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Mosques and the Second Generation: Pathways of Demarginalization in Bologna, Italy

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Abstract

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bologna between 2022 and 2023, including anonymized interviews and participant observation, and examines the role of Islamic religious spaces in fostering civic participation and identity among second-generation Muslims in Italy. Focusing on the experience of the Islamic Community of Bologna—and particularly on the engagement of young Muslims born or raised in the city—the study addresses how mosques, often perceived as marginal or insular, can become spaces of urban integration. The analysis shows that the religiosity expressed by the youth diverges from that of the first generation and serves as a resource for building social capital and legitimising new forms of public citizenship. Particular attention is devoted to the collective experience of the Iftar street, which constitutes a moment of institutional recognition and symbolic co-construction of belonging: no longer “immigrant Muslims,” but “Muslims of Bologna.” In the absence of a national integration model, the article concludes that local dynamics can generate implicit forms of inclusion, enabling new generations to emerge as civic actors capable of redefining the boundaries of urban belonging and articulating a post-ethnic, citizen-oriented Islam.

Keywords: European Islam; Italy; second generations; mosques; citizenship



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1. Introduction: “Becoming Italian” Between Social Exclusion and Religious Congregations

Islam entered the European public sphere when migrant workers began to settle permanently rather than see themselves as temporary (Dassetto and Bastenier 1993).

In European history, the multiplication of mosques¹ followed family reunifications (Kepel 2015): when Islam “comes out of the suitcase,” the foreign worker is seen, by locals, as a Muslim (Allievi 2005). In Italy, immigration from Muslim-majority countries intensified later than in other European contexts, starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, mosques spread rapidly, and national organizations emerged to coordinate and represent the growing number of local associations (Guolo 2004). Mosques thus signal both the beginning of integration and a self-managed tool for meeting specific community needs. Though they involve only a minority of immigrants (Allievi 2003), for many Muslims and their children, it is through the mosque and its surrounding networks that the city is experienced, inhabited, and made meaningful. For some, mosques offer refuge and recognition (Ambrosini et al. 2018); for locals, they can signify change that challenges traditional self-representations (Allievi 2013) and may provoke symbolic conflict: opposing the mosque often means contesting the other’s legitimacy. Yet, as Touraine (Touraine and Wieviorka 1997) reminds us, conflict is intrinsic to democratic societies—it is how actors

emerge and redefine themselves. Many prayer spaces have faced closure or intimidation, confirming the role of religion in drawing symbolic boundaries in Europe (Alba 2005; Foner and Alba 2008). In Italy, Islamic communities face particular precarity due to the lack of recognition under the 1929 law on admitted religions and the *Intesa*². Draft agreements (*intesa*) proposed since 1994 were never accepted by successive governments, leaving Islam without legal status (Ferrari 2013). Without national or local recognition, mosque survival depends on local discretion (Bombardieri 2011; Rhazzali and Equizi 2013).

Beyond legal exclusion from religious freedom, active Muslims may face two additional layers of exclusion from citizenship, understood here both as belonging to the urban community and as membership in the national body of citizens. First, urban exclusion: while prayer spaces once existed in city centers, with mass migration, Islamic places have been pushed to the periphery. In Italy, the city center has strong symbolic value—town squares act as social agoras and spaces of civic expression. First-generation urban Islam is marginalized, ethnically fragmented, and often excluded from civic participation (Conti 2014). Second, under *jus sanguinis*³, children of immigrants may lack citizenship in the country where they grow up, attend school, and share democratic values with peers—without enjoying equal rights and protections. Even when citizenship is acquired, full belonging may remain elusive (Calabretta 2023). Their origins, names, appearance, religion, and disadvantaged social background can hinder recognition as full members of the national “we”.

Given these challenges, classical sociology (Gordon 1964) assumed a linear relationship between the distancing of children of immigrants from their parental cultural heritage and full assimilation, ultimately culminating in civic and identity assimilation. Since the 1990s, this view has been increasingly questioned (Zhou 1997; Rumbaut 1994, 1997), leading to a reevaluation of the potentially positive role of identities and groupings tied to ethnicity or religion. In particular, religious-based organization among immigrants has, under certain conditions, proven to be an effective source of resources to confront socioeconomic, political, cultural, and identity-related challenges (Foner and Alba 2008; Hirschman 2004; Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2014). For instance, articulating an Islamic identity can serve as a way to overcome the dilemma of dual belonging (Acocella and Pepicelli 2018), or as a form of positive identification in response to stigma (Forgia 2025). It may thus become a tool for re-anchoring identity, enabling individuals to transcend ethnic boundaries and construct new forms of citizenship—both locally and transnationally (Dikici 2022). This approach aligns with the idea of *lived citizenship* (Kallio et al. 2020), which understands citizenship as embedded in everyday practices, beyond legal frameworks or national criteria.

In this perspective, Islam and the networks it fosters can be seen as a form of social capital. The concept itself has been widely critiqued (Anthias 2007; Piselli 1999; Portes 1998). In sociological theory, social capital has been defined both as the capacity of social networks to generate social trust and participation (Putnam 2001) and as an individual resource, rooted in one’s social position and relational ties, which may provide access to material or symbolic benefits (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988). These two dimensions are not mutually exclusive: while one stresses trust and civic cooperation, the other highlights the capacity of social relations to produce tangible advantages or mitigate social disadvantage.

Bankston III and Zhou (2002) tested these theoretical perspectives in their study of immigrant students’ educational achievement, demonstrating that social capital cannot be defined *a priori* but only *ex post*, according to its concrete outcomes. They thus propose a descriptive use of the concept, identifying which forms of sociability effectively convey useful resources to individuals or groups.

Subsequent studies, such as García-Muñoz and Neuman (2013) and Dinham et al. (2006), have built on Putnam’s approach to examine religious communities as potential

bridges or barriers to social integration, refining the concept through the categories of bonding (internal cohesion), bridging (connections across communities), and linking (vertical relations with institutions). In this view, religious social capital may simultaneously sustain individual empowerment and collective civiness—or, conversely, fail to generate either—depending on the surrounding context. The analytical framework proposed here, drawing on these approaches, seeks to capture both dimensions of social capital: as a generator of social trust and as a vehicle of resources.

Table 1. Illustration of the functions of social capital adopted in this study.

	Individual Advantage (B)	No Individual Advantage (No-B)
Social trust (A)	A and B	A and No-B
No social trust (No-A)	No-A and B	Non-A and No-B

2. Context and Research Questions

For the past two decades in Italy, various forms of formal and informal collective engagement among children of immigrants have emerged within mosque settings. While religious education remains central, Islamic youth associations have become key spaces for constructing both Muslim and Italian identities—places where young people reflect on their role and place in Italian society (Frisina 2007, 2017; Maddanu 2013). As with their parents, those who attend mosques represent only a portion of the broader group of Muslim children of immigrants in Italy. Yet they form an active minority, playing a leading role in the generational shift underway in many mosques—often located on the urban periphery and excluded from civic life in the cities where these youths were raised. Some attend university in the city center but must travel long distances by bus to reach the mosques in peripheral areas. This is precisely the condition of the so-called “mosque Muslims”—as many of our interviewees identify themselves, distinguishing their experience from peers who prefer non-religious forms of socialization—in Bologna.

Building on literature that explores the social impact of ethnic and religious association in integration processes (Portes and Zhou 1993), this study examines the case of Bologna, which has already been the subject of prior research (Conti 2013, 2014; Riccio and Russo 2009). Bologna, capital of the Emilia-Romagna region, has attracted high numbers of migrants since the 1970s due to strong labor demand, and today hosts one of the highest foreign-born populations in Italy. Here, Islamic communities began forming early, and now we observe the emergence of a second generation that has taken on leadership roles within mosques. This provides a strategic vantage point for analyzing the generational transition within mosques and the evolving role of second-generation Muslims. Notably, the current president of the Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy, the first second-generation Muslim to hold this position—grew up in Bologna’s Islamic community.

Focusing on “mosque Muslims,” the study investigates how mosques shape the experiences of immigrants’ children in the face of double exclusion: exclusion from full civic belonging (“we, the equal citizens”) and exclusion from the urban and civil fabric of the city. Specifically, *the research asks whether participation in mosques and Islamic associations fosters civic integration—and a symbolic return toward the city center—or whether it instead reinforces dynamics of closure*. Similarly, mosque-based socialization may serve as a resource for constructing Muslim identities that are compatible with civic participation, or it may fuel identities perceived as incompatible with the local democratic space. In other words: is being a “mosque Muslim” a barrier or a bridge to civic integration and to challenging both individual and collective marginality? This approach builds upon earlier studies. Building

on Conti's (2013) earlier analysis of the emergence of these processes, the new ethnographic material presented here enables a diachronic understanding of mosque-based participation.

In a first phase, we reconstruct the Bologna case through existing literature and testimonies gathered by key informants during fieldwork. This helps trace the history of Islam's reterritorialization in the city, driven by first-generation immigrants, its pluralization and transformation over time, and its emergence through conflict with institutional and civic actors. In a second phase, we introduce original fieldwork data to examine the rise of second-generation actors within these organizations, the biographical role of the mosque in their lives, and their initiatives in response to the challenges inherited from their parents' generation. Finally, the case of Iftar Street Bologna serves to illustrate how generational change in Italian Islam can transform mosques from symbols of marginality into active players within local civil society. At the same time, it highlights the potential of religious association to function as social capital for second-generation Muslims—enabling the development of both Muslim and civic identities.

3. Methodological Notes

The material analyzed stems from broader fieldwork conducted between September 2022 and May 2023 in four provinces: Mantua, Verona, Trento, and Bologna. In Bologna, data collection was based on participant observation (Beaud and Weber 2010) in mosques and Islamic associations; 5 semi-structured interviews with first- and second-generation mosque leaders; and 23 in-depth, biographical interviews with young people raised and educated in Italy (age 18–37), whose parents immigrated from Muslim-majority countries. The term “second generations” is used here in an inclusive sense, covering both the 2.0 and 1.5 generations according to Rumbaut's (2004) classification. The 23 interviewees (see Table 2) comprise two groups selected according to different sampling criteria. The first and larger group (18 interviews) was selected based on their active participation in religious associations—who were recruited in three mosques selected because they hosted initiatives dedicated to the second generation. Interviewees were affiliated with various Islamic associations active in the city, including GMI (Giovani Musulmani d'Italia), the Young Muslim Organisation, the Strong Believer Academy, and the Islamic Community of Bologna. The second, smaller group (5 interviews) was recruited outside of mosque contexts using a snowball sampling strategy starting from the first group. These participants self-identify as Muslim but are not involved in any form of religious association. They were raised in Italy by immigrant families and primarily served as a control group. The interviewees were selected across the entire province of Bologna—in the city, the suburbs, and the countryside—in line with the typical Italian case (Allievi 2005), where migration does not concentrate in single neighborhoods within densely urbanized areas but is instead distributed throughout the territory, both in urban and rural settings. The collected material was analyzed thematically and complemented with public statements, documents available online and existing literature. In reporting the interviews, I distinguish between *imam* (a figure primarily devoted to ritual functions) and *mosque leader* (a more administrative role). When the interview concerns a first-generation individual, this will be explicitly indicated; when no specification is provided, the reference is to a second-generation participant.

Table 2. Socio-demographic and Educational Profile of the Interview Sample.

Group	Female	Male	MENA	South Asia	Upward-Mobility Education ⁴	Non-Mobility Education
Religiously affiliated	9	9	12	6	15	3
Control group	2	3	2	3	2	3

4. Results

The presentation of the findings of this study, drawing on both existing literature and fieldwork material, is organized around three key areas: the evolution of Islam in Bologna and in Italy, the contribution of the second generation in facing the challenges inherited from their parents, and the experience of the Iftar Street.

4.1. Muslims in Bologna: From Student Islam to Workers' Islam, from the Islam of Fathers to That of Sons and Daughters

Bologna was the focus of a research and social action project led by Bartolomeo Conti between 2013 and 2015. According to Conti, the city represents an ideal-type case of a process common to many Italian cities: “The city’s first Islamic place of worship was opened in the late 1980s by a small group of Middle Eastern university students, who were granted a prayer room by a Catholic association. This small space was located in the city center.” As the demographic shifted from small groups of foreign students to a more diverse wave of mass migration, a growing number of larger, ethnically fragmented Islamic centers emerged on the urban periphery—“not only beyond the old city walls, but literally beyond the city itself, we might say, where no one could see or hear them” (Conti 2013, 47). The first mosque, originally located under Bologna’s iconic “Two Towers” in the city center, now stands over 40 min by bus from its original site. New Islamic communities ended up organizing themselves into cultural associations, renting garages, warehouses, and old storefronts. According to Conti, this shift was driven partly by logistical needs (larger spaces at lower costs) and partly by a strategy of “invisibility”—interpreted at times as separatism, and at other times as an attempt to avoid public stigma. In 2001, the oldest community purchased land to build a new mosque. However, between 2007 and 2008, the project sparked public controversy. The city government and the association failed to reach an agreement, and construction was ultimately denied. According to Conti, the project’s failure reflected mutual distrust: both Italian institutions and Muslim leaders were still unfamiliar with each other. Citizens’ committees and anti-mosque mobilizations—amplified by local and national media—also played a major role, framing the visibility of Islam in public space as an invasion and a threat to the city’s Christian heritage (Allievi 2010; Allievi et al. 2009). As in many Italian cities, the opening and legal recognition of a mosque in Bologna quickly shifted from a matter of religious freedom to a political battleground—often at the expense of a minority population, many of whom still lacked citizenship rights (Allievi 2013). First-generation workers’ Islam remained fragmented along ethnic lines and largely disengaged from civic life, focused primarily on religious services, children’s education, and welcoming newcomer immigrants.

The years of public controversy around mosque construction coincided with the rise of Islamic associations founded by second-generation Muslims. Foremost among them is the *Giovani Musulmani d’Italia* (Young Muslims of Italy, GMI), established in 2001 under the motto “Protagonists, with God’s help.” It is a nonprofit organization aimed at “supporting young Muslims in building an Italian Islamic identity that reconciles faith and national belonging”⁵. GMI emerged from the merger of two youth associations linked to UCOII. It operates through local chapters across Italy, organizing religious training, social events, and discussion spaces for young Muslims raised in Italy. Over time, GMI has also promoted cultural initiatives and advocacy campaigns on issues such as citizenship, racism, and human rights (Frisina 2007, 2017).

Internally, GMI has fostered a leadership that has become established in many Italian mosques, articulating a new way of envisioning Islam’s role in society. GMI members are often university-educated and possess greater cultural and social capital than their parents. On the one hand, many GMI now occupy—or are preparing to occupy—key leadership positions within Islamic associations. On the other hand, GMI has also served as a political

incubator for those who now contribute to democratizing and multiculturalizing Italian public life. Notable examples include S.A.Q., who was the former city councilor in Milan; N.B., the first woman in Italy to obtain the title of *madrassa* (religious guide), a professor at IULM University in Milan, public intellectual and president of the Italian Association of Imams and Religious Guides; K.C., former GMI president, member of parliament for the Democratic Party, and, in 2019, the head of the Grand Mosque of Rome; S.E.S.A., representative of the Italian Islamic Confederation and active in the Democratic Party; R.L., who was the former head of GMI Brescia, now vice-president of the Islamic Center of Brescia and city councilor; N.B., current vice-president of UCOII and the first woman to have led GMI; Y.L., current president of UCOII, a former GMI member who began his activism in Bologna. Second-generation Muslims active in GMI are often among the few who achieve positive visibility in public space, holding positions of responsibility and often collaborating with Catholic organizations. For example, the Italian Episcopal Conference invited the UCOII president to the Vatican upon the death of Pope Francis, and a GMI delegation was also present for the Jubilee of Youth 2025.

The emergence of second-generation Muslims has led to some tensions between immigrant parents, older mosque members, and youth leaders raised in Italy.

Male_32_Bologna_Egypt_GMI: “But this idea of always separating everything between men and women—that’s their thing [referring to the first-generation leaders], it’s cultural. We think it’s much better to do things all together, if that means young people are more willing to come. They grumble, but I say: it’s much better for young people to get to know each other and maybe find a wife here in the mosque, rather than in a bar.”

While generational transitions can sometimes lead to tensions, it is important to stress that in Bologna, this shift has rarely been conflictual. Rather, it appears as an expected and, in some ways, prepared development—one that both sides acknowledge.

Imam_Bangladesh_First Generation: “I often tell young people they can do much more than we ever could. They go to university, they have the chance to do so much—talking with classmates, with institutions. They speak the language well, they know the laws, they know the people here.”

Mosque leader_Syria_First Generation: “Many worshippers are Moroccans who come here to work, and with them it’s difficult because they bring a poor cultural background and ideas that don’t really work here. [...] With the youth, it’s a different story. You need different words to speak to them. They read more, they study more, and many of the issues we face with adults don’t exist with the younger ones. But the challenge is getting young people to come to the mosque. I still have a role as long as the first generation is here, but for those who grew up here, you need leaders who also grew up here.”

This awareness is shared by new leaders as well:

President of UCOII_38_Bologna_Morocco_CIB: “The new generations in Italy’s Islamic communities have more Italian traits—linguistically and culturally. The generational shift, as a transformation of Islam, is a natural process. [...] It’s not a choice; it’s inevitable. We must acknowledge this to avoid internal divisions. [...] I’m part of this ongoing generational renewal. [...] Let’s not forget: this is not a matter of youth versus adults, not a confrontation, but a matter of complementarity. [...] We must not treat young people as incapable children, but give them responsibility; nor should we think adults are too old or outdated to lead the community and ignore their skills. So, what we need is complementarity. But change is certainly coming.”

Driven by young members of local Islamic youth organizations, and in collaboration with the leadership of major Islamic centers, the *Comunità Islamica di Bologna* (CIB) was founded in 2014. Its goal was to coordinate the city’s various prayer rooms and Islamic centers—bridging different expressions of local Islam while also building connections with

public authorities and the wider Bolognese society. According to [Conti \(2013, 2015\)](#), the CIB has stood out since its inception for three main features: (i) the presence of culturally competent actors raised in Italy; (ii) a desire to move beyond the internal distrust and separation typical of the first generation; (iii) a proactive approach aimed at challenging the image of Islam as a social problem and instead presenting Muslims as useful, legitimate, and contributing members of the city. This reactivation took the form of numerous volunteer-led initiatives organized in collaboration with secular and interfaith local associations. From 2015 onward, “open mosque days” were held to invite the general public into Islamic spaces and introduce them to the community’s activists. These events gradually reopened channels of communication with local authorities—also because many CIB members were already involved in cooperatives, secular associations, or, in some cases, local political life, including city council roles.

4.2. Sons and Daughters of the Mosque Between Fragmentation and Marginality

During fieldwork in the spring of 2022, the Comunità Islamica di Bologna (CIB) consisted of around 30 members, including representatives from individual mosques (mainly first-generation immigrants) and board members (mainly Muslims raised in Italy).

Female_27_Tunisia_CIB Member: “The average age of the CIB board is 25; the youngest is 21, and the oldest is 37.”

Male_33_Egypt_CIB Member: “I’m on the board of CIB, which is a legally recognized social promotion association. Within CIB, we coordinate the Islamic communities of Bologna. We promote dialogue, inclusion, and integration events. . . and we also represent the Muslim community at the institutional level. [. . .] Most of the CIB board members are young people raised in Bologna.”

Male_37_Bangladesh_CIB: “As CIB, we try to organize events that open our doors to the broader public. [. . .] The goal is to bring us closer to the wider citizenry—to let us Muslims speak for ourselves, instead of being portrayed by the media or letting others define who we are or what we do. You want to know who the Muslims of Bologna are? Come and meet us.”

Bringing together delegates from around 15 mosques, the association works to foster dialogue between the city and its Muslim communities. It does so by leveraging the cultural and social skills of the most integrated and active members, helping to overcome a religious identity based on affiliation with a single mosque or ethnic community. This enables forms of cooperation and synergy that were unimaginable for the first generation—if only for linguistic reasons.

Male_37_Bangladesh_CIB: “Islam from the Indian subcontinent has a tendency toward self-ghettoization—we struggle to open up and integrate into society. But we’re trying to fix this, because unlike our parents, we’re finally able to communicate with Muslims from all over the world here in Italy. And those of us who grew up in Bologna, we don’t have the same doubts about ‘being Italian or not’ as the previous generation. For us, it’s clear that our lives and investments are here, in Italy—or at most in Europe. So everyone wants to build something here, regardless of our parents’ origins.”

Male_33_Egypt_CIB Member: “Since 10 out of the 15 mosques are run by Bangladeshis or Pakistanis, the language barrier is important. They often communicate in their own language, or with just enough Italian to get by. But with their children that barrier disappears, because we share Italian as a common language. [. . .] In GMI, groups are usually mixed, and that helps us all communicate more easily. [. . .] It’s hard to get in touch with first-generation Bangladeshis or Pakistanis—they’re very closed off, very distrustful. If you don’t have someone they trust, they won’t open up. I can connect you with a second-generation guy, he’s Bangladeshi, speaks perfect Italian, and is part of CIB. Thanks to him,

I'm able to communicate with the older generation. During meetings, when the elders don't understand, he translates. He's the key to creating dialogue among Bologna's Muslim communities. [...] The Muslim community is incredibly complex: it brings together many cultures, nationalities, and differences, and it spends a lot of energy just trying to resolve its own internal tensions. The Italian state still hasn't grasped this—they treat us like all Muslims are the same. But I'm Egyptian, and I feel closer to an Italian than to a Pakistani."

Male_27_Egypt_GMI: "The Bangladeshis open mosques so they can pray in their own language. [...] But that creates a certain level of closure. For example, they give the sermon in their own language, not in Arabic, Italian, or even English. I couldn't go there—I wouldn't understand a thing. We young people don't go to those mosques. We gather among ourselves."

The case of Bologna confirms the insights of early Italian research into the specific features of immigration in Italy (Allievi 2005): the ethnic and religious heterogeneity of immigrant populations, along with their distribution across both urban and rural areas, has largely prevented the formation of religiously or ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods. Even in areas with a high concentration of immigrants, diversity remains the norm. For Islamic communities to establish meaningful connections with one another, it has taken a generation of Muslims socially integrated into Italian society. This generational shift is particularly evident in how young leaders from GMI and CIB envision a future mosque for the city—not as one mosque per ethnic group, but as a mosque for all Muslims in Bologna, a space that would allow them to feel "like everyone else."

Female_27_Tunisia_CIB Member: "What we need is a central point for the whole community. The problem is that, say, a Bangladeshi person doesn't mix with Arabs or Pakistanis, so there's a small mosque just for Bangladeshis, and no Arabs go there. But that doesn't work for me. We need one place, central, open to all the Muslims in Bologna... a place known for being open to everyone—not just for Pakistanis, not just for Bangladeshis, not just for Arabic speakers. A visible, unifying space for all Muslims in Bologna. One that replaces those dark, hidden basements. I want to see white and Black, African and Asian, all praying together."

Male_33_Egypt_CIB: "I want to work so that my children can grow up in a better religious environment than I did—so they don't have to hide away in a smelly garage to pray. [...] I want to be able to pick up my son from school and take him to the mosque—downtown, where we live—not to some garage on the outskirts. Just like everyone else who can leave school and walk into any of Bologna's churches. Beautiful, dignified churches. I want a mosque as beautiful as the churches in Bologna."

For this new active Muslim minority, Islam and Islamic association life offer a way to move beyond the ethnically-defined identities and networks of their parents. Through Islam, the self-perception shifts from being "a Moroccan" to being "a Muslim from Bologna." At the same time, this heritage is not viewed as something to be passively reproduced, but rather as a challenge: to redefine the public image of Muslims and to present themselves as a resource, not a burden.

President of UCOII_38_Morocco: "The Islamic community wants to grow in quality and take on a proactive role in European and Italian society. We are active, we don't want to be communities seen as a burden by the state, as a cost, a loss on the balance sheet. We want Muslims to be seen as contributors and supporters. This is possible through the emergence of the Islamic community via the new generations. And when that happens, it helps young Muslims feel part of Italian society at every level."

Female_24_Tunisia_GMI: "In the end, this is our city. What's good for Bologna is good for all of us—our children will be citizens of this city."

Female_21_Morocco_GMI: “I chose to study political science for this reason. Having lived in this situation my whole life, I wanted to contribute to changing things. Because I am Italian—I grew up in Italy and I feel Italian. But I also have a heritage from another country, and I believe in my right to live that identity with dignity in my city.”

The creation of a representative body for the interests of Muslims is therefore not motivated by a desire to separate from the rest of the civic community, but by the opposite: the desire to build unity in order to better participate in public life and to challenge the condition of marginality. The demand is not for special treatment as Muslims, but for the right to participate in the city with equal dignity and on the same terms as everyone else (Dazey 2021, 2024; Fregosi 2009).

4.3. *Emerging as a Positive Social Actor*

A central—though not exclusive—role in the life of the Comunità Islamica di Bologna (CIB) is played by the oldest association in the city, originally located beneath Bologna’s Two Towers (which we will refer to as the “Mosque of the Towers”). In addition to providing social and religious support for immigrant families, the Mosque of the Towers has become remarkably active in collaborations with local institutions and non-Muslim associations. The association runs an after-school program staffed by 12 adults—educators, teachers, and volunteers—who manage classes of up to 25 children each. This program operates in partnership with local public schools and is open to all neighborhood children, including those from non-Muslim families. Over the years, the mosque has sat alongside other associations and cooperatives at a community table aimed at coordinating neighborhood initiatives. It also hosts a facility for the homeless and offers multiple services for asylum seekers and refugees. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Islamic center launched a blood donation campaign involving many Muslims from the community, and young members of the mosque were among the local volunteer groups that delivered food and essential goods door to door during lockdown. Together with other neighborhood associations, the mosque won a municipal grant competition with a project aimed at improving green spaces and installing nighttime lighting to enhance safety and livability. As this area is particularly neglected and home to many non-Muslim families as well, the mosque youth’s efforts to improve their local environment have produced broader benefits for the surrounding community.

The CIB has also offered the city valuable competencies that are increasingly relevant in a multicultural and multireligious society. On 26 February 2023, a migrant boat sank near Cutro, killing 94 people, mostly from Muslim-majority countries. The CIB, having secured cemetery space, organized Islamic burials. At the March 10 funerals, it ensured rites were respected, enabling Bologna’s mayor to showcase the city as a model of inclusion. Being viewed as a municipal partner in addressing social issues has yielded tangible results.

Female_27_Tunisia_CIB: “They reach out to us for meetings, they ask for advice, they invite us into schools. . . Y. [Editor’s note: referring to the president of UCOII] is friends with the mayor—they even go out to dinner together. That makes me feel things have changed. The Italy my father told me about in the 1990s was much more racist. I got involved in activism because I personally had a very hard time being accepted. And I wanted to work to change that.”

Here, as in previous interviews, the role of mosques clearly emerges as a vehicle through which to articulate aspirations of participation, contestation, and both personal and collective fulfilment. Sometimes it is not CIB itself offering official guidance, but rather its individual members who collaborate with local associations and cooperatives. These collaborations go beyond religious initiatives: they build bridges through people who are

doubly competent—familiar with Italian society, but also intimately aware of the specific dynamics that only those raised in Italy with a migration background can truly understand.

Female_27_Tunisia_CIB: “For the past few years, I’ve worked as an educator in a cooperative that supports migrants. And there’s a real need for people who understand both sides of the Mediterranean.”

Finally, faith-based activism can become, for some, an opportunity to speak for themselves. Members of GMI and CIB are frequently invited to public events, both as community representatives and as active citizens. In such contexts, the so-called “mosque Muslims” have the opportunity to speak publicly beyond the ethnic and religious network, to raise social concerns, articulate demands, and most importantly, to self-define—adding a Muslim voice from within to the dominant discourse about Muslims produced by the majority society. Members of CIB, like those of GMI, are mostly young people engaged in university-level education and therefore undergoing upward social mobility. They present a profile that diverges both from media representations and from the more socially marginalized profiles typical of the first generation.

4.4. *Iftar Street: A Return Towards the City Center*

The needs, skills, and aspirations of the new generations, combined with a local administration capable of welcoming, publicly recognizing, and investing in this emerging actor, have led to—and are manifested in—initiatives such as the Iftar Street.

Man_33_Egypt_CIB: “Iftar is the moment in the day during Ramadan when the fast is broken. It’s a moment of celebration. We have always organized iftar at the mosque [...] In 2017, we thought instead of doing one single iftar with all the mosques of all nationalities, and to do it in the street, open to anyone who wanted to come. [...] A huge job, we convinced the mosque leaders, we held meetings with the municipality. Each mosque took care of a part, we all contributed financially.”

The first edition of Bologna’s Iftar Street took place in 2017. For one day, the associations managing peripheral mosques—mostly unknown to the majority of the public—took their place in the public square, legitimized by the city’s main secular and religious authorities. The first Bologna Iftar Street was organized through the collaboration between the Municipality of Bologna and the CIB, and, as can be seen from the many videos available online⁶, the event was open to and attended also by non-Muslim citizens. Public proclamations from institutional actors often give a fictitious or idealized image of reality. However, they are useful for understanding the political line adopted, and the symbolic boundaries they intend to present, recognize, and legitimize. Both during the 2023 edition—attended in person during fieldwork—and in the videos of all previous iftars since 2017, the mayor and the bishop repeatedly deliver the same message, using different semantics, built around the idea that the Islamic community is part of the future of Bologna’s citizenry. During the second edition in 2018, then-mayor Merola, on the stage of the event, facing a mixed table of Muslims and non-Muslims, in front of cameras and journalists, declared: “We are all citizens of Bologna, and together we are improving this city, and our children will build a better future, together [...] your faith too includes the idea of sitting together at the table, conviviality and mutual understanding—this is also the history of Bologna”. Matteo Zuppi, Cardinal and Archbishop of Bologna, also on stage, said: “I believe God is happy, the one God... the God of Abraham is happy because His children are together. To respect God is to respect man; whoever loves God learns to love others. This is also our history.”

In 2023, the Iftar Street held for the first time in Piazza Lucio Dalla. On stage, before the muezzin’s call marked the end of the fast, speeches were given by the president of UCOII, Matteo Lepore (Mayor of Bologna), the Vice President of the Region Irene Priolo, Archbishop Matteo Zuppi, and also the former President of the European Commission

Romano Prodi. Lepore opened the event stating: “I’m proud that you are increasingly contributing to our community [...] this is not a festival of the Muslims, this is a festival of the Muslims of Bologna.” He was followed by Irene Priolo, Vice President of the Region: “This is a picture of our future—you are an integral part of the future of our country and our region, you are the most vibrant part and can represent a fundamental component of our community.”

Iftar officially began at 19:42. The muezzin called, and about 100 volunteers began distributing meals—donated by four restaurateurs of Pakistani origin—to around 2500 attendees. There was music, and at the long tables, men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, sat side by side. Some wore traditional dress, others Western clothing. A prayer area was set up where men prayed in front and women behind, all on the same carpet, just a few meters from the tables. The workforce is composed of GMI volunteers, who had been holding regular meetings for months. Volunteers came from across Italy. Some traveled many hours by train to experience something that, as one staff member put it, “in Genoa, I think it’ll take years before we see something like this.” The Bologna Iftar is especially awaited by Muslims who grew up in its mosques, who see in this event the realization of a religiosity that reflects their own—different from that of their parents and from the prejudice they face daily.

Female_21_Morocco_GMI: “The idea they have [Editor’s note: referring to her father’s generation] of Italy is something they’ve built up in their heads. But there’s nothing to be afraid of in Italy—if you don’t try to do things, if you don’t leave the house, you can’t teach your children how to go out into the world. It all depends on us, on how we engage with the country we live in. Italy could be the most open country in the world, but if we don’t open up, it’s useless. [...] The Islam of people like me is reflected in things like the Iftar Street—there we were open to the public, anyone who wanted to come and see what we do could come and listen to what is sacred to us, eat with us, see young Muslims working hard as volunteers. If we did more things like this, Italians could understand us better [...] Showing others that we’re not doing anything wrong is important—today people need to know who we are. To me, there’s nothing more Muslim than showing others the beauty of our sacred month.”

These statements gain weight considering that the *Iftar Street* initiative was contested—not only by non-Muslims, as public expressions of Islam in urban spaces have often drawn criticism from local authorities and segments of the wider citizenry (Allievi 2013; Conti 2013), but also by some first-generation mosque leaders. In their view, public engagement during the sacred month represented an improper mixture of faith and politics⁷. This perspective reflected an understanding of Islam that seeks to preserve its moral integrity by maintaining separation from the wider society—an Islam that defines its authenticity through distance from the non-Muslim environment. Such criticism reveals that Muslim communities in Bologna are far from monolithic: initiatives like *Iftar Street* do not speak for an entire community but rather express the effort of a younger generation to experiment with new forms of visibility and civic participation despite the reticence of some of their elders.

This event also carries a significant practical value: it fosters communication between the Islamic community, institutions, and the city, while allowing young Muslims to shed marginalization. Socialization in these spaces supports the feeling of being full and legitimate citizens, with the right and the power to occupy the democratic public space of the city in which they grew up. We find the image of oneself as someone entitled to aspire to a meaningful role in the society they live in, equal to that of their native peers. A Muslim, citizen like any other.

Female_24_Tunisia_GMI: “To organize Iftar Street we went to the Municipality of Bologna, we asked, and they said yes. We didn’t encounter any obstacles. If we wanted

to organize another event like this, in my opinion we could do it. [...] There are no more obstacles now [...] Of course, it's important that others, other GMI groups, do what we did, because step by step, things can change."

A young person who today joins religious gatherings in any of the mosques studied would find themselves embedded in a network of ties and connections—"bridging" ethnically different forms of Islam, secular or interfaith associations, "linking" with local institutions and their representatives. This might be conceived as a form of social capital for the individual that is simultaneously a resource for the community—but also an example of strong ties that open both horizontally and vertically toward broader citizenry. Faced with a general climate of suspicion and conflict towards Muslims and visible Islam, the case of Bologna should be understood as an outlier, which may nonetheless be considered a pioneering prototype of a near future.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study has explored the figure of the "mosque Muslims" and the role of religious aggregation for the children of Muslim immigrants in Italy in relation to the dual exclusion—both civic and social—analyzed here. And in some ways, even towards exclusion from the right to freedom and religious equality. The findings of this research do not concern the Muslim population in Italy as a whole, but rather the specific contribution of organized Islam for the minority that actively participates in it. The collected data suggest that attending mosques and Islamic associations does not necessarily imply a dynamic of isolation or separation. On the contrary, under certain conditions, these settings may act as a form of social and cultural capital for assimilation. On the one hand, they provide spaces for social emergence and urban visibility, through which members of the community position themselves as active and contributing agents within the local fabric. On the other, they function as sites of religious reinvention, where Islam is reinterpreted through a civic lens, in a tension between continuity and adaptation (Yang and Ebaugh 2001). This combination of a strong sense of religious belonging and the internalization of civic membership can be regarded as a form of selective acculturation (Portes and Zhou 1993). In other words, for some youth, becoming "mosque Muslims" can represent a concrete way of becoming Italian, through religion (Hirschman 2004; Kurien 1998). The dual identification of Bologna's Muslims—by local authorities and by Muslim actors themselves—can be considered a form of civic and identity assimilation (Gordon 1964), which does not occur through the abandonment of religion, but rather through its opposite (Portes and Zhou 1993). In this sense, assimilation should not be understood as homogenization into a majority group conceived as static and unchanging. Rather, it should be seen as integrated participation in the inevitable social transformation and in the redefinition of its categories of self-representation (Alba 2005). Furthermore, the case of Bologna shows how generational turnover within mosques can facilitate a return to the city center—both symbolically and politically. The new Muslim generation, no longer accepts the condition of passive otherness and emancipates itself from ethnic fragmentation, paving the way for a post-ethnic and post-migratory Islam "of Bologna", thereby driving the transition from immigrant communities to an urban religious minority (Conti 2014). These findings suggest that cases of separatism and incompatibility in Islamic communities have less to do with Islam itself as a religion, and are more attributable to the typical limitations of first-generation migrants and the complex interplay of gazes and representations between natives and non-natives (Conti 2014).

The Iftar Street initiative, now increasingly widespread in various Italian cities (like Verona or Milan), represents a moment of positive visibility and signals a possible turning point. This type of experimentation may be regarded as a model of local solution to a national problem, where the absence of national recognition and clear integration policies has been compensated by local initiative and by spontaneously generated forms of social

capital, thereby confirming the specific character of the Italian “model without a model” of multiculturalism (Allievi 2010), based on implicit dynamics of inclusion (Ambrosini and Molina 2004). With the emergence of second generations and the definitive settlement of Islam in the public sphere, Italy is facing—and will continue to face—two major challenges. First, in the context of religious pluralism, any public authority that wishes to remain within a democratic framework must act as both arbitrator and interlocutor of primary socialization agencies in order to ensure equal access to representation, rights, and duties for all citizens (Milot et al. 2010), while also recognizing the contribution these agencies—albeit in a religious language (Habermas 2008)—may offer. Second, the challenge of the present concerns the expansion of the boundaries of the civic “we” (Alba 2005), which depends on the majority population’s ability to rearticulate its own identity references.

Suggestions and Hypothesis for Future Research

This research opens two possible hypotheses: either the dominant European narrative misreads Islam by ignoring the civic role of mosques, or Italy may represent an exception.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: In the French doctoral system, this corresponds to the standard procedure: the ethical evaluation of doctoral fieldwork is carried out by the supervisor together with the CST, which has annually reviewed and approved the progress of my project, including its ethical aspects. To approve this, the author provided the following documents: 1. A signed statement from his thesis supervisor, Prof. Philippe Portier, certifying that the ethical procedures at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) are based on the review and approval of both the supervisor and the Comité de Suivi de Thèse (CST). 2. A signed letter from the head of the Comité de Suivi de Thèse confirming that his research project has been positively evaluated and that the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki were duly taken into account.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was waived due to the adoption of oral consent. The reason lies in the specific methodology of ethnography. In such research contexts, ensuring a high level of informality during interviews is essential for data quality. This choice was made in agreement with the author’s supervisor and is consistent with common practice in doctoral ethnographic research within the author’s institution.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CIB	Comunità Islamica di Bologna
GMI	Giovani Musulmani d’Italia
UCOII	Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia

Notes

- ¹ The concept of “mosque” in diaspora contexts is not clear-cut. In Italy, Islamic spaces often emerge from small immigrant groups, self-organized to meet religious and social needs. Some are ethnically homogeneous; others are mixed, including converts. Initiatives may be spontaneous or tied to transnational networks. Most lack official recognition as places of worship, and—apart from the Islamic Centre of Rome—managing associations do not have religious legal status. This reflects Italy’s secular framework and creates legal and social insecurity (Rhazzali and Equizi 2013; Bombardieri 2011). We specify whether each site is an Islamic

center or prayer room, and its ethnic makeup. More broadly, we follow an inclusive definition: “all places open to worshippers where prayer is held regularly are considered mosques” (Allievi et al. 2009, p. 17).

- 2 The intesa is a specific agreement between the State and a religious denomination. Under Italy’s concordatary model of secularism, the right to religious freedom is only partially governed by general laws. Certain protections and recognitions depend on obtaining such an agreement, which some religions have and others do not—thus risking the transformation of a fundamental right into a privilege for a few.
- 3 A principle governing access to Italian citizenship. It prioritizes descent—being born to Italian citizens—over place of birth or residence, making it extremely difficult even for those born and raised in Italy to obtain it.
- 4 With the terms upward mobility or non-mobility we refer to the type of educational pathway followed. The first category includes those who attended a good high school high school track leading to higher education (liceo or technical institute), those currently enrolled in university, and graduates. The second category includes those who attended vocational high schools, school dropouts, and those not enrolled in university.
- 5 The text is taken from the association’s self-presentation on the National Youth Council portal, which brings together dozens of secular, religious, and political youth associations. <https://consigionazionalegiovani.it/associazione/giovani-musulmani-ditalia/> (accessed on 14 August 2025).
- 6 The numerous videos of the events were made by GMI volunteers and are available on the CIB page: <https://comunitaislamica-bo.it/news/iftar-street/> (accessed on 14 August 2025).
- 7 “The Iftar Street, what they do. . . This month is the month of Ramadan, during which we fast—not only from food, but also by refraining from coarse speech or bad actions. We perform the five daily prayers and additional ones. Our culture teaches us to feed the poor, but going to the public square and spending five or seven hours organising such an event means drifting away from the remembrance of Allah. We should help the poor and give them food; instead, they feed people who are not poor, and that does not bring us closer to God. What they do is political. The Prophet teaches us to lower our gaze when a woman who is neither our wife, sister, nor daughter passes before us. Here, in European culture, women are not properly covered, so when one looks at a woman, the fasting loses its meaning. We have many disagreements with the CIB. We organise something here at the mosque, distributing dates and milk to those who wish to break the fast here. But nothing organised, be-cause people need time to remember the Prophet. The iftar is a Muslim feast, not a political one.”

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