 were released by international agencies.

With regard to the situation of Muslims in Italy, it is confirmed that the characteristics of the context before the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus affected not only the perceptions of such crises, but also the interpretations, thus going to better delineate the specific fragmentary and complexity of the Islamic experience in Italy.

3. Methodology

The methodological approach that was used for this analysis is qualitative and mixed, consisting of different types of online methods.

It must be also considered that in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, no face to face or personal meetings were allowed, for this reason a “distanced research”¹⁹ approach was chosen.

Moreover, due to the inner and complex nature of the issues explored, a virtual multiple – site (Evans, 2010) approach was preferred as well as the *multilayered definition of the virtual world* and the *cross-matching data* provided by Beck (2004).

The main aim of this methodology is to disclose the *webs of meanings* Geertz (1973) and how a social issue have been framed in different cultural contexts (Hine, 2000).

The general methodological approach can be placed under the framework of the virtual ethnography and it is composed of the following tools, methods and analysis:

An exploratory questionnaire from selected Muslim representatives of Italian Mosques and Italian Islamic cultural centres. Its main aim was to understand the interpretative categories for the analysis of the phenomenon, considering the answers such as a driver for the combined analysis with the other information collected. This perspective was also supported by what Geertz identified such as “webs of meanings”.

Desk research, secondary data collection through online open source: articles and documents on the topics of the research; Facebook Page of Mosques and Italian Islamic cultural centres; post on Twitter.

The online open sources were searched according to the following keywords, where possible both in Italian and English: islamophobia; ISIS; Daesh; Covid-19; coronavirus; Muslim(s).

19 Leighton Evans (2010). *Authenticity Online: Using Webnography to Address Phenomenological Concerns. New Media and the Politics of Online Communities*. Oxford: Mousoutzanis, Riha, p. 13.

The online open sources were collected in a time span from 20 February 2020 to 24 June 2020.

In addition, the criteria of relevance and relevance with respect to the topic covered by the data were also used for the collection of sources.

A secondary data analysis as well as a manual content analysis about the information collected through open source were carried out.

The virtual ethnography was conducted considering both the open source secondary data collection and the information found out by a key informant, playing also the role of gatekeeper for the collection of questionnaire: his figure was essential to understand and interpret the phenomenon from a cultural perspective of the Italian Muslim community.

4. Exploratory questionnaire on the topics of the phenomenon²⁰

The online questionnaire was sent through the key informant, who is an important figure to connect with the people representing the reference community of the current research fieldwork.

The people were selected to deepen the characteristics of the fieldwork and those of the themes that were to be studied. In addition, they were chosen in accordance with increased activity in the Italian mosques and Islamic cultural centers in Italy as well as according to the role they have in the environments of mosques and cultural centers.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts:

one on the socio-demographic aspects and
the other on the aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The total number of responses is 20, 4 people are women and 16 are men and represent from a geographical and cultural perspective, the fragmentation of the Muslim community in Italy.

Starting with the analysis of the socio-demographic section, interesting aspects emerge.

The most representative country of origin is Morocco with 15 responses; 1 Egypt; 3 Italy; 1 Tunisia/Hungary. This trend is also present in the more general statistical data, which report that the Moroccan community is one of the most present in Italy.²¹

20 See **Annex 2 - Outline of the Exploratory Survey.**

21 See: <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/documenti-e-norme/studi-e-statistiche/Documents/Rapporto%20annuale%20sulle%20comunit%C3%A0%20migranti%20in%20Italia%20-%20anno%202018/Marocco-rapporto-2018.pdf>

These data have to be compared with the following, which relate to the years lived in Italy, specifically:

14 years, one person
15 years, two people
20 years, four people
36 years, one person
24 years, one person
32 years, one person and
ten people born in Italy.

Two important aspects emerge from these answers:

the trend of the Moroccan community is also confirmed by the years in which people live in Italy. In fact, the Moroccan community is one of the oldest located in Italy many decades ago and
the discrepancy of the data, between the ten people born in Italy and the three who indicate as the country of origin Italy, find their explanation in being of Moroccan origin.

The third question concerned the city of origin and the answers represent the variety and landscape of the Muslim community in Italy:

a person from Arezzo
a person from Avellino
a person from Belluno
a person from Torino
a person from Oleggio
two people from Pesaro
two people from Verona
two people from Ravenna
two people from Roma
three people from Torino
a person from Treviso
person from Umbertide
a person from Vicenza and
a person from Volla.

The data demonstrate the geographical variety of the Muslim presence in Italy and highlight the absence of reply from Lombardia Region. This can be explained in two ways:

- a) Lombardy was the most affected region since the Covid-19 epidemic started and had difficulties in managing the emergency and crisis. It is possible that people, even if they received the questionnaire, did not intend to answer.
- b) The absence of a region such as Lombardy, refers to the pattern of the presence of the Muslim community in small towns in Italy, which will occur in a special question in the next section.

The last question of this first section concerns the role played within the mosque or cultural centers, which is in direct relation to the selection of the profiles of the interviewees.

17 people replied in total:

three volunteers

one imam

one member of the youth group

one board member

two people without a role. One of them specified by writing that there is no role in the Muslim community because they are all children of God

three presidents

one youth spokesman

two secretaries

two vice-presidents and

one spokesman.

The second section specifically covers some aspects of the perception of the Muslim community from the outside and from newspaper in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The first question concerned the definition of a pandemic, which was defined from 14 people as follows:

a virus

frustration

restrictions of displacement freedom

a moment of reflection

a mercy and a blessing of Allah

a crisis that caused irrationality

a test

a challenge of humanity

a global emergency

a pandemic.

The answers demonstrate a variety of thinking within the Muslim community, with multiple nuances of definition and interpretation that vary from more scientific to religious aspects.

The second question concerned the consideration of ethnic minorities (e.g. in linguistic and cultural aspects) of religious minorities during the crisis management of the pandemic.

19 people replied and 47.4 percent answered that religious minorities were not considered, while 52.6 percent considered religious minorities.

The rift in the answers to this question is understandable in light of the knowledge of the difficulties faced by the Muslim community for two reasons:

Measures of restrictions for the management of the pandemic have prohibited meetings in mosques and places of worship: this situation similar to so many other collective activities.

The problems and difficulties faced by the Muslim community for the burial of their members in relation to the procedures promoted after the pandemic.

These reasons are therefore the basis of this division in the responses.

The third question was more generally about the perception and assessment of the effectiveness of crisis management in Italy.

The answers are thus divided: 20 percent believe that it has been inadequate, 50 percent think it has been adequate; while 25 percent considered it effective and 5 percent ineffective.

The number of responses for the most positive, which consider crisis management effective and adequate for 75 percent is in line with the previous question where a majority of respondents said they had not noticed discrimination against religious minorities during the first months of the pandemic.

A very interesting topic is the one introduced by the fourth question, which focuses on the fact that some international and Italian media, in the early days of the pandemic, talked about how and if ISIS could exploit the pandemic for possible attacks.

The answers to this question have been very varied, bringing out the complexity of mutual perception on this specific and important issue.

In particular, this phenomenon has been considered as follows:

- a defamation campaign
- an attack by the media
- ignorance
- the target wants to be told this
- never heard of it
- never heard of it, indeed positive focus on the Muslim community
- to divert public opinion

because they're ignorant, ISIS isn't all Muslim
 because Islam is being exploited
 they always try to connect something to Muslims
 typical journalistic terrorism
 want to make listens and focus attention on a well-known theme
 they had nothing else to write about and
 the attempt increase fear.

The variety of responses highlights some interesting aspects including:

Six people have never heard of it and this can be explained in the dual meaning that either they are exposed differently to traditional international and national media or had no interest in the subject of this question.

Other responses reveal some of the best-known theories of media communication, such as the gate keeper function, the agenda setting or the way in which news (both linguistically and stylistically) is presented to the public.

Another reflection concerns the role of the audience which appear to be passive and waiting to meet previous expectations.

It is also interesting the talk about the purpose of putting fear, referring to the terrorist framework especially for the language used.

The fifth question is related to the previous one and wants to be more precise about the possibility of ISIS exploiting the crisis moment due to the Covid-19 pandemic to carry out attacks in European countries. The 19 answers are 73.7 percent no, while a 26.3 percent yes: this percentage of responses are in line with those of the previous question and especially with the broader overall picture that wants to consider ISIS as one of various types of extremist threats.

The sixth question aims to focus on the phenomenon of solidarity on the part of the Muslim community, which has spread as a phenomenon through social networks and where it has been most widespread.

The result is the following: "55 percent think in small towns, while 45 percent in large cities", representing the dual soul of the Muslim community in Italy and its presence even in the small provincial realities.

Linked to this question is the following that wants to bring out the definition of solidarity:

70 percent believe it is a universal human act
 25 percent think it is a religious action and
 5 percent see it as an act of belonging to the nation where you live.

The answer that defines solidarity as a universal human act is interesting, because in addition to obtaining the majority of responses, it also indicates the neutrality of cultural or ideological visions that could guide the previous definition.

The penultimate question focuses on the perception of prejudice by the Muslim community during the first months of the pandemic: 75 percent said they did not feel prejudiced; 15 percent do for their religion and finally 10 percent yes for their ethnicity.

Although the majority of responses indicate a lack of perception of prejudice, 25 percent indicate some form of prejudice related to either their ethnicity or religion: communication in this context played a fundamental role.

The last question concerns the role that solidarity actions promoted during the pandemic may play in reducing and limiting prejudice towards the Muslim community. 95 percent think they are useful for this purpose, while 5 percent do not.

The analysis of this exploratory survey reveals some important dimensions, which will be the common thread and the interpretive lens of the next open source analysis:

Mass media (mainly international) narratives in time of pandemic: connecting ISIS and the Covid-19 pandemic. Especially, the possibility by ISIS to exploit the Covid-19 pandemic for their attacks.

Ethnic and cultural crisis management: few considerations of ethnic groups during crisis management

Ethnic and Muslim Identity; national sense of belonging

the Covid-19 pandemic and its interpretation both religious and cultural and Muslim community solidarity.

All of these listed aspects have been addressed and analysed in the open source analysis of social media and social networks.

5. Findings from open source and secondary data analysis²²

The exploratory analysis of the questionnaire revealed some interesting trends, which will be discussed then in light of the results that emerged from the open source analysis.

Online open source data collection focused on various types of data, such as those from newspapers in their online editions and those instead of social networks.

The collection of online open data was possible through the use of certain keywords such as: *ISIS, pandemic, Muslims, Covid-19, coronavirus, terrorism, extremism*.

There are 105 items collected, including some in English by relevance criterion. The harvest took place in the period of time from February 20, 2020 to June 24, 2020.

22 See **Annex 1 – Online News**.

From a methodological perspective, a manual content analysis was conducted, looking for the recurrences not only of words, but especially of themes and content.

Moreover, the theoretical background of this analysis lies on the key principles of news framing, social media coverage and agenda setting applied in the online environment.

This is especially valid with regard to the way in which the social media and social networks users narrate certain phenomena and events, especially referring to the issues of prejudice, ethnic and religious differences.

For instance, *Hostile media bias describes how people with strong attitudes about an issue believe that media intentionally slant stories against their side or in favour of the other side* (Vallone et al., 1985).²³

This topic is in line with the narrative dynamics of the treatment of discriminatory phenomena against Muslim people, as well as hate speech or hate online.

As Weberling McKeever²⁴ points out, the role of the media in the perception and interpretation of immigrants is real: *Mass media have a role in shaping people's perceptions of immigrants and immigration* (Kellstedt, 2003), *servicing as sources for learning about national trends and policy proposals* (Kim, Carvalho, Davis, & Mullins, 2011).²⁵

Furthermore, despite different tools made available to the new online communication environment and different figures such as that of the influencer, certain communication strategies and narrative methodologies find themselves applied also to the wider context of social media and social networks.

The theme in question is aimed at a specific area such as that of a correlation, between being Muslim and being a terrorist, in the potential development of prejudices and stereotypes. The news in this case can be a push factor: *News about terrorism may increase prejudiced attitudes toward outgroups*.²⁶

23 Robert P. Vallone; Lee Ross and Mark R. Lepper (1985). The hostile media phenomenon: Biased perception of media bias in coverage of the Beirut massacre. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49, 4. Cited in Brooke Weberling McKeever, Daniel Riffe, & Francesca Dillman Carpentier: Perceived Hostile Media Bias, Presumed Media Influence, and Opinions About Immigrants and Immigration. *Southern Communication Journal*, Vol. 77, No. 5.

24 McKeever, Riffe and Carpentier, 2012, p. 3.

25 Cf. Paul Kellstedt (2003). *The mass media and the dynamics of American racial attitudes*. New York: Cambridge University Press.; Cf. Kim Sei hill, John P. Carvalho, Andrew Davis and Amanda M. Mullins (2011). The view of the border: News framing of the definition, causes, and solutions to illegal immigration. *Mass Communication & Society* 14, 292 - 314.; Cf. McKeever, Riffe and Carpentier, 2012, p. 3.

26 Enny Das; et al. (2009). How terrorism, news reports increase prejudice against outgroups: A terror management account. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45(3), 453-459; cf. Luwei Rose Luqiu, and Fan Yang (2018). Islamophobia in China: news coverage, stereotypes, and Chinese Muslims' perceptions of themselves and Islam. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 28:6, 6.

As for the polarizing dynamics that promote Islamophobia and the influence of media coverage:

“Many studies attempt to trace the origin of Islamophobia by examining representations of Islam and Muslims in the news media. One study on the British media suggests that British Muslims are portrayed as ‘un-British’ and ‘deviant’, themes that can be linked to the development of racism (Saeed, 2007). The British media tend to focus on British Muslims as a terrorist threat (Moore, Mason, & Lewis, 2008). A study on British newspapers from 1994 to 2004 concludes that Muslims were portrayed as a threat to Western values (Poole, 2004), and British newspapers have been criticized for biased reporting, disseminating propaganda, and promoting Islamophobia, practices that lead to anti-Muslim sentiment (Richardson, 2004).”²⁷

This general mass media frame points out theoretical orientations, which are proper also in the context of virtual and online communications.

Especially, two aspects need to be taken onto account:

how the information is framed by the online users;
 how information, beliefs or thoughts are disseminated through social media and social networks, in reference to what can be defined as a diffusion chain:

“Media attention lends legitimacy to the voices and frames – the conceptions and organizations of information that help us understand the world around us —that are chosen to be featured (Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, & Moody, 2011). Media coverage also amplifies incidents and ideas by providing a platform to spread certain positions and perspectives to a broader audience (Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, and Moody, 2011). This platform is further expanded by members of the public disseminating media amongst themselves (Nacos, 2002).”²⁸

After having combined both theoretical and methodological insights, the analysis demonstrates the recurring themes and narratives, which go to implement the per-

27 Ib.: Cf. Amir Saeed (2007). Media, racism and Islamophobia: The representation of Islam and Muslims in the media. *Sociology Compass*, 1(2), 443-462.; Cf. Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Matthew Wren Lewis (2008). Images of Islam in the UK: The representation of British Muslims in the national print news media 2000 - 2008. *Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies*.; Cf. Elisabeth Poole (2004). Islamophobia. In E. Cashmore (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of race and ethnic studies*. New York: Routledge.

28 V. Bekkers, H. Beunders, A. Edwards and R. Moody (2011). New media, micromobilization, and political agenda setting: Crossover effects in political mobilization and media usage. *Information Society*, 27, 209-219.; Cf. Brigitte L. Nacos (2019). *Mass-mediated terrorism*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.; Cf. Erin M. Kearnsa, Allison E. Betusb and Anthony F. Lemieuxb (2019). Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others? *Justice Quarterly*, Vol. 36, Issue, 6, 6

ception and interpretation of the audience and those who are exposed to it, are as follows:

- a) The correlation between the pandemic and new attacks by ISIS.
- b) The Islamic definition of the pandemic, especially linked to the vision promoted by ISIS.
- c) The international security and geopolitical situation, with a particular focus on stopping the international mission against ISIS in Iraq.
- d) The ability by ISIS to exploit the pandemic and the emerging vulnerabilities of the affected societies to organize and carry out attacks in Europe.
- e) Donations made by Muslims in Italy especially to Italian agencies. Instead, news and information about donations by Muslims to other Muslims, for example from mosques or cultural centers, are most prominent among social networks.
- f) The burial of Muslims who died in Italy for Covid-19 or their repatriation to countries of origin.
- g) The impact of restrictive measures during the lockdown for the management of religious services related to Ramadan.
- h) The communication by the Muslim and ISIS communities compared to the personal protection measures against the Covid-19 virus. As for information on the protection measures against Covid-19, attention was also reported about the communication of ISIS to its foreign fighters, who were traveling in areas critical of the epidemic.
- i) The focus on the migration flows, which shifts the main narrative from the “Muslim” category to the “migrants” category in general, avoiding ethnic connotations as well as in the same area the focus has shifted from the meaning of ISIS to the “Islamist”.
- j) The way in which Islam defined that the dead of Muslims for Covid-19 is martyrdom.

These themes highlight some essential dimensions to understand the double phenomenon of perception in-group and out-group.

In particular the features of narratives built around specific themes: especially interesting are those relate to solidarity actions promoted by Muslims towards Italian agencies or institutions; the supposed resilience effect, of reorganization of ISIS and affiliates, but which divides scholars and analysts at an international level.

The narratives differentiate their topics according to the dissemination and localization of the media or communication media that promote them: at the national level, more attention is devoted to international scenarios and therefore to the treatment of threats from ISIS and their developments; at regional and local

level, the focus is on how Muslims are dealing with the crisis from Covid-19, the problem of burials of Muslim people who died for Covid-19 and the management of Ramadan-related rituals, considering that mosques were closed for lockdown.

As for the perception at the temporal level, the spread of the news focused, as it was to be imagined²⁹, on the cultural aspects related to religious practices only in the weeks following the emergency. This is relevant because it insists that it is now considered a specific feature of this current pandemic, which is also valid in other contexts, that is the definition of the event, the type of crisis and what was needed had an important time frame. In particular, all this is to be referred to the lack of knowledge on the part of both the scientific community and the public, about the type of biological – health risk that has occurred.

Continuing with the analysis, an interesting perspective and for this reason treated individually is the one that emerges from the analysis of some of the most interesting Facebook and Twitter pages of Italian mosques or Italian Islamic centers. To give an example these are the ones most considered during the same time span used for the collection of other open sources:

- Associazione Islamica Italiana degli Imam e delle Guide Religiose³⁰
- Centro Islamico Culturale d'Italia – Grande Moschea di Roma³¹
- CII Confederazione Islamica Italiana³²
- COREIS Italian Muslim Youth³³
- Islamic Relief Italia³⁴
- UCOI- Unione delle Comunità Islamiche d'Italia.³⁵

From this analysis emerge the trends confirming the complexity and fragmentation of the Muslim community present in Italy.

It is also interesting to note how the proposed narrative of the pandemic, its impacts and effects reflects the vision and cultural orientations of the environments, be they mosques or cultural centers, to which they relate.

Similarly, the tones and communication modes often reveal internal divisions and tensions, which broaden their references beyond the context of the current crisis from Covid-19: this has been particularly noted for those cultural centres, associations or mosques that refer to polarizing visions of Italian or European society.

29 Cf. Marco Lombardi (2005). *Comunicare nell'emergenza*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.

30 See: <https://www.facebook.com/Associazione.ImamItalia/>

31 See: <https://www.facebook.com/centroislamicoculturale/>

32 See: <https://www.facebook.com/confederazioneislamicaitaliana/>

33 See: <https://www.facebook.com/coreis.giovani/>

34 See: <https://www.facebook.com/islamic.relief.italia/>

35 See: <https://www.facebook.com/UCOIIUnioneComunitaIslamicheItalia/>

As in any context of crisis, the pandemic from Covid-19 deserves to be interpreted according to two dimensions: the spatial and the temporal³⁶.

The first in this particular narrative context, confirms what the results of the questionnaires have already emphasized: a difference between centers and mosques in large cities and those present in the Italian provincial areas. Diversity covers issues considered where, for example, during the pandemic more information about personal protection measures against Covid-19 were provided and discussed in provincial contexts; similarly, actions of local solidarity between Muslims and Muslims and Italians are more communicated through social networks with a local physical basis.

At the national level, on the other hand, more attention was given to broader issues such as the international situation and some interpretive orientations related to the pandemic.

As for narratives from a temporal perspective, communications were often posted at the beginning on issues that focused on the practical management of the crisis, but there was also a phenomenon of simultaneity, for which often some practical information was posted or re-discussed even if already published in previous days and weeks.

Finally, one difference that is interesting to point out is the narratives according to the social networks used: through Facebook, news is discussed in a more open and inclusive way; Via Twitter, however, there is no shortage of clashes, tensions and tendencies to polarization. This predisposition had already been noted in other hate speech contexts such as the aforementioned Map of Intolerance.

The narrative and dissemination of communication has different images depending on the cultural and political orientations of mosques and Islamic cultural centers in Italy: there are in fact those that emphasize the link with Italian national identity and therefore approach a dialogue and cooperation with Italian institutions and agencies; there are those of more traditional Islamic orientation, which outline a specific Muslim identity, being nevertheless aware of the national context.

Finally, there are those of cultural-religious orientation who take less part in relational life with other national institutions.

For the purpose of this analysis, it is interesting to point out a trend about the solidarity actions that were promoted during the emergency and in the first months of the pandemic: at the local level among Muslims, while at the national level the offers have also spread to Italian institutions and organizations. Another evidence that emerges from this analysis is the lack of explicit reference to Islamic fundamentalism: the most used and recurring words are those of Islamic extremism or Islamic terrorism. As far as it can be understood, Islamic fundamentalism in

36 Cf. Lombardi (2005).

its dual semantic and cultural identification seems to refer primarily to the events of 9/11 and the social phenomena related to them.

6. Future Perspectives: Italian Islam and the Covid-19 pandemic

One of the most interesting findings of this analysis is that there is not only religious fundamentalism as a cognitive and interpretive category. In reality, there are multidimensional cultural components, more or less broad where conflicts, tensions and polarization find their expressive spaces.

In this sense, the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus has unearthed these dynamics, often latent or confined to delimited spaces and realities, putting in place what can be defined as the Italian Islam of the two-faced Janus: this means that the diachronic aspect is given not by the temporal dimension of the phenomenon between the past and the future, but also by a cultural perspective that encompasses and makes coexisting different tensions of the same cultural perspective.

Online ethnographic analyses conducted confirmed the variety of cultural positions also present in the Italian Muslim community. Certainly, these are related to the different ethnic backgrounds and especially with regard to the analysis of social networks emerges the multiplicity of visions and interpretations.

This different cultural background and, at least for a certain component, the lack of inclusion of people of Islamic faith has produced perceptions of the pandemic with an interesting cultural perspective. In turn, the interpretations have resulted in social practices and behaviours, which have resulted in compliance with rules and measures during lockdown, but also for some violations.

It also emerged that, the juxtaposition between Muslim people, Islam and terrorism and ISIS exists, although not explicitly and not necessarily targeting.

What is interesting for the future development of this study are the latent or composed of references that emphasize areas of tension and conflict between the same belongings to mosques or Islamic cultural centers in Italy.

Finally, three aspects concern a necessary reflection that comes from a preliminary lesson learned from the impact of this Covid-19 pandemic:

The inclusion both from a cultural and linguistic point of view of Muslim people and like them of other ethnicities present in Italy, in the management of the crisis, understanding how cultural aspects influence adherence to the methods of crisis management or instead produce social frictions.

How a national sense of belonging and individual identity are shaped during an emergency like the current one.

Extremist currents linked to forms of Islamic terrorism were not found to be ex-

plícit either within the Muslim community or for example by scholars studying the phenomenon. It is certain that they also exist in the context considered here and that their manifestations are mainly latent and need for further analysis.

Finally, the context built by the pandemic has given the opportunity to put at the centre of the discussion some important points for Muslim community in Italy, such as the construction of new mosques, the recognition of some Islamic cultural centers and the fight against forms of prejudice, Islamophobia and hate speech.

The future challenge facing crisis management, at least in Italy, is to include all these socio-cultural factors within it, so that the management of the crisis reaches the desired levels of effectiveness, thus avoiding to feed potential threats and conflicts from the most conflicting fringes of the various communities.

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Annex 1 – Online News

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Annex 2 – Outline of the Exploratory Survey

Socio - demographic section

1. What is your country of origin?
2. How long have you been living in Italy?
3. Which city do you live in?
4. What is your role within the organization of your Islamic center?

The Covid - 19 Pandemic

1. What is the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus for you?
2. Considering the pandemic from Covid-19, according to you the management of the crisis in Italy is...
3. How do you view the management of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 virus in Italy?
4. Why do you think the media during the first months of the pandemic mostly talked about the Islamic community, referring to the possibilities of ISIS to exploit this moment for attacks?
5. The press, especially the foreign press, has often communicated that ISIS would use the pandemic to strike European countries. Do you think such an event is possible?
6. Social networks have reported acts of solidarity by the various Muslim communities in Italy. According to you, there were more:
7. According to you, solidarity is...
8. Do you think you were prejudiced during the first months of the pandemic by Covid-19 in Italy?
9. Do you think solidarity actions can reduce prejudice against Muslim people and communities in Italy?

