

# Italy strengthens state in wake of Charlie Hebdo attack

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13 January 2015

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack in Paris, Italy has been strengthening its state apparatus and restricting civil liberties. In addition, anti-immigrant chauvinism is on the rise.

Immediately after the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, the police presence at airports, in front of embassies, at state buildings, newspaper offices and public squares was increased by tens of thousands of security forces. According to Interior Minister Angelino Alfano (New Centre Right, NCD), no one could rule out, “that dramatic acts take place in Italy.”

Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (Democratic Party, PD), rushed with Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni (PD) and Alfano to Paris to participate in the EU security conference, including discussions with dozens of other heads of state and former general and CIA director Michael Hayden.

Alfano reported from Brussels that there was to be a European-wide agreement on sharing passenger information. Airline companies would be compelled to hold data on their passengers for up to five years.

Directly after the terrorist attack, the Italian interior minister announced a strengthening of the country’s anti-terror laws. In an interview with the television channel Raitre, Alfano said he would present a draft bill to the council of ministers that would allow the police to confiscate the passport of any terrorist suspect.

In addition, he would grant the police emergency powers to expand Internet surveillance. The government was planning to shut down suspect web sites. In the future, providers would have to cooperate with efforts to “detect messages online that contribute to radicalisation,” Alfano said. Providers would be “banned under threat of criminal prosecution from accepting web sites that agitate for terrorist behaviour”.

Alfano is clearly seizing the moment to implement

plans that have been ready for some time. He held the post of justice minister under the government of Silvio Berlusconi, but now he is the deputy leader in a coalition headed by Renzi and the PD, which officially belongs to the centre-left camp. This coalition is now implementing the long-planned police state measures.

Alfano declared “the entire West” is under attack, and Italy is at risk “because we have the Pope in this country and because we are allies of the United States.” Behind this formulation he conceals the country’s close military cooperation with Washington. In August 2014, Italy supplied weapons and munitions to the Peshmerga militias, and supports the war in Syria and Iraq.

Restrictions of civil liberties go hand in hand with rising right-wing populism and anti-immigrant chauvinism. The parliamentary debate on Friday was dominated by figures from Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, the Lega Nord and Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement. Attacking the government from the right, they demanded a more decisive and rapid police state build-up and an intensified struggle against uncontrolled immigration.

Paolo Grimaldi from the Lega Nord criticised how, on the one hand, terrorist suspects were to have their passports confiscated, but, on the other hand, navy ships were being sent to bring thousands to Italy who didn’t even have passports. This represented an open call to allow migrants to drown in the Mediterranean.

Members of Grillo’s movement also declared in parliament that the government’s measures were inadequate, and called for an increase in the security budget.

Roberto Calderoli of the Lega Nord adopted the demand of France’s National Front to reintroduce the death penalty, which Italy abolished in 1947. He was supported by the interior minister. Alfano stated,

“Whoever plans such attacks must expect to be killed.”

The right-wing campaign is not only being fostered by the far right and populist politicians, but also by media outlets that were formerly seen as part of the centre-left. A good example of this were comments in *Corriere della Sera* which recalled the anti-Islamic sentiments of Pegida in Germany.

Under the headline “The do-gooders that blind us,” Piero Ostellino complained in *Corriere* about the ignorance of the left. They had failed to understand “that Islam is still stuck in the Middle Ages, and above all that it is incapable of emerging from there.”

Ostellino wrote further, “Whether the do-gooders like it or not, we are different.... We are also better, because we have been practicing the separation of religion and state for several centuries, unlike those who are theocracies and want to stay that way. They want to colonise us and dominate us with the help of that Trojan horse that is called immigration and which we ourselves encourage.”

In another *Corriere* article, Ernesto Galli della Loggia demanded the right to criticise Islam with the justification, “In spite of all good will and constructive speeches, the problem of Islam persists like a rock.” This was “a unity of religion, culture and history that affects approximately one and a half million people and in its entirety proscribes regulations that, and this is the critical point, are incompatible with the rules that exist in practically every other region” etc., etc. (“The European 9/11,” January 8, 2015).

These right-wing diatribes are closely connected with the deepening economic and social crisis in Italy, and are aimed at diverting the growing opposition to unemployment and declining living standards into right-wing, racist channels.

Protests against the social attacks of the Renzi government have sharply increased recently. For example on Thursday, prior to departing for Paris, Renzi was met by two angry protest rallies within a couple of hours during a visit to Bologna. Hundreds demonstrated in front of the University of Bologna for decent-paying jobs, while at a factory called Granarola, the employees launched a two-hour strike during his visit in protest at his Jobs Act labour reform.

Similar protests take place virtually daily. The reason is the mounting economic distress of the working population, which particularly affects the youth and

robs them of any prospects. According to official statistics, 44 percent of young people between 15 and 24—almost every second young person—are out of work.

Since Renzi took over government, employers’ associations have been demanding a much quicker implementation of economic reforms in the interest of big business. Renzi is utilising the Paris attack to integrate a whole layer of former left and radical politicians and journalists into the government’s right-wing policies.

One example is Paolo Gentiloni, the foreign minister. He only assumed this position a few weeks ago, succeeding Federica Mogherini who became the successor to Catherine Ashton at the EU. Gentiloni began his political career as a member of the radical left organisation Democrazia Proletaria, that later became a part of Rifondazione Comunista (Refounded Communism).

Around 2001, he joined Renzi’s party, the bourgeois Catholic La Magherita. This party fused with the successor of the KPI, the Democratic Left, in 2007 to form the PD. In the Magherita faction, which has determined policy within the PD for some time, Gentiloni was a key follower of Renzi.

Gentiloni said on Thursday, after the attack in Paris, that one had to “move with full force” against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and that “our problems cannot be resolved by not intervening.” In the same interview, Gentiloni boasted that Italian soldiers had been present in the Middle East for some time. Although they did not have their own mandate to fight, but would help the Kurds “in a thousand ways.”



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