

Do Sicilians have an affinity for the Islamic world in their DNA?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Al Jazeera recently carried a feel good story about Sicily, focussing on the city of Palermo, where Sicilians, according to this article, have welcomed Muslim migrants, who soon feel right at home because a thousand years ago Muslims ruled the island for all of 200 years. We are asked to believe that “Sicilians have an affinity for the Islamic world in their DNA.”

Read the story [HERE](#).

“The sound of about two dozen children practicing Qur’an recitations fills the otherwise empty Islamic Cultural Center of Via Roma in Palermo, Italy.

'Two break out of the group and start playing hide-and-seek between a curtain that separates the children's section from the rest of the centre.

"They are quickly ushered back to their place by Imam Sehab Uddin.

The scene is set: Muslim children, harmless and inoffensive (with two sweetly "playing hide-and-seek"), practicing their Qur'an recitations. Islam has come to Sicily, but who could object to this scene of innocent study?

"Home to more than 25,000 immigrants, many from majority Muslim countries such as Bangladesh, Palermo, has become a symbol of multiculturalism and integration that has been built on Sicily's history.

"A Muslim stronghold for about 200 years between the ninth and 11th centuries, the Mediterranean island – of which Palermo is the capital – still bears the marks of Islamic history both physically and culturally.

"Ahmad Abd Al Majid Macaluso, the Imam of Palermo, walks through the San Giovanni degli Eremiti monastery and points to a discoloured section of wall.

"He explains that was where the Mihrab used to be, the semi-circular carving in a mosque's wall that faces the Kaaba in Mecca, the holiest site in Islam.

"Every church here used to be a mosque which used to be a synagogue which used to be a church which was a mosque," he explains. "This is the history of Sicily."

Not quite. Some churches, very few, may have been mosques a thousand years ago, and before that, were either churches or synagogues. In Al Majid Macaluso's telling, they appear to have begun as mosques ("which used to be a church which was a mosque"). That's the impression he wishes to give, but it is

not true; the churches and synagogues preceded the arrival of Muslims, and their mosques, in Sicily, by more than half a millennium.

“Imam Macaluso thinks that these symbols, like the Qur’anic inscription on the Cathedral of Palermo, the Arab-Norman architecture that dots the landscape, and the culture of the people make it a bit easier for Muslim immigrants to adjust to their new home.

How does the “culture of the people” make it “easier for Muslim immigrants” to adjust to their new home”? He doesn’t tell us what that culture consists of, so we have no way to judge the truth or falsehood of his remark.

“Surely, for Muslims that come here from other countries, Sicily is a happy exception because there is a natural disposition for unity, to recognize a brotherhood with Muslims, Jews and other religions,” Macaluso said.

Imam Macaluso claims there is in Sicily a “natural disposition for unity, to recognize a brotherhood with Muslims.” No evidence of this “natural disposition...to recognize a brotherhood with Muslims” is offered. Not a single non-Muslim Sicilian, save for Mayor Orlando himself, is quoted. And if there were this “brotherhood,” why has Sicily shifted politically so much to the right, supporting the anti-immigrant parties of Cinque Stelle and the Lega Salvini? Why do Sicilians agree with Matteo Salvini’s policy of not allowing Muslim migrants coming from Libyan ports to disembark anywhere in Italy? Shouldn’t the Sicilians be welcoming them with open arms?

“Sicilians differ from the rest of Europe in this natural disposition for diversity. Sicilians have this affinity for the Islamic world in their DNA.”

This seems quite a stretch. The last Muslim stronghold in Sicily fell to the Christians in 1091; by 1282, there was not a single Muslim left in Sicily. There was no “natural disposition for diversity”, either among the Muslims, or among the Sicilians who threw off their rule. Yet we are being asked to believe in some quasi-genetic (“in their DNA”) “affinity for the Islamic world” in Sicily. How does this affinity display itself? Muslims ruled Sicily a thousand years ago, and finally, in bloody battles, they were driven out. How would that explain why they are –according to one imam and one mayor –made to feel welcome in Sicily today?

We are provided with the anecdotal evidence of exactly one Muslim, Masrur Rahim, “a slim 29-year-old originally from Bangladesh, who moved to Palermo when he was nine.”

“Now working at a travel agency in the city centre, Rahim credits the hospitality of Sicilians to their Islamic ancestry and multicultural past.”

“The connection you feel is the people, because they [the Muslims] have left something inside the people,” Rahim said. “They are completely different from the northerners. They are more friendly here, they accept people, it’s better than the other places of Italy, the northern places of Italy.”

If we are going to attribute the friendliness/warmth/hospitality of Sicilians to that Islamic blip in their distant past, rather than to the natural warmth of Italians (who outside Sicily never experienced Islamic rule), and even more of southern Italians (in many countries, not just in Italy, southerners are distinctly warmer than northerners), can we attribute other aspects of Sicilian culture, such as the Mafia, to that Islamic heritage? I doubt that Imam Macaluso would agree. But isn’t the Mafia’s practice of extortion, whereby people pay to be “protected” from the Mafia itself, likely based on the Jizyah payment

Muslims exacted from dhimmis? Don't the all-black outfits of Sicilian widows owe something to the niqab? And does not the *delitto d'onore*, the "honor crime" in which a Sicilian man may kill a female relative who has brought dishonor to the family, based on the "honor killings" in Islam?

"Imam Sehab Uddin also believes that there is a difference between the cultures of northern and southern Italy."

"Italy is like an apartment building," he explains. "The people in the north are on the top floors and don't talk to the people on the bottom floors [the south]. The people in the north, in cities like Padova and Venice, are scared of me. If I try to get their attention to ask them a question, they are scared of me. If I ask someone here, they answer and help me immediately."

Could his warmer reception in the south be attributed simply to the fact that he is known to people in Sicily where he lives, and whose distinctive dialect he speaks? In the north, in Padova and Venice, he is a complete stranger, and if they are, as he claims, "scared" of him, surely he can think of the reason why that might be. Does he really need to be reminded of the almost 35,000 terror attacks world-wide by Muslims since 9/11?

"Patrizia Spallino, an Arabic language professor and director at the Office of Medieval Studies in Palermo, explains that the Tunisian Arabic that used to be spoken on the island over 1,000 years ago is still evident in the Sicilian dialect through places and everyday words.

"The port neighborhood of Marsala in Palermo derives from the Arabic marsa Allah, meaning "port of God".

"This influence can also be seen in common Sicilian words like meskeen, from the Arabic miskeen, meaning someone who is poor or unfortunate.

What are a handful of Arabic words that have entered the Sicilian dialect meant to signify? That Muslims and Sicilian Christians get along swimmingly? Today, in the advanced West, among the Arabic words and expressions that have entered our languages in the last few decades are jihad, jizyah, dhimmi, fatwa, mufti, allahu akbar. Do those words, and the concepts behind them, suggest empathy, or enmity?

“Although this Arab influence is evident to someone who studies the language and knows the history, Spallino explains, most of the population is unaware of these links.

“What is not lost on people, is what she calls the Mediterranean idea of hospitality.

“The idea of hospitality, starting with Greece and the Arabs and then Byzantines ... is sacred,” she says. “You do everything you can for hospitality. In Arab countries, when they invite you in [to their home] they get you a tea, something to eat, this is also very Sicilian.”

This “hospitality” among the Sicilians apparently must be attributed to the 200 years they endured under Arab rule, until they finally managed to drive the Arabs out, The Sicilians could not possibly have arrived at such displays of “hospitality” on their own. When Sicilians invite you to their houses, they give you “tea” and even “something to eat.” What a display –really quite modest –of hospitality. Surely this could only be the result of that Muslim Arab influence from a thousand years ago.

“But the reality of this hospitality has not been the same throughout Italy.

“Over the past few years, Italy has seen several attacks against immigrants – the worst of which took place last year in the central Italian city of Macerata, where a man who ran in local elections under the far-right Lega party shot and

injured six African migrants in a series of drive-by shootings.

“In addition to these attacks, Italy’s interior minister, Matteo Salvini, has taken a hard line against immigration, at times forbidding those who have been rescued in the Mediterranean to disembark at Italian ports.

Salvini, who rises ever higher in the opinion polls, is not being “inhospitable.” It’s the wrong word. For these migrants are not guests coming to have tea and sandwiches, and then leave. They are people who are coming to live, permanently, in your country, which is your home. They bring with them a culture antipathetic to your own, and a faith that teaches them to despise you and all other Unbelievers. Their presence is a very different kind of imposition.

“One of the most outspoken politicians against Italy’s anti-immigrant policies has been Palermo’s mayor, Leoluca Orlando.

“Minister Salvini isn’t against Muslims, Minister Salvini isn’t against immigrants, Minister Salvini is against Italians,” says Orlando, tapping his finger on his desk. “He is against our culture of hospitality, he’s against our Mediterranean soul, he’s against our history.”

But “our history” includes enormous efforts by local Christians to free Sicily from Muslim rule. That’s the history Salvini remembers, and Orlando chooses to forget. “

This past January, [Mayor of Palermo] Orlando, along with the mayors of Naples, Reggio Calabria and Florence, clashed with Salvini by rejecting the controversial Security Decree. The decree, in part, cancelled residence permits for humanitarian reasons, replacing it with shorter permits for specific incidences like natural disasters.

“Orlando’s welcoming approach to immigration and

multiculturalism can be seen in his office. It boasts a 200-year-old, coffee table-sized Quran, gifted to the city by the Aga Khan Foundation.

One wonders if Orlando has ever been tempted to read the Qur'an. For if he did, he might be less sanguine about Muslim migrants. He might discover those 109 verses that command Muslims to wage violent Jihad against non-Muslims, to "fight" and to "kill," to "strike at the necks" and to "sow terror in the hearts of" non-Muslims. He might discover the verses in which Muslims are told they are "the best of peoples" and that non-Muslims are "the most vile of created beings." Perhaps Orlando suspects, and doesn't want to know what he would find were he to read the Qur'an; it would only disturb his equanimity.

"Arabic and French pamphlets on migrant rights sit neatly stacked to the side of his desk.

"When someone asks how many immigrants are in Palermo, I don't respond 100,000 or 120,000," Orlando explains. "I say none because the people in Palermo are Palermitans. The mayor of Palermo does not make a differentiation between those who were born in Palermo and those who live in Palermo."

So just like that, the leftist mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, who has that kind of *buonismo* about Islam that so infuriated Oriana Fallaci, erases with a rhetorical flourish the distinction between those who are born in Palermo, and likely come from families that have lived in Palermo for generations, and those migrants who just arrived yesterday, having a different language and customs, misogynistic views of women, an inculcated contempt and hostility for all those who do not share their faith. For these economic migrants bring with them, undeclared in their mental baggage, the ideology of

Islam. But for Leoluca Orlando history and ideology do not matter. Like Pope Francis, Leoluca Orlando doesn't believe that Europeans have a right to keep out those who wish to settle among them, no matter how unstable or threatening they appear to be. Orlando does not think Europe – Italy, Sicily, Palermo – has a right to preserve its own culture, customs, beliefs. For Mayor Orlando, the minute a migrant settles in Palermo, he becomes just as much a Palermitano as someone whose family has been in the city for hundreds of years.

“Orlando links his perspective on immigration and his policy to the city’s culture and history.”

His perspective on immigration should not be attributed to his city’s “culture and history.” His is the standard view of the European left. Migrants, all migrants (but especially those from the favored non-white and Muslim peoples), have a right to settle wherever they want in Europe, and no matter what the indigenous population may think. Diversity is an unalloyed good. Too great an attachment by Europeans to their own nation and culture is to be discouraged as reactionary, ‘islamophobic’. The only acceptable culture is that of multiculturalism.

“In the south of Italy, in particular, we are not European, I’m sorry but Palermo is not Frankfurt or Berlin” claims Mayor Orlando.

Comment:

Of course Palermo is not Frankfurt or Berlin. But just because Palermo is a far cry from those efficient, well-organized, business-like German cities, this does not make Palermitans “not European.” That would make as little sense as claiming that people in New Orleans or Biloxi are “not American”

because of their slower pace of life, their southern drawl, their laid-back lassitude. By dint of their shared ethnicity, language, laws, customs, history, and especially, by their shared religion, Sicilians are Italians, and Italians are Europeans just as much as people in Frankfurt or Berlin.

Again, Leoluca Orlando:

“Palermo isn’t Paris ... Palermo is Beirut, Palermo is Istanbul, Palermo is Jerusalem, Palermo is Tripoli. Palermo is a Middle Eastern city in Europe. The Mediterranean isn’t a sea, it’s a continent. We have a Mediterranean identity that is multicultural.”

Comment:

Leoluca Orlando seems to relish the idea that Palermo has become one more Middle Eastern city, akin to Beirut, Istanbul, Tripoli [Jerusalem, which he also names, is –thanks to its majority Jewish population – a European rather than a Middle Eastern city]. Can 20,000 Muslims [out of 25,000 migrants] in Palermo, which has 700,000 inhabitants (and nearly 900,000 if outlying districts are included), really transform the city into Beirut or Tripoli? Of course not. But what astonishes, is Orlando’s attitude, which is one of pleasure at the idea that his city might be becoming “Beirut, Istanbul, Tripoli.” What should horrify him ostensibly fills him with delight – or is this delight feigned, because he doesn’t know how else to respond?

“For people like Masur [a Muslim in Palermo, who came from Bangladesh] this multicultural identity has helped him feel not just tolerated, but accepted.” “I feel at home now,” he says. “If I go somewhere else in Italy, like Venice or Milan, I say ‘no,’ I want to go back home to my Palermo.”

But surveys reveal that Muslims living in Italy feel less attached to their country than in any other EU country. Asked

to rank their attachment on a five-point scale, the average score in Italy was 3.3, the lowest of the 15 countries surveyed. Apparently a great many Muslims do not “feel at home” in Italy, though of course these economic migrants are happy to pocket the many benefits that the generous Italian state provides, including free or subsidized housing, free medical care, free education, family allowances, and unemployment benefits even without the need for recipients to have been previously employed .

Many Sicilians do not share Mayor Orlando’s delight with Muslim immigrants. Sabina Bonelli, parliamentary candidate for Lega Salvini Premier (the new name of the party headed by Salvini), told CNBC that Sicily had been turned into a “big refugee camp.”

“The Mediterranean was a cradle of culture, trade and tourism but it’s become a place where human traffickers bring lots of people and give them false hope,” she said, adding that Italy needed to regulate migration and a law to block new arrivals.

Leoluca Orlando doesn’t share her dismay:

“Palermo is no longer an Italian town. It is no longer European. You can walk in the city and feel like you’re in Istanbul or Beirut.”

This statement can be read in two ways. It happens to have been said by Leoluca Orlando, for whom these Muslim migrants are a *good thing*. He never tells us exactly what wonderful things these Muslim migrants have brought to Sicily. Not a single benefit to the lives of Sicilians is presented. We are to take it on faith. Perhaps he is unaware of the vast drain on the public treasury of these Muslim migrants, who are in no hurry to find jobs, but glad to live on state support. He may not know that Muslims have taken over much of the drug trade, and prostitution, too, from the Mafia. That’s why the Mafia has been leaving Palermo: the Muslim gangs are too dangerous.

Mention of the Muslim gangs would not fit Orlando's optimistic narrative.

Does Mayor Orlando know that most Sicilians don't want to walk in Palermo to "feel like you're in Istanbul or Beirut." They are no different in their desires from other Europeans. How many English people relish walking in certain parts of their cities – Bradford, Leeds, Manchester, London – and feeling as if they were in Karachi, or Baghdad? How many French people in Paris or Marseille enjoy those neighborhoods that have become versions of Algiers, or Rabat?

Not everyone in Sicily is quite so convinced as Mayor Orlando that Muslim immigration is to be welcomed. Not everyone is so enamored of the "diversity" and "multiculturalism" he celebrates. Matteo Salvini's Lega Salvini and Beppe Grillo's Cinque Stelle, have made electoral gains in Sicily with their anti-immigrant policies, a clear sign of growing disaffection with the welcome extended to Muslim migrants by such mayors as Leoluca Orlando. The next Italian elections will tell us whose version of reality is being accepted by the voters: those who regard the growing Muslim presence with delight, like Mayor Orlando in Palermo, or those who regard it with dread, like Matteo Salvini.

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