

EUROPEAN MONITORING CENTRE ON RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA
OBSERVATOIRE EUROPÉEN DES PHÉNOMÈNES RACISTES ET XÉNOPHOBES
EUROPÄISCHE STELLE ZUR BEOBACHTUNG VON RASSISMUS UND FREMDENFEINDLICHKEIT



Anti-Islamic reactions in the EU
after the terrorist acts against the USA

A collection of country reports from RAXEN
National Focal Points (NFPs)

12th September to 31st December 2001

ITALY

Cooperazione per lo sviluppo dei paesi emergenti (COSPE)
Co-operation for the Development of Emerging Countries

Following the terror attacks in the USA on 11th September the EUMC found that there was a pressing need to closely follow the possible negative repercussions on racial and xenophobic attitudes and events in civil societies in Europe. On the basis of national reports drafted by its RAXEN network of National Focal Points (NFPs), the EUMC produced a first short-term report on anti-Islamic reactions in all countries of the European Union on 9th October 2001.

In order to have a longer term and regular monitoring on attitudes/incidents towards Muslim/Islamic communities and other vulnerable groups, the EUMC decided to follow up the first report and continue to closely monitor the situation at least until the end of the year 2001.

It therefore asked the RAXEN NFPs to produce additional reports, monitoring the situation on a monthly basis until the end of the year; in addition, it asked for a final report analysing the overall developments from 11th September to 31st December 2001.

According to the EUMC request, the reports have addressed in particular the following issues:

- acts of violence or aggression and changes in the attitude of the EU population towards ethnic, cultural or religious minorities (especially Muslim/Islamic communities but also other vulnerable groups or new types of victims), related to the recent terrorist attacks in the USA;
- good practices and positive case studies established in order to reduce prejudice and violence;
- reactions by politicians and other opinion leaders including initiatives to reduce polarization and counteract negative national trends.

In addition to the summary report written on behalf of the EUMC by Prof. Nielsen and Mr. Allen of the University of Birmingham, the following pages contain the original reports submitted by each NFP for the whole period.

Not all reports have been made available from all countries, but the coverage is however complete. The reports are quite varying in size. It should be considered that the Member States have different systems in collecting data: some have implemented a rather elaborated and comprehensive approach, while others have done what they could to get information about the situation in the Member State.

The task of the RAXEN network is to collect reliable and comparable data (including examples of and models for “good practices”) at the European level on the phenomena of racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism in order to help the EU and its Member States to take measures or formulate courses of action. For further information please visit the EUMC homepage <http://eumc.eu.int>

Vienna, 23 May 2002

First short-term report

Verbal and physical attacks

So far no physical attacks have been reported nor have there been cases of personalised verbal attacks.

Following the attack at the World Trade Centre in New York and at the Pentagon, Muslim / Islamic communities in Italy have been in the spotlight both in the public opinion and the media. This increased attention has been ambivalent: many political, religious and academic leaders have, in their public pronouncements, warned that a clear distinction should be made between fighting terrorists who happen to be Muslims and fighting Islam as a religion. At the same, many other such figures, including leading politicians, have taken clear anti-Islamic stance in their public pronouncements.

It must be underlined that some political parties are overtly using the attack to mount campaigns against migrants in general and Muslims in particular.

Attitudes

The anti-Islamic public discourse has so far come from quarters that have expressed similar positions in the past; in other words, it does not seem to be a general change in attitude by non-Muslims towards Muslims or people of Arab origin.

20th September 2001

Report on anti-Islamic and anti-Arabic reactions after the terrorist acts in the USA – Reactions from 25th September to 19th October

Acts of violence or aggression and changes in the attitude of the EU population towards ethnic, cultural or religious minorities, especially Muslim / Islamic communities but also other vulnerable groups

There have been no reports of physical attacks against Muslims living in Italy, or against other foreign citizens. So far, there have been reports of Muslim-owned shops in Milan being painted with racist graffiti (<http://www.repubblica.it/> – 15/10/2001).

After September 11, companies employing migrant Muslim workers and Italian nationals are reported to have seen an increase in informal discussions on Islamic culture. Some of these discussions, witnesses say, have been heated, but without ever finishing in verbal or physical aggression.

On October 14, the Union of Islamic Organisations and Communities in Italy (UCOII – <http://www.islam-ucoii.it/>) organized a congress in Bologna in order to discuss the serious political situation created by the attacks on New York and the beginning of the war in Afghanistan. In a declaration adopted at the end of the congress, concern was expressed over

the conditions of Muslims in Italy, saying that “the international situation created by the criminal attacks of September 11, is having negative consequences on our community due to daily aggression by the media and an unusual police attention.”

On more than one occasion, the Imam of a major industrial city, has been said to have expressed doubts about Bin Laden’s responsibility in the WTC bombing and to have justified the stance of the Afghan government (www.lastampa.it/ – October 15, 2001). These remarks have been widely commented on, including by among others, the Minister of the Interior who declared that: “the out of line statements made by some Imams in the past few days are not to be tolerated, and they should, in some way or other, be prosecuted.” (<http://www.repubblica.it/>, <http://www.corriere.it/>, October 14-16, 2001). In a poll taken by a major research institute between the 15th and 17th of October, respondents were asked whether Imams who express “understanding” for Bin Laden should be expelled; 38% were in favour of expulsion, 42% against and 20% did not know. The media have tended to keep in constant public focus anything short of an outright condemnation of Bin Laden as a criminal by Muslim leaders in this country.

The opinions of the Italian population towards Muslim migrants do not seem to have changed after the attacks of September 11. The research institute, PEOPLESWG (<http://www.peopleswg.it/>) published, on October 11, a study entitled, “Islam and the West: A Dialogue of Difference”. A national poll taken by this group from October 5-7, asked the question: “*Do you think that the presence of Muslim migrants in Italy could raise issues that are significant, of little significance, or completely unimportant with regards to a peaceful co-existence in our country?*”, the answers were as follows:

- 22.1 % significant
- 10.2% of some significance
- 38.4% of little significance
- 18.1% not significant
- 11.1% do not know / no answer

The authors of the above opinion poll say that these results do not differ substantially from those obtained by asking similar questions earlier in the year.

Good practices and positive case studies established in order to reduce prejudice and violence

There is an increase in the attention given to, along with a desire for, public discussion on Muslim culture. Testimonies to these are the numerous TV programmes on Islam and articles carried in the national and local press. However, in all this media coverage, Islam is often presented in stereotypical terms.

Many meetings and conferences at the national and local levels have been organized concerning Islam and the West. The most important ones have been those held at the *Comunità Sant’Egidio* in Rome and in the City of Florence.

The *Comunità di Sant’Egidio* (<http://www.santedigdio.org/>) organized the **Christian-Islamic Summit** in Rome, on October 3-4. This summit was attended by, among others, the President of the Republic, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and important leaders from both the Islamic and Christian communities. The President of the Republic made the following declaration:

“Islam is a great religion and culture deserving our full respect. Christianity and Islam, even in their diversity, share universal principles.”

The *City of Florence* (www.comune.fi.it) held a conference on Islam and the West on October 11. It was attended by journalists, academics, Italian and foreign Muslim and Christian experts.

Reactions by politicians and other opinion leaders including initiatives to reduce polarization and counteract negative national trends

The Prime Minister was reported, by both national and international media, on September 26th to have said in a press interview given in Berlin, that Western culture is *superior* to Muslim culture. His statements were subsequently criticized by EU leaders. The Arab League requested an informal apology. On September 27, during a debate in the Senate, the Prime Minister said he was “sorry” that his “words had been taken out of context” and that these “may have offended my Arab and Muslim friends” (<http://www.repubblica.it/> – 28/10/2001).

He later invited and met with ambassadors from Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Pakistan, Indonesia and the Palestinian National Authority on October 1st at the Government House (www.palazzochigi.it). According to the official press release, the Prime Minister “took the opportunity to speak of his profound respect for Islam. It is a great religion which includes more than a billion faithful, and one which preaches tolerance, the respect of human rights, peaceful co-existence between nations, and reciprocal understanding, to provide an important contribution to humanity.”

On September 29, the *Corriere della Sera*, a newspaper with the largest number of copies distributed daily (<http://www.corriere.it/>) hosted a 14-page article entitled “*Anger and Pride*” written by a well known writer and journalist. The theme of the article was the New York bombing and Muslim culture; the tone was violent and insulting; the contents explicitly anti-Muslim, anti-arab and anti-migrant. The article has led to a wide and heated debate on a national level which is still going on. Many on-line fora have been opened on the subject by the major national newspapers. The newspaper has announced that the article will be part of a book on post-September 11 events in the US, about to be released by the same author. The same newspaper is publishing rejoinders to that article and many of those so far published have expressed regret that such articles legitimate public expression of hate and racist ideas and worst of all, could have negative impacts on the young. To this effect, a renowned writer commenting on the former recently wrote: “That which is not of secondary importance, and which should worry all of us, including politicians, religious leaders and educators, are certain expressions, or worse, entire and passionate articles which have, in some way, legitimized such expressions, to the point of becoming the topic of general discussion, gaining a place in the minds of the young, and maybe leading them to passionate conclusions dictated by temporary emotional responses.” There is a broad consensus among actors in the struggle for equal opportunities and against racism that editorials like the one mentioned above have more far-reaching negative effects and so should not be under-rated.

Some political parties, as already mentioned in the first report, are continuing their anti-migrant campaigns, especially against Muslims. The Northern League Group in the Senate has published a report entitled “*Islam Advances*” in which it outlines the *potential dangers* posed by the increasing presence of Muslims in Europe. This report states that: “with its more than 5 million Muslims, France must adapt to the traditions of Islam. Rights in France

are being “*Islamised*” since the granting of the right to wear a veil in schools and that of polygamy”. Needless to say here that this account of events in France is inaccurate to say the least. Nonetheless, one possible effect of these types of claims would seem to be to instil fear in the population. The report goes on to quote passages from a document attributed to a high prelate in the Catholic church, the Archbishop of Izmir, Turkey which says that “Islamic domination began with petro-dollars, used not to create jobs in the poor countries of Northern Africa and the Middle East, but to build mosques and Islamic cultural centres in those countries which are targets of immigration from Muslim countries; an example of this is the large mosque built in Rome, the centre of Christianity. The permission to use Catholic churches for their religious services is not seen by Muslims as a friendly gesture, but indeed, as a clear sign of the lack of faith and moral weakness of Christians”. The report further claims that a high-ranking Muslim authority once said that: “Thanks to your democratic laws, we shall invade you and our religious laws shall then eliminate you”.

An under-secretary at the Ministry of Reforms and a member of the Northern League Party, in a television interview on the 16th of October, called on the government to stop issuing entry visas to Muslims as a preventive measure in a war situation (*la repubblica, Interni, page 10; il Manifesto*, October 17; www.ilmanifesto.it).

Report on anti-Islamic and anti-Arabic reactions **after the terrorist acts in the USA** **October 19th - November 23rd, 2001**¹

1. Acts of violence or aggression and changes in the attitude of the EU population towards ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities, especially Muslim/Islamic communities but also other vulnerable groups

1.1 Acts of violence

- **Motta di Livenza (Treviso):** a large “paper-bomb” made with a plastic tube and gunpowder was thrown at the house of the local Imam. (<http://www.ilgazzettino.it/> - October 19-20, 2001)
- **Turin:**
The house of an Imam who has been reported as making pro-Bin Laden statements (see second report: September 25. – October 19 2001) was attacked and partly damaged by unidentified persons and his family is reported to have been threatened (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - October 22, 2001)
- **Vigevano:** a young student of North African origin was beaten up at his high school by two fellow students who punched and slapped him around. «You are like Osama; look at you, you are just like him. Go back to your country, terrorist, Muslim piece of sh... » the two students yelled at him as they beat him up. (<http://www.corriere.it/> - October 25-28-29, 2001).

¹ Report drafted by Michele Bertani.

1.2 Acts of aggression and hostile treatment

- **Turin:** a petition protesting against the opening of a new “mosque” consisting of a series of rooms in a residential block was signed by a thousand signatories from the neighbourhood. Problems of “public disorder” and environmental degradation due to “the large number of Muslims who would come around the area” were cited as justification for the petition (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - October 23, 2001)
- **Turin:** racist graffiti was painted on the shutter of a shop managed by Muslim immigrants. (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - October 24, 2001)
- **Bologna:** The Islamic Cultural Centre denounced the case of a local transit bus (ATC) driver who is said to have shut the door of the bus hindering a woman wearing a chador from getting on to the bus. (October 25, 2001) (<http://www.ilfatto.rai.it/> - November 5, 2001).
- **Vittorio Veneto (Treviso):** A petition to protest against the opening of an Islamic cultural centre was signed by about a thousand residents. The vice-mayor of the town declared: “The concern expressed by residents is understandable. Our town is not ready.” (La Padania, October 30, 2001)
The vice-mayor was later interviewed on November 14 in a weekly program on the national, public channel RAI3².
- **Ribera (Agrigento):** Residents refuse to rent their houses to seasonal farm workers from North Africa. The Catholic parish priest was reported to have warned his congregation saying: “You either rent your houses to Tunisians and Moroccans, or you will be denied Communion”. (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - November 1, 2001)
The parish priest was interviewed on November 5th, in a nightly programme on RAI1, the public service channel with the largest audience.³
- **Milan:** Some residents of Viale Jenner, where the Islamic Cultural Institute is located, declared they were “prisoners in their own houses” as a result of the presence of the cultural centre. “This is not intolerance: we feel unsafe” the inhabitants declared. (<http://www.corriere.it/> - November 3, 2001, Milan local news pages)

The Islamic Cultural Institute (www.sutulhq.net), visited by thousands of practising Muslims on non-working days is considered “the point of reference for radical Islamic elements⁴”. The Institute was founded in 1998 by a break-away faction of the Islamic Centre of Milan (www.islam.it); the latter is considered as having more moderate tendencies and is affiliated to UCOII – the Union of Islamic Organisations and Communities in Italy (UCOII – <http://www.islam-ucoi.it/>). UCOII is said to represent 600,000 Muslims in Italy and 80% of associated organizations.

² The programme “SHUKRAN” of Wednesday, 14th November 2001 is cited among the **good practices**.

³ The programme “IL FATTO” (*THE FACT*) of Monday, November 2001 is cited among the **good practices**.

⁴ Cf. Gritti R., Allam M., “Islam, Italia”, Guerini and Associates, Milan, 2001, p.63.

According to the Department of the Treasury of the United States (<http://www.corriere.it/> - October 13, 2001), the Islamic Cultural Centre of Milan is said to have connections with one of the companies whose assets have been *frozen* by the same US Department for suspected links to the terrorist organization Al Qaeda.

During the same week, the police in Milan was reported to be investigating on suspected islamic extremists: three were arrested and two others declared wanted. According to the Police, the arrested used the Cultural Institute in Viale Jenner for their weekly prayers (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - October 11, 2001).

The news around the cultural institute received wide press coverage; the most widely read newspaper in Italy wrote: “The Islamic Cultural Centre is said to be considered as the most important Al Qaeda base in Europe, used by Bin Laden’s organization as the “station” from which arms, men and money depart towards various destinations world-wide” (<http://www.corriere.it/> - October 13, 2001, page 11).

A major Tv programme “Sciuscia” (<http://www.sciuscia.rai.it>) dedicated an entire transmission to interviewing people who went in and out of the institute. Throughout the interviews, the refusal of many to speak to the press for fear of how it could be used, was portrayed as a negative attitude by these Muslims. The overtly sexist offence by one of those the female journalist tried to interview was rightly reported.

- **Riva del Garda (Trento):** the Northern League (a political party) and *Gioventù Trentino Tirolese* (tyrolean and trentino youth movement) staged a demonstration to protest against Muslim immigrants. The co-ordinator of the initiative is quoted as declaring: “With terrorism, our only solution is to close the borders to Muslim immigrants, at least, for now. It is a question of public safety”. Among the slogans shouted during the demonstration were: “Self defense from Islam”; “Stop Islam”; “Padania is Christian land”. (*L’Adige*, November 5, 2001, page 18).
- **Trento:** arrives at the Imam of Trento receives letter with suspicious contents; the sender took advantage of public concern over anthrax in the US. The Imam defined it as: “an awful joke”. (*L’Adige*, November 6, 2001, page 18).
- **Varese:** The mayor of the city, a member of the Northern League Party, had surveillance cameras installed outside the “mosque”. Referring to the case, the mayor said: “We have decided to install fixed surveillance cameras in front of the building (where the “mosque” is located) in order to keep under constant control the presence of Arabs in the area and as a goodwill measure towards the residents of that area, who are *disturbed* by the Muslim presence. I have already warned that I will readily close the “mosque” upon any minimum sign of danger for the citizenry”. (*La Padania*, November 7, 2001, page 2)
- **Treviso:** the municipal council, led by a Northern League majority, orders the closure of a warehouse being used as a mosque. The Mayor of the city has, on several occasions, manifested discriminatory behaviour towards immigrants in general and Muslim ones in particular. City officials justified the closure by citing safety problems for which the warehouse is not inhabitable. In response to the anti-Islamic protest movement requested by The Secretary of the Northern League Party in Treviso called for a demonstration against Muslims. A local Catholic parish priest has declared these acts as

“unconstitutional” and “non-Christian”. (*Il Gazzettino*, November 15-18, 2001, *Il Manifesto*, - www.ilmanifesto.it November 17, 2001).

- **Mozzecane (Verona):** stones are thrown at the windows of the Islamic Institute and one window is smashed. (*L'Arena di Verona*, November 18, 2001, page 24)

1.3 Changes in attitudes

From the preceding accounts, it seems clear that attitudes towards ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities, especially Muslim / Islamic communities and other foreigners have changed decisively in the period October 19 – November 23, 2001. Instances of intolerance on the hand and fear on the other have risen. The increase in distrust of the Muslim community was confirmed in an opinion poll by ISPO/ACNielsen-Cra carried out on October 21 (<http://www.corriere.it/> - October 29, 2001, page 11). The sample population interviewed responded as follows:

Is the Muslim religion intolerant?

Yes 43%

No 24%

Do not know 33%

Arabs do not inspire trust

Agree 38%

Disagree 36%

Do not know 26%

Should Arab immigrants leave Italy?

Yes 25%

No 46%

Do not know 29%

Should we accept Christian immigrants only and refuse Muslim immigrants?

In October 2001, 13% of those interviewed responded “yes” while six months earlier, in April 2001, only 9% responded “yes” to the same question.

Some possible reasons for the change in attitudes of Italians towards these minorities are:

- Statements by Italian politicians and articles in the press from opinion leaders which, in some way, have presented Islam, and foreigners in general, as threats to Italian traditions and culture. (see Second Report: September 25 – October 19, 2001)
- Statements by an Imam in defence of Bin Laden’s innocence (see Second Report: September 25 – October 19, 2001). The media have presented him as the true face of Islam and flag-bearer of Islamic values while giving less prominence to various other leaders of the Muslim community who have openly criticized the same Imam for such pronouncements.
- The news of arrests in Milan of a presumed group of Muslim extremists with links to the Algerian GIA and statements from the United States Department of the Treasury of possible involvement, in the Al Qaeda network, of an Islamic centre in Milan. Both

newspapers and television carried news on these issues for days and this may have induced alarm and concern in public opinion.

- A disproportionately high presence in the media of radical Muslim leaders who can not be considered as representative of the Muslim community at national level. This high visibility in the media consequently portrays militant Islam as the prevailing expression of Islam in Italy. One of the TV programmes (www.portaaporta.rai.it) with largest audience in Italy had the president of Muslim Union of Italy (U.M.I) as a guest and in the course of the transmission, he expressed quite extremist views. Though his organization is said to have a few hundred members in all of Italy; he was however presented as being a spokesperson of Italian Muslims. The programme “*Porta a Porta*”, transmitted on RAI1 four times a week, is widely considered as influential on public opinion and the journalist who conducts it as an opinion leader.

2. Good practices for reducing prejudice, violence and aggression

Various initiatives and meetings between Christian and Muslim communities, have continued to take, particularly at the local level. In Verona and Trento, an ecumenical prayer session was organized and it was attended by members of all religious denominations. The news was only reported in local papers, without visibility at the national level.

The 7th Muslim-Christian Meeting took place in Modena, on November 16-17, 2001 under the title “*Gender, Religion and Appreciating Differences*”. It was organized by the regional (Emilia-Romagna) branch of ACLI (a Catholic volunteer association). The co-ordinating committee of this yearly event is composed of researchers and experts from Muslim and Christian communities, including the Secretary of UCOII – Union of Islamic Organizations and Communities in Italy.

As a sign of respect for the diversity of religious backgrounds of her pupils, a teacher of a lower middle public school in La Spezia, on arrival of a new student with Muslim backgrounds, took down the crucifix hanging on one of the walls of the classroom; this gesture provoked strong protests from the parents of the other children and carried the headlines in many newspapers. The Principal of the school declared that: “While tolerance is important, it is wrong that Christians should renounce their own identity.” The crucifix was later put back where it had been by the Principal (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - October 30, 2001). This episode, originally intended as respect for pluralism, ended up steering anti-Muslim feelings in part of the local population.

In Biella, the teachers in a section of a kindergarten decided to celebrate Christmas in a way that highlights its “*universal*” meaning and does not to exclude non-Catholic Italian and immigrant children; this decision once again caught the headlines and one parent, interviewed by the local paper, accused these teachers of *censorship* of Italian traditions. The teachers said that they have always celebrated Christmas in a way that emphasized such *universal principles* as *peace* and *brotherhood* between peoples and nations, without ever provoking any protests. (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - November 8 & 9, 2001).

The news of these events has triggered a nation-wide discussion, provoking a debate that is still going on about the secular nature of Italian schools. Mario Borghezio, a member of the European Parliament for the Northern League Party protested strongly against what he defined as: “an upsurge of cases of islamization” in schools. In another case in a school in Ceva, Cuneo, the principal of a school decided that there were not going to be lessons on Saturday, November 17 to allow Muslim pupils to celebrate the beginning of Ramadan, the

same MEP declared that “the new crusades of Christian Padanians (northern Italians), will stop this growing *islamization* taking place in our public schools”. (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - November 16, 2001)

In what seemed a reconciliatory move, the Secretary of UCOII - Union of Islamic Organisations and Communities in Italy (<http://www.islam-ucoii.it/>) declared that: “The teacher from La Spezia who a few days ago removed the crucifix in her classroom made a coherent decision. She probably chose the wrong moment. As for us, we Muslims have never asked that all crucifixes be removed from schools.” (*L'Adige*, November 7, 2001, page 14)

Good practices on TV

Shukran (“Thank you” in Arabic) <http://www.raitre.rai.it/raitre/tg3/shukran.htm>, a weekly TV programme on RAI3 on multi-ethnic Italy, is transmitted every Wednesday from 12:55 to 13:10.

During the 15 minutes programme; many stories are presented and followed by comments from guest invited to the transmission. Each episode presents five video services filmed in Italy and abroad on the subject to be treated.

The transmission on Wednesday, November 14 focussed on a petition by some local residents to stop the opening of an Islamic cultural centre in Vittorio Veneto (Treviso). The vice-mayor of Treviso, a member of the Northern League Party and supporter of the petition, was invited together with a politician from the centre-left opposition who supports providing the the project. The discussion was responsible and balanced though presenting opposing views by the guests; it avoided sensationalism.

Il Fatto <http://www.ilfatto.rai.it/> is a daily news and information programme, transmitted on the TV channel RAI1 from 20:30 to 20:40. It is conducted by one of Italy’s most experienced and famous journalist. On Monday, November 5, this programme had as its guest Don Emanuele, a Catholic parish priest from Ribera (Agrigento) who was reported, during the week, to have warned members of his congregation that he would not allow access to the holy Communion to those members who had vacant houses but refused to rent them to Muslim workers in the area. The discussion was well balanced and provoked reflection.

Uno Mattino is a daily, morning programme of updates and news on TV RAI1 from 7:00 to 9:00.

The transmission on Wednesday, November 14 was on Muslim culture and a reflection on the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Among the guests were a journalist of Egyptian origin who is also an expert on migration issues and the Rector of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies. The discussion was well balanced and historical and cultural aspects of Islam were highlighted.

3. Reactions by politicians and other opinion leaders including initiatives to reduce polarization and counteract negative national trends

Politicians

The Minister for Reforms and head of the Northern League Party, Umberto Bossi, defended the statements made by the head of Cabinet in his Ministry in an interview on October 16, in which he invited the Government to stop Muslim migrants from entering the country (see

Second Report: September 25 – October 19, 2001). The Minister declared: “There is a war going on; if the situation gets worse, if we risk a disaster, if we risk dying of Ebola, it is wise to stop new Muslim immigrants from entering. Speroni (the official who gave the interview) speaks the *people’s* language; the people think the same way. Fortunately, the Northern League speaks the *people’s* language and not the language of politicians.” (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - October 19, 2001)

On Friday October 19, Mario Borghesio, an MEP from the Northern League Party, organized a demonstration in front of the Islamic Cultural Centre in Milan. On a banner displayed during the protest was the slogan: “Terrorists, and illegal immigrants out of Milan (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - October 18, 2001).

Other members of the governing coalition from different Parties have distanced themselves from the declarations of the Northern League. The Minister for EU Affairs declared that: “The opinions expressed by the Northern League are not those of the Government. We defend the West and its Christian and liberal values. But we are also friends of Islam and of those who are willing to be our friends”.

Another member of the government, Minister of Public Affairs with responsibility for Intelligence Services declared: “While confirming my opposition to pursuing crimes of opinion, I do think that the statements made by the Imam of Turin are unacceptable and dangerous (See Second Report: September 25 – October 19, 2001). The way in which the Muslim community has isolated him is encouraging; it is also significant that the Imams of Trapani and Milan and qualified Islamic groups have distanced themselves from his declarations” (<http://www.lastampa.it/> - October 18, 2001). The above minister of Public Affairs is the only member of the Government who has publicly recognized the numerous criticisms directed at the Imam of Turin by other prominent figures from Muslim communities.

Opposition Parties have bitterly criticised Northern League politicians for their anti-Muslim discourse.

Opinion Leaders

“*Porta a Porta*” (www.portaaporta.rai.it) is one of the programmes on Italian television with the largest audience; it is transmitted every night from Monday to Thursday on TV RAI1 (a national, public channel). Politicians, opinion leaders, artists and TV stars are usually invited to discuss current events. The journalist who conducts it – Bruno Vespa – is an experienced journalist; he is also author of many books on Italian politics and customs.

On Monday, November 5, the programme featured as one of its guests, the president of the Union of Italian Muslims (UMI), an organisation of about 6,500 members. During the transmission, this man, known to belong to hardline and intransigent wing of Islam in Italy, claimed Bin Laden was innocent and made use of offensive language towards Christians and the West. The other guests were uncomfortable throughout the transmission; the journalist conducting later declared in an interview the “Now people know the ugly face of Islam. Some Muslims do not consider Bin Laden to be a terrorist and are ready to uphold the worst of things” (*Libero* – November 7, 2001, page 3).

On Wednesday, November 7, the Catholic daily – *Avvenire* – carried the following headline: “*A Strike Against the Foundations. The Crucifix Ridiculed*”. The paper dedicated two entire pages to the story and four editorials to the transmission and to some of the statements made therein. The newspaper criticised both the president of UMI for the extremist views he expressed and the offensive language he used and the journalist for inviting such a person

known to hold such extreme views. The newspaper claimed that the journalist tried to provoke the guest whenever he seemed to appear soft and conciliatory, by reading out some aggressive statements said to have been made by the person. The paper concludes by saying that “Thanks to the journalist, dialogue between the West and Islam has taken a giant step backwards. The behaviour of the journalist goes against that sense of responsibility that all journalists in the public service should have” (<http://www.avvenire.it/> - November 7, 2001, <http://www.corriere.it/> - November 8, 2001).

A member of the board of Islamic cultural centre in Bologna, which represents about 15,000 Muslims in that region declared: “Not even we from the UCOII can claim to represent Islam in Italy, how much less UMI. In any case, the claims of Mr. Smith (president of UMI) are inaccurate, even at a doctrinal level” (<http://www.avvenire.it/> - November 7, 2001)

The Secretary-General of the same organisation UCOII has promised that his organisation will challenge what he defines as a “political manoeuvre” that is permitting few and extremist Muslim groups to have much visibility on the media, thereby giving an erroneous image of Islam. He has warned against the risk of an escalation in tension “which could bring about more intolerance” at a time when “it is necessary that everyone behaves responsibly”.

According to the president of the Islamic community in Brescia, one of the largest communities with about 28.000 members, statements like those made by the president of UMI are worsening the situation of Muslims and make it more difficult to recover lost ground due to events since September (<http://www.avvenire.it/> - November 7, 2001).

Report on anti-Islamic and anti-Arabic reactions **after the terrorist acts in the USA** **November 23rd - December 31st, 2001⁵**

Part One

1. Acts of violence or aggression against ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities, especially Muslim / Islamic communities but also other vulnerable groups

1.1 Violent Episodes

No violent physical attacks against Muslims or other ethnic, religious or political groups were noted in this period.

1.2 Aggressive and hostile behaviour

- A female journalist from “*La Nazione*” newspaper decided to test the situation of hostility towards Muslims following the 11th September bombing. She wore the *niqab* veil used by some Muslim women that leaves only the eyes visible and went around the city of Bologna for a whole day followed at some distance by a photographer from the same journal. She reported being insulted and asked if she was a friend of Bin Laden by some and receiving support from some others who defended her right to dress as she preferred and profess the religion of her choice (*La Nazione*, November 9, 2001;

⁵ Reports drafted by Michele Bertani.

<http://www.lanazione.it/>). In Florence, a high school teacher reported doing a similar test a few days before that of the journalist from “*La Nazione*”. The teacher says he “dressed like a Palestinian” and went about the city visiting bars, markets and other public places, trying to engage people in conversations on the events of September 11; he also met with some hostility though he was not physically attacked in any of the places he visited; he said at last that he would never try such a test again.

- A native Italian Muslim who converted to Islam after marriage and wears the *niqab* veil was interviewed after her husband was arrested in the course of investigations by the public prosecutor of Milan into the activities of some militant Islamic groups. She reported being heavily insulted several times and called “friends of Talibans” well before her husband was accused of having connections to some militant groups in the area. She said that when she reacts to such aggression and the attackers hear her accent and notice that she is not a foreigner, they get confused for a while and in some cases, resort to more violent insults. (*Sette*, n. 51/52, 2001, pag.57)
- Another young native Muslim woman tried to find a legal chamber for her internship after taking a degree in Law. She reported being interviewed by three legal chambers and was turned down. On all three occasions, she wore her veil covers the head, including the ears. When she was invited for the fourth interview, she went without her veil and was hired. The Director of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Naples declared that when this woman arrives at work, she takes off her veil before entering the office and puts it back on after leaving the place.
- The Chief Prosecutor of Bolzano dropped the case of an attempted law suit against a provincial councillor and the regional vice-president accused of racial, ethnic and religious discrimination by a fellow councillor after the former presented a motion in the Provincial Assembly requiring the regional government to stop Muslims being employed in South Tyrol following the September 11th terrorist attack. The Chief Prosecutor justified his decision by saying that the proposal did not contain anything that is relevant from the point of view of criminal justice; besides the proposal was made in the exercise of their duties as legislators. (*Il Mattino di Bolzano e provincia*, 14th December 2001, p. 21 - www.ilmattinobz.it)

1.3 Changes in Attitudes

- On December 15, the European Society of Psychoanalysis published the results of a survey carried out in Italy involving 2,500 children aged between 7 and 16 years. The report says that 37% of the sample interviewed declared that they were suspicious of and hostile to non-European immigrants, in particular the Roma, Albanians and Moroccans. According to the report, the level of hostility is even stronger in Northern Italy, especially in Lombardia and Veneto regions. Racist opinions of the above groups are said to have originated from family contexts for 58% of the sample while 48% pointed to television which is also accused of being responsible for the negative image associated with foreigners. (www.televideo.rai.it, December 15, 2001, 13:40). The day after this report was released, the Northern League Party’s newspaper, *La Padania*, was the only newspaper to carry the story under the heading: “To defend their identity, children want classrooms without non-EU citizens.” (*La Padania* December 16, 2001, p.3)

- On December 17, the daily newspaper, *Il Gazzettino*, published the results of a periodic survey commissioned by the Northeast Observatory and carried out by the Poster Institute. The survey analysed the relationship between citizens and immigrants in the Veneto and Friuli-Venezia-Giulia regions. In September 2000, one out of four interviewed was in favour of granting entry permits to Catholic migrants and less to Muslims in order to avoid a purported “*Islamic invasion*”. In the December 2001 report, the percentage of those interviewed who were in agreement with the idea of having only Catholic migrants had risen from 25% in the same period in 2000 to 31%. Those who see migrants as threat to public order remained unchanged at 39%.
According to the survey, hostility towards immigrants was widespread, especially in some sections of the population: the less educated, the elderly and retired workers.

2. Good practises and positive case studies established in order to reduce prejudice and violence

Pope John Paul II reiterated on different occasions the fact that “there is an authentic Islam, one that prays and takes care of the needy”. He invited Catholics to observe a day of fasting and prayer on December 14, 2001 as a gesture of peace and justice. He also invited leaders of different religions to meet on the 24th of January 2002, in Assisi to pray together. This call from the Pope was favourably received not only by Catholics in Italy but also by non-believers, including some politicians and intellectuals. Many Muslims and Islamic communities in Italy as well as the University of Cairo at Al Ashar publicly thanked the Pope for his initiative.

At the central Cathedral in Milan, an inter-religious prayer session was held in the presence of members of many other religions - Protestants, Buddhists and Muslims. In Ancona, on the evening of December 14, Christians dined together with Muslims at the local mosque. The weekly newspaper, *Verona Fedele*, published by the Diocese of Verona, carried on its front page a letter of support for this initiative of the Pope from the Imam of the mosque in Verona. The Director of this weekly wrote an editorial titled “Together with Islam: reciprocal respect without loosing each other’s identity.” (*Verona Fedele*, n. 49. December 16, 2001).

Criticisms of the initiative came also from within the Catholic church: a priest who is active in Party politics and popular for his right wing sympathies, declared he was going to observe a day of fasting but not on the same day as Muslims. The Bishop of Como, a known conservative, declared he was going to accept the Pope’s invitation to fast but will do so “unwillingly” on the 14th of December precisely because that day was the last day of the Muslim Ramadan. He is quoted as saying that his “faith is a true one, while the Muslim faith is not”. (*Corriere della Sera*, December 13, 2001, p.9 – *La Stampa* December 15, 2001, p.8 – *La Repubblica*, December 14, 2001, p. 18)

The President of the House of Deputies, Hon. Pier Ferdinando Casini, visited the central mosque⁶ in Rome on December 17, 2001 and met with representatives of the Arab and Islamic communities. The President declared that his presence there “had the symbolic value of paying homage to a great culture and religion”. He defined as absurd the attempt to confuse terrorism with the larger Arab community and criticized what he defined as “irresponsible statements made by some people” that received wide press coverage for no

⁶ There is a central mosque in Rome which is called the “Islamic Cultural Centre” because for some legal reasons, it can not be called a “mosque”, instead, the street where it is located is known as “Via della Moschea”, the Mosque street. Some Muslim organisations are asking that whatever legal barriers there are for which mosques can not be named as such, should be removed.

reason. He added that “Italy is on the path to a multi-racial and multi-religious society based on reciprocal tolerance”. (*La Stampa*, December 18, 2001, p.9 – *La Repubblica*, December 18, 2001, p.21).

3. Reactions by politicians and other opinion leaders including initiatives to reduce polarization and counteract negative national trends

Politicians

Politicians, clergymen, intellectuals, lay and Catholic organisations accepted the invitation by the Pope to observe a day of fasting on the 14th of December (see Good Practices), the last day of the Ramadan. A popular writer, Erri De Luca commented the initiative positively saying that though he is not a believer, he felt the responsibility of sharing the experiences of Catholics and as such would join in sending this “message of peace”. He said the Pope’s initiative was like shaking the hands of Islam, an expression of sympathy towards people who have, as a group, been put on the bench of the accused” (*Corriere della Sera*, December 15, 2001, p.10).

The southern region – Campania – budgeted about a million and thirty-two thousand Euro (2 billion lire) for a new mosque to be built in Ponticelli; the above amount is part of a 77 million Euro development fund meant for infra-structural rehabilitation of the Province of Naples. The decision provoked heated debate at both local and national levels among politicians as well as within the religious community. Plans for the mosque were begun in 1989, followed by requests for various building permits and licences; one of the aspects on which there is agreement today is where it will be built.

The Bishop of another town in the same Province – Pozzuoli -, protested to the authorities saying that the renovation of the Cathedral of Pozzuoli had been forgotten since 1964 when it was destroyed by fire. The Imam of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Naples commenting the Bishop’s reaction, showed support for the plight of the cathedral but wondered if the Bishop would have reacted the same way before the 11th of September. The Imam added that his religious community did not know anything about financial support from the regional government and that the Muslim community is going to set up a fund raising committee in order to build the mosque. (*La Repubblica*, Naples Edition, December 2, 2001, pp. I, III – www.Repubblica.napoli.it).

Another parish priest in Ponticelli declared his support for the mosque adding that whoever says anything to the contrary is trying to exploit a delicate situation for political reasons”. (*La Stampa*, December 14, 2001, p.16).

In a letter to the newspaper of the Italian Episcopal Conference, *L’Avvenire*, a priest from Naples expressed his concerns over the construction of the mosque. The Editor of the newspaper in his reply wrote: “ ... it is difficult not to notice how mosques are slowly infiltrating our cities ... causing a strong sense of discomfort among other residents ... it is necessary to consider carefully the side effects, including such aspects as the possibility of a reciprocal treatment in countries where Muslims are the majority and the willingness of Muslims living here to integrate into our society and accept its traditions and history ...” (*L’Avvenire*, Letters to the Editor, December 30, 2001 – www.avvenire.it)

A member of Parliament from the right wing National Alliance party and elected in one of the constituencies in the Province of Naples challenged the decision to financially support the construction of the mosque by the regional government, defining it as “unacceptable” because “there are native families of eight people in Naples who live in places without windows or

bathrooms. A columnist of a left-wing newspaper, *Il Manifesto*, commenting on a parliamentary decision on the same subject (see below), wrote that it would be appropriate to refuse State support for the construction of the mosque on the condition that such support is also withdrawn from the Catholic church. She argued in favour of giving financial support to all religions or to none at all and questioned whether Catholics have a right to proper places of worship while Muslims do not.

On December 12, the financial support accorded by the regional government of Campania ended up in Parliament and a proposal by an MP from the Northern League Party which is part of the ruling centre-right coalition, was adopted. The document adopted requires the central to intervene and explain to the Regional government “the need to use the amount destined for the mosque to complete the housing scheme in the region”. During parliamentary debate, one of the Northern League MPs who intervened not only criticised the decision by the regional government in very strong terms but also made anti-islamic; he even added some sexist comments against the mayor of Naples, a woman and a former Minister of the Interior. These comments were promptly deplored by the entire opposition while some commentators from the ruling coalition dissociated themselves from his sexist comments but fell short of a clear criticism of the entire speech. (*La Padania*, December 13, 2001, p.5 – *Corriere della Sera*, December 13, 2001, p.9).

Opinion leaders

The article, violently anti-islamic and anti-migrant, written by the writer Oriana Fallaci on the events of 11th September titled “Anger and Pride” (see Second Report of September 25-October 19, 2001), was published as a book shortly before Christmas. The author added a few comments to the original article and in particular Prime Minister Berlusconi’s remarks made in Berlin that Western culture is *superior* to Muslim culture. She criticises Berlusconi for failing to confirm it publicly and instead tried to appease his European critics.

A known sociologist and writer agreed with the Prime Minister’s claim of superiority in his editorial on a weekly magazine. This editorial was explicitly anti-Muslim and anti-migrant. (*Oggi*, no. 41, October 10, 2001, p.27).

While other commentators have openly criticised Fallaci’s book, the same is being advertised on national television and it is reported to have sold tens of thousands of copies in a short time.

The issue of A popular weekly magazine - *Panorama* -, in its edition of January 10, 2002, published an exclusive interview with Oriana Fallaci entitled “The unknown portrait of Oriana Fallaci: Italy’s greatest female writer”. The interview celebrates her career, in particular her correspondence from war zones and her books. The interviewer concludes the article saying that while she continues to be criticised by those she defines as “propaganda puppets”, public opinion continues to love her. Another columnist has appealed to the President of the Republic to appoint her senator for life, an honour reserved for those considered to have made exceptional achievements as intellectuals, politicians or professionals.

Part Two Summary Report - September–December 2001

September 11 – 20, 2001

Public reaction to the terrorist bombings in New York and Washington can be defined in this period as one of shock and fear for the future. The suddenness of the event, the massive loss of human life and the sense of vulnerability deriving from the fact that a very familiar means of transport – commercial flights – had been turned into such deadly and devastating weapons, generated a sense of shock that will be overcome only some weeks after the attack. Concern for the future mostly had to do with speculations on what was going to be the reaction of the US. Public discourse in this period was dominated by discussions on these aspects and Islamic and migrants minority communities in Italy were not immediately linked in public discourse to the bombings except for a few right-wing politicians and conservative intellectuals most of whom were known to hold negative opinions about Muslims well before the attacks. Besides, there was a general feeling of unconditioned support for the American people; the slogan “*we are all Americans*” was frequently used by both politicians and the media as a way of expressing support and sympathy for the American people struck by such tragic events. In this period, no cases of physical violence against Muslims and / or their property was reported. This scenario will change in the second period.

September 21 – October 19 2001

In this period, the initial reaction of shock started giving way to public debate on factors that may have contributed to the event. Media attention on Muslim culture and religion is very high, though the analysis proposed is often superficial and stereotyped. More politicians and opinion leaders join the debate and discussions on Muslim culture is linked to the presence of Muslim migrants in the country. Some *negative elements* of Islam are emphasized in public discourse and used to suggest tighter immigration controls. Two councillors in the autonomous Province of Bolzano - Alto Adige (South Tyrol) present a proposal to the local council to stop Muslims being employed throughout the province. New editions of existing books are published while some others are translated or published for the first time and bookshops record a rise in sales of books on Islam. Muslims or experts on Islam are invited to take part in public debates. The first cases of intolerance and aggression are reported in this period: an Islamic Cultural Centre in Imola is vandalised on September 29 and anti-Muslim and anti-migrants discourse in this period revolves around three main events:

- ❑ Prime Minister Berlusconi’s discourse on the *superiority* of Western culture with respect to Islam which triggers criticism from some of the European Union member States and the Arab League. Berlusconi will say later that his comments were taken out of context by the media (see Second report);
- ❑ the Imam of a major Islamic Cultural Centre in the industrial city of Turin is reported to have expressed doubts about Bin Laden’s responsibility in the New York and Washington bombings and to have justified the stance of the Taliban government in Afghanistan;

- the country's leading daily newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, publishes on September 29th an editorial by a renowned journalist, Oriana Fallaci, which is violently anti-Muslim and anti-migrant. This editorial will be at the centre of public debate for weeks and later, will be published as a book.

In general, this period can be described as one in which public expression of hate, islamophobia and xenophobia was legitimised. Prominent politicians, including members of the government, took anti-Muslim and anti-migrant stance on various occasions, including attempts to exploit the situation and push through a new legislation on migration that provides for very strict limitations on, among others, entry and family reunions. All these contributed to creating the climate in which most of the cases of aggression recorded in the third period will take place.

October 20 – November 23, 2001

Events recorded in this period clearly suggest a marked change in attitudes towards ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities, especially Muslim / Islamic communities (see Third Report). Media attention remained high and quite often, radical Muslims are presented as models; this high visibility in the media consequently portrayed militant Islam as the prevailing expression of Islam in Italy and this contributed to shaping popular sentiments towards Muslims. Opinion polls taken in this period showed a significant increase in the proportion of those who favoured admitting more Christians into the country than Muslims. Many hostile acts against Muslims occurred, including measures by some administrative authorities, as well as cases of physical violence against persons and property owned by Muslims or Muslim communities.

This change was not uniform throughout the country: according to some Muslim communities, the situation in the south of the country and the islands remained fairly stable compared to what it was before September 11 and negative changes after this date were not violent. In Sicily in particular, it is reported that Muslim leaders have been actively involved by various institutions and local media in good practices aimed at promoting mutual understanding and respect; various public discussion fora have been organized, many of them targeting schools and youth.

On the other hand, most of the known cases of violence and aggression occurred in the central and northern regions and it is remarkable to note that these are the regions where political exploitation of the tragic events of September 11 have been most frequent and explicit.

November 24, 2001 – January 15 2002

With the beginning of the US-led attack on Taliban governed Afghanistan, the attention of the media and public opinion on the 11th September bombings gradually started giving way to discussions on the progress and consequences of the war and the attempt to capture members of the Al Queda organisation. All the same, Islam remained central in this reformulated discourse. No violent acts against Muslims are recorded and fewer cases of hostile attitude are reported in this period. While more anti-Muslim political discourse occurred, the Muslim community received more positive press coverage. Many more books have been published on Islamic culture and religion and the number of inter-religious initiatives involving Muslims during the Christmas period was quite high and

most important was that they involved local communities and as such were more likely to contribute positively to improving relationships between minority and majority groups.

The Pope's invitation to Catholics to join Muslims in a day of fasting and prayer on December 14, the last day of Muslim Ramadan, and the visit by the President of the House of Deputies to the Islamic Cultural Centre (central mosque) in Rome, were among the major developments on the subject in this period. On the political front, the Northern League Party pressed ahead with its anti-Muslim campaign by taking it right up to the Parliament after a regional government (governed by the coalition that is in opposition at national level) decided to support financially the construction of a mosque which had been planned far back in 1989. The governing centre-right coalition passed a motion requiring the central government to take measures to stop the regional government from contributing financially to the construction of the new mosque.

Conclusion

The pattern of public reaction to the events of 11th September has been different from what has been noted in other EU countries. There were no violent attacks against supposed Muslims and other religious minorities in the days immediately after the bombings in New York and Washington. Such violent reactions, mainly attacks against persons and property belonging to Muslims and Muslim communities will emerge only after weeks of anti-islamic discourse by part of the political elite, in an attempt to maximize the political benefits and broaden their consensus by using the opportunity to put stricter controls on immigration. Public pronouncements of various members of the Northern League Party are good examples of such instances.

Other opinion makers, including leading figures from the media world, did contribute to a climate of subtle but increasing islamophobia in which violent physical attacks later appeared. Some polls taken in October and November confirm an increase in hostility towards Muslims and in some parts of the country like the Veneto, Trentino – Alto Adige and Friuli Venezia Giulia, 3 out of 10 people, according to one of the opinion polls, consider Muslims to be a threat to Italian culture and identity. In the end, it seems that the explicit anti-Muslim and anti-migrant discourses by part of the political and intellectual elite and the way parts of the media presented news relating to the events of 11th September, have fuelled a subtle but lasting feeling of hostility towards some religious and ethnic minorities. Worthy of note and hope is the contribution the Catholic hierarchy has made on the issue by taking a very clear stance: outright condemnation of the bombings while at the same time taking concrete steps to promote dialogue between different religions.