

ISLAM BEYOND TRADITIONAL TERRITORIES

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Keywords: Italy; Sicily; Vatican; Arabs; Islam; Catholicism; Lega Nord; legal status of Islam; migrants; Islamophobia.

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Citation: Bibikova O. Islam and Islamophobia in Italy // Russia and the Moslem World, 2026, № 1 (331), P. 57–68. DOI: 10.31249/rmw/2026.01.06

Abstract. In Italy, views on the place and role of Islam are as stereotyped as in the rest of Europe. The Catholic Church is still acting as the guardian of national memory, as well as public ethics and values that are widely held in Italy. However, with the expansion of religious pluralism resulting from migration flows since the 1970s, the Catholic Church faced the fear of losing its monopoly on national religious space.

Despite the mediation efforts of civil society and multiple initiatives focusing on interreligious dialogue, Islam has no legal standing in Italy. As a result, due to the complex relationship between state and religion, Muslim immigrants lack true recognition in the Italian society.

The first Muslim settlements in Italy date back to 827. Having mastered coastal navigation in the Mediterranean, the Arabs started raiding their European neighbours. In 692, they sacked Syracuse, a Greek city located on the east coast of Sicily. The subsequent series of raids on other cities on the island was largely facilitated by the feuds between rival Sicilian rulers.

At that time, Sicily – an island conveniently positioned on maritime shipping routes – was under Byzantine rule. After the Arabs

took control of Palermo in 831, they continued their attacks on other Sicilian cities and even the coastal areas of mainland Italy. They eventually managed to seize control over Sicily and establish an emirate there, which lasted from 965 to 1072.

Following the Norman Conquest in the 12th century, the number of Muslims in Sicily dwindled, as they chose to move to the Maghreb; as a result, Islam on the island was in decline. However, the presence of Muslims in Sicily, albeit temporary, had a significant impact on the agriculture, culture, and language of southern Italy that lasts to this day. The Arabs initiated land reforms, introduced new farming techniques, taught local people to grow new crops – citrus fruits, almonds, sugarcane, cotton, henna, and pistachios – and improved the irrigation system.

In addition, there are words of Arabic origin preserved in the local dialect that have something to do with the administrative activities of the Arabs; first of all, these are “words for weights and measures, and the man who inspected these” [1, p. 46–47].

During the Arab rule on the island, architecture and art blended elements of Arab, Byzantine / Greek, and Latin cultures. Even after the Norman conquest of Sicily, the style was still popular for a long time.

The Arabs were quite tolerant of the indigenous population, as there was no forced conversion to Islam. However, under the Norman rule, Islam gradually gave way to Christianity, disappearing altogether by 1300.

From time to time, Arab troops would raid wealthy cities and monasteries in continental Italy and even the outskirts of Rome (846). However, the Arabs lost the battle of Garigliano in 915. Moreover, the Italians were joined by Byzantine troops in opposing the Arabs. As a result, the Arabs were forced to fall back, the bulk of the warriors relocating to the Maghreb; those who stayed assimilated into the local population. Naturally, the Arab raids fuelled hatred toward Muslims, primarily among the inhabitants of continental Italy; in Sicily, however, anti-Arab sentiments were not very strong.

As the Scottish orientalist W. Montgomery Watt noted, for Roger II (1095–1154), founder and first King of Sicily, and his descendants “material motives seem to have been stronger than religious ones, and in many respects it [Sicily – *O. B.*] remained a part of the Islamic world. The externals of the life of some of the later rulers seemed to contemporaries more Muslim than Christian. In particular Roger II (reigned 1130–1154) and his grandson Frederick of Hohenstaufen (1215–1250) have been called ‘the two baptized sultans of Sicily’” [1, p. 22–23].