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## MEDITERRANEAN “SOLIDARITY”

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the peculiar convergence of interests, as well as the underlying motives, that engendered the recent partnership initiative between an Italian neo-fascist movement, CasaPound, and the notorious Lebanese terrorist organization, Hezbollah. In order to bring light into a rather obscure niche of the academic research, we will first introduce the ideological drivers that underpinned the dialectic relationship that the Italian radical right maintained with the so-called ‘Resistance Camp’ throughout the entire Second World War’s aftermath, never succeeding, however, in materializing a cooperation on the operational level. The central part of this work focuses on CasaPound’s organizational dimension, providing the reader with the essential insights concerning this neo-fascist group, necessary to put the partnership enterprise into the right perspective. The ensuing section deals with CasaPound’s international operations, with a special emphasis on the Syrian arena. This author believes, indeed, that the civil war situation in Syria, along with its dramatic international ramifications, functioned as a catalyst for translating an arid ideological affinity into actual operational collaboration. The two conclusive sections present an in-depth analysis of the conference ‘Mediterraneo Solidale’, – which took place in Rome on September 26, 2015, under CasaPound’s lead and saw the participation of two eminent figures of Hezbollah’s Political Council – as well as an attempt to explicate the mutual benefits that this sort of partnership might entail for the two players.

\* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

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## BACKGROUND

A low-intensity interplay between the Italian neo-fascist galaxy and Middle Eastern terrorist organizations, – especially in their nationalist Palestinian declination – despite following a fluctuating trend dependent upon particular historical junctures, has represented a constant throughout the entire post-Second World War period.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, until recently, it had never exceeded the magnitude of expressing ideological affinity or displaying political solidarity vis-à-vis a struggle against an enemy regarded as mutual, namely a world order based on American capitalistic imperialism, allegedly created and dominated by the Jewish-Zionist financial lobby.

In Italy, as far as the predominant neo-fascist Weltanschauung during the World War II's aftermath was concerned, this imperialistic scheme primarily translated into a sizable presence of American military bases and personnel scattered throughout the entire Peninsula, into an intense American interference in the Italian domestic affairs through its alleged institutional proxies<sup>2</sup> and, even more distressingly for the neo-fascist ideologues and militants, into a profound societal shift towards mass consumerism. The recourse to a terrorist strategy became the neo-fascist organizations' weapon of choice in order to bring about political change.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, Palestinian terrorist organizations, mostly driven by nationalistic aspirations of self-determination, decided to deploy an analogous strategy to confront what they considered to be the very incarnation of this American-Zionist imperialistic plot, the State of Israel.

In this context, the striking success of the Iranian Khomeinist Revolution was regarded by the various Italian neo-fascist formations as the first 'military' victory over the US-Zionist imperialism, therefore greatly contributing to the global struggle against

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth analysis of this historical interaction see Ely Karmon, *Coalitions between Terrorist Organizations: Revolutionaries, Nationalists, and Islamists* (Leiden, Netherlands, and Boston, MA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2005), Chapter 7.

<sup>2</sup> Especially *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC), the most dominant Italian political party for the first fifty years of Italy's democratic history.

<sup>3</sup> For an account of this historical period see Giorgio Cingolani, *La destra in armi. Neofascisti italiani tra ribellismo ed eversione (1977-1982)* (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1996). See also Franco Ferraresi, ed., *La Destra Radicale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1984).

the common enemy.<sup>4</sup> As implied by numerous neo-fascist publications issued from the late 1980s to the present day, the admiration for this new ‘Resistance Camp’ might have reached greater understanding and materialized some sort of cooperation if the Italian neo-fascist terrorist groups had not been annihilated by the security forces, by the late ‘80s. At the leadership level, however, the Italian neo-fascist constellation maintained close ties with Iran to the present day, mostly cemented by communal anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli sentiments.<sup>5</sup>

This convergence of views about the forces operating in the international arena, as well as the identification of a common enemy, however, never sufficed to generate a tangible cooperation between all these terrorist actors on the operational level. Moreover, notwithstanding the rabid antisemitism and anti-Zionism, which are inherent tenets of the Italian fascist and neo-fascist subculture, these Italian terrorist organizations always refrained from conducting terrorist attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets.<sup>6</sup> Ostensibly, ideology, despite certainly being an enabling variable, must be accompanied by other sorts of incentives in order to transform into cooperation, and in turn into kinetic force. In other words, up to the present time, ideological proximity alone has hardly sufficed in materialize actual partnership between Italian neo-fascist organizations and Middle Eastern terrorist groups and ‘State Sponsors of Terrorism’.<sup>7</sup>

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war, in early 2011, has introduced a completely new dimension to this enduring dialectic relationship between radical elements of the two continents, creating the conditions for a coalescence of the multifaceted European

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, *Terza Posizione* (an extreme-right group founded in Rome in 1978 which rejects both capitalism and socialism, looking instead to find a ‘third position’; its main ideologue was Julius Evola) immediately supported the Islamic Revolution which, as well as being anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist, was perceived as a religious struggle on behalf of an ancient culture and tradition. See the monthly publication ‘Terza Posizione’, January and March 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Karmon, *Coalitions between Terrorist Organizations*, 211.

<sup>6</sup> According to Dr. Ely Karmon (*Ibid.*), «it is clear that the antisemitism that was expressed in Italian radical right-wing publications was not translated into action, *inter alia*, because Italian fascism and the Italian people harbored a traditionally benign attitude towards the Jews».

<sup>7</sup> ‘State Sponsors of Terrorism’ are those states designated by the US Secretary of State for having repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism. Currently there are three countries designated under these authorities: Iran, Sudan, and Syria, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/list/c14151.htm>.

extreme-right constellation behind the pro-Assad banner.<sup>8</sup> This unprecedented alliance between the reactionary forces operating on the European soil – most notably, the British fascist party *BNP*, the German neo-Nazi party *NPD*, the French ultranationalist party *Front National*, the Greek xenophobic party *Golden Dawn*, and the Italian neo-fascist movement *CasaPound Italia* – goes by the name of *European Solidarity Front for Syria*, and was created at the beginning of 2013 in order to coordinate a plethora of initiatives in support for Assad’s regime, throughout entire Europe.<sup>9</sup> Against this backdrop, the Italian neo-fascist movement CasaPound played an instrumental role in the establishment of this transnational extreme-right coalition to support Assad regime’s existential struggle and, in line with this goal, has also entered into direct contact with the Lebanese terrorist organization, Hezbollah.

## CASAPOUND ITALIA<sup>10</sup>

CasaPound is an Italian extra-parliamentary movement whose identity, in the words of its national representative for cultural affairs, Adriano Scianca, is rooted in the Italian fascist tradition and ideology,<sup>11</sup> from which the leadership has surgically selected the components most relevant to the current Italian reality, notably its social doctrine and legislation.<sup>12</sup> As far as CasaPound’s positioning on the political spectrum is concerned, apart from the official rhetoric of alterity vis-à-vis the traditional left-right divide, the organization’s ‘hybrid’ forms of political engagement, which draw both from the radical-

<sup>8</sup> A political contextualization of this European initiative can be found in Maya Shwayder, “Assad’s Unlikely Allies: Who In The West Is Supporting The Maligned Syrian Dictator, And Why,” *International Business Times*, April 20, 2013, <http://www.ibtimes.com/assads-unlikely-allies-who-west-supporting-maligned-syrian-dictator-why-1205445>.

<sup>9</sup> For a complete list of the adherents to this coalition see the official ESFS’s website at <http://www.esfsyria.org>.

<sup>10</sup> For the most comprehensive works on CasaPound to date, see Matteo Antonio Albanese, Giorgia Bulli, Pietro Castelli Gattinara, and Caterina Froio, *Fascisti di un altro millennio? Crisi e partecipazione in CasaPound Italia* (Acireale/Roma: Bonanno Editore, 2014); see also Daniele Di Nunzio and Emanuele Toscano, *Dentro e fuori Casapound. Capire il fascismo del Terzo Millennio* (Rome: Armando Editore, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Adriano Scianca, *Riprendersi Tutto – le parole di CasaPound: 40 concetti per una rivoluzione in atto* (Milan: Società Editrice Barbarossa, 2011), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Of utmost importance with this regard, are two statutes promulgated during the Mussolini’s dictatorship: the 1927 *Carta del Lavoro*, and the 1943 *Manifesto di Verona*. They represent a constant reference point for the group’s ideology and operational activities.

right and from the radical-left repertoire of actions, is rather explicatory of its distance from the traditional party system. Therefore, the group properly identifies itself with the social movements' tradition.

The history of these '*Fascists of the Third Millennium*', as CasaPound's militants like to refer to themselves, begins indeed with one of these unconventional actions, that is, the squatting of an abandoned state-owned building in Rome's Esquilino neighborhood, with the declared intention of allocating it to Italian families in need of a house, on December 26, 2003. Since its very inception, therefore, CasaPound situates the housing-related issues in Italy, and in Rome area in particular, at the epicenter of its ideology and mobilization initiatives. This is well exemplified by the name of the movement itself as well as by its main logo: '*casa*', indeed, is the Italian term for 'house'; whereas '*Pound*' is an explicit reference to the fascist and anti-Semitic American poet Ezra Pound, who in his *The Cantos* elaborates the theory of rent conceived as a usury practice, originating from the distortions of neo-liberal capitalism. The rationale underlying the selection of the turtle as CasaPound's main logo, is that «the turtle is one of the few living beings fortunate enough to always carry with it its own house».<sup>13</sup>

In 2008, following a short period of partnership, CasaPound's charismatic leader Gianluca Iannone<sup>14</sup> decides to divorce from the main neo-fascist Italian party to which the group was affiliated, *Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore* (MS-FT), and to officially register his own movement as an 'organization for social promotion', under the name of *CasaPound Italia*. In the words of Iannone, who has been MS-FT youth organization's leader, the key reason for this departure stems from the inadequacy of the mainstream right-wing Italian parties to address the nation's pressing social issues, in general, and to devote the necessary attention to CasaPound young militants' demand to

<sup>13</sup> Translated from <http://www.casapounditalia.org/p/il-simbolo.html>, under the section 'Il Simbolo'.

<sup>14</sup> Gianluca Iannone (born in 1973) is the historical leader of CasaPound Italia and the voice of the rock band ZetaZeroAlfa. Before this recent experience, he had a long history of militancy in different Italian extreme-right organizations, especially in their youth branches, and has been at the center of several violent actions against political opponents and perceived enemies.

engage in revolutionary forms of political activism, in particular. Nonetheless, CasaPound's real origins must be traced in the socio-cultural breeding ground of the disenfranchised neo-fascist youth of Rome and in their grievances, at the end of the '90s. In order to give a voice to these grievances, the future autocratic leader of CasaPound, Gianluca Iannone, founds the 'identitarian' rock band ZetaZeroAlfa, in 1997. In parallel, the group begins to conduct a series of demonstrative actions – illegal occupations, violent protests, assaults against symbolic targets, violent confrontations with political adversaries – in order to accrue the craved visibility on the national media. The movement also decides to engage in institutional politics, running in the 2012-2013 national and local elections, but achieving particularly unsatisfying results.<sup>15</sup>

CasaPound's ideology directly draws from the Italian fascist tradition and from the post-Second World War neo-fascist experience.<sup>16</sup> The group methodically selected and reinterpreted the most advantageous ideological elements to nowadays' specific Italian context, that is, mainly fascism's 'social doctrine', while marginalizing the most infamous aspects of those historical experiences, such as racism, anti-Semitism, violence, and recourse to terrorism.<sup>17</sup> The most obvious purpose of this pragmatic operation is the elevation of the movement's public image and of the precarious political legitimacy it currently enjoys in the country.

Fascist ideology, therefore, plays a pivotal role in the group's framing and interpretation of the reality and it represents an indispensable model of reference for

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed overview of the 2013 electoral results visit the Italian Ministry of Interior's website at <http://www.interno.gov.it>.

<sup>16</sup> CasaPound's political program, *Una Nazione* ('A Nation'), could be considered its ideological manifesto. It is structured in 18 points which essentially converge on the imperative necessity to regain the national sovereignty that has been surrendered to the 'imperialistic forces', in order to solve the most pressing issues that afflict the nation. Downloadable at <http://94.23.251.8/~casapoun/images/unanazione.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> At the official level, CasaPound explicitly rejects anti-Semitism, condemning Mussolini's racial laws (1938) as a historical 'mistake'. However, behind this façade of political correctness, an analysis of CasaPound's social media supporters' attitudes has clearly demonstrated a deep-rooted inclination toward fervent anti-Semitism, violence, ultra-nationalism, and hatred against the immigrants. For reference, see Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, and Caterina Froio, *Populism in Europe: Casapound* (London, UK: Demos, 2012).

addressing the grave social problems caused by the global financial crisis, in Italy.<sup>18</sup> In this context, CasaPound is successfully harnessing the opportunities that the crisis has offered, in order to justify its role as a ‘social services provider for those Italians in need’ and a force to be reckoned with at the national level, while also reconnecting with fascism’s traditional anti-imperialist and anti-systemic rhetoric. In fact, in the group’s public discourse the crisis is conceived as the direct output of the distortions and paradoxes of neo-liberalist doctrines and practices – intrinsic to the international capitalistic system<sup>19</sup> – which are held responsible for the devastation of the Italian national economy. To overcome this ‘dictatorship of the banks’, CasaPound advocates for a strong state, capable of counterbalance the inequities produced by the market economy, and in turn to restore the sovereignty that the country has ceded to transnational institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the European Union Institutions.<sup>20</sup> Hence, in CasaPound’s ideology, international capitalism has been identified as the public enemy number one, and the call for a restless fight against it has been of paramount importance for the group’s identity-building process, since its very creation.

In order to confront such a mighty enemy CasaPound deploys a repertoire of actions that comprises both a legal/conventional<sup>21</sup> and an illegal/non-conventional<sup>22</sup> array of

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<sup>18</sup> For a detailed analysis of CasaPound’s ideological exploitation of the financial crisis situation, and the group’s crisis-related initiatives see Matteo Antonio Albanese, Pietro Castelli Gattinara, and Caterina Froio, “The appeal of neo-fascism in times of crisis. The experience of CasaPound Italia,” *Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies*, 2 (2013): 234–258.

<sup>19</sup> The international (Jewish-American) plutocracies, in Mussolini’s jargon.

<sup>20</sup> CasaPound’s leaders declare that the movement is pro-European, although endorsing a protectionist and autarchic version of the European Union, in which the ‘corrupted’ supranational financial institutions ought to be totally subordinated to politics.

<sup>21</sup> These mainly include cultural-recreational activities, legislative initiatives, public petitions, participation to local and national elections, press conferences, and pseudo-welfare activities (food distribution, health assistance, legal consultancy, civil protection services).



activities, although utilized in tandem, and covering mainly four macro-thematic areas that are particularly valued in the extreme right's subculture: the question of housing policies; the question of labor-related conditions and workers' rights; the question of fiscal-financial policies; and the question of national sovereignty. It must be stressed that CasaPound reaches peaks of visibility and garners media attention primarily through its non-conventional and violent actions, purposely designed to impress its audiences.

A distinguishing feature of CasaPound is the emphasis it puts on physical confrontation and strategic use of violence, especially in order to garner publicity and to attract new sympathizers and potential members towards its cause. Violence, in the group's perception, is an extremely sensitive issue – notably because of public image management's considerations – and mainly serves two distinct functions, depending on which audience it is targeted to. On one hand, when addressing the external audience, at least according to its official rhetoric, CasaPound outright rejects violence as a means to achieve political goals, justifying it only as a defensive tool whose utilization is contingent upon external threats against the group. Conversely, this rhetorical construction is manifestly contradicted by factual reality, in which the organization is oftentimes the real initiator of severe violent actions. On the other hand, totally in line with the historical fascism and neofascism cult of violence, when it addresses its own constituency CasaPound makes widespread use of violent rhetoric and practices, in order to build and strengthen a collective sense of belonging to the community.<sup>23</sup> This is particularly evident observing CasaPound's recreational gatherings, such the ZetaZeroAlfa's concerts, in which violence works as social aggregator and develops in

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<sup>22</sup> The most publicized of these actions are obviously the squatting of state-owned buildings for housing purposes ('occupazioni a scopo abitativo') and for the creation of right-wing social centers ('occupazioni non conformi'), because of which CasaPound has become notorious nation-wide. However, the group also conducts more violent actions, such as unauthorized demonstrations, physical clashes with political opponents and security forces, assaults against highly symbolic targets, ambushes against perceived enemies, etc. Because of its violent behavior, CasaPound became on several occasions the focus of Parliamentary Interrogations to the Ministry of Interior. See, for instance, [www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/fiano\\_on\\_5-04919.pdf](http://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/fiano_on_5-04919.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Pietro Castelli Gattinara and Caterina Froio, "Discourse and Practice of Violence in the Italian Extreme Right: Frames, Symbols, and Identity-Building in CasaPound Italia," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 8 (2014): 154-170.

the militants a profound sense of comradeship, critical for the movement's cohesiveness. It can be asserted with a sufficient level of confidence that violence, both on its external and internal dimensions, is conceived by CasaPound's leadership and militants as the preferred tactic to engage in the national political arena, to gain media visibility, and to ultimately exert pressure on the Italian public opinion at large.<sup>24</sup>

CasaPound's organizational structure is strictly hierarchical and, in perfect accordance with the fascist tradition, it revolves around its autocratic leader, Gianluca Iannone, its ideologues, and its main headquarters, located within the squatted building of *via Napoleone III n. 8*, in Rome. Iannone is, indeed, the person who appoints each and every national and local office representative, following a meticulous screening process, and takes the most critical decisions for the group.<sup>25</sup> Initially settling in Rome and in the surrounding areas in 2003 CasaPound, in parallel to the broadening of its political initiatives in order to encompass issues of national interest, and thus to enlarge its pool of supporters, has also gradually expanded its physical presence and infrastructure, covering the entire Italian Peninsula. Today, in fact, the organization's local branches have been established virtually in every Italian region.<sup>26</sup> In 2014, CasaPound could count on approximately five-thousands members and hundreds of thousands of sympathizers. It also owned fifteen bookshops, twenty pubs, eight sport associations, a web radio station<sup>27</sup> and a web TV channel.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, it also issues a monthly publication, *L'Occidentale*, a quarterly journal, *Fare Quadrato*, and a very active online newspaper, *Il Primato Nazionale*.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Albanese et al., *Fascisti di un altro millennio?*, 118-122.

<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, information pertaining CasaPound's inner structure has not being made available to the public by the group.

<sup>26</sup> An updated account of CasaPound's local offices' nation-wide distribution can be found on their official website, <http://www.casapounditalia.org/p/tartarughe.html>.

<sup>27</sup> *Radio Bandiera Nera* broadcasts in more than twenty different countries, <http://radiobandieranera.org>.

<sup>28</sup> *Tortuga Web TV*, [http://original.livestream.com/tortuga\\_tv](http://original.livestream.com/tortuga_tv).

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.ilprimatonazionale.it>.

As an integral part of CasaPound's organizational structure we can find its juvenile organization, called *Blocco Studentesco*,<sup>30</sup> which was established in the summer of 2006 and it is currently on the rise among the university students' population and academic institutions, especially in central Italy. Blocco Studentesco, despite being a separate body, fully coordinates with CasaPound's leadership vis-à-vis its policies and their translation into action. Blocco Studentesco primarily operates in universities, but it is also active in high schools and lyceums, and presents itself as an action-oriented and revolutionary movement, whose chief objective is to reinstate the younger generations at the center of the Italian educational system, perceived as obsolete, leftist, and elitist. In line with this objective, it essentially promotes the following agenda: absolute opposition to the ongoing privatization of the educational system, which must be a prerogative of the state only; efficient reinvestment of the university tuitions, in order to provide the students with all the necessary services; revision of the scholarships' assignment system, in order to render them more accessible to a broader student population; an across-the-board enhancement of meritocracy at all levels of formal education; the simplification of the bureaucracy procedures altogether. In parallel to these lawful initiatives, Blocco Studentesco's militants have on several occasions been the protagonists of unconventional actions and episodes of extreme violence such as, for instance, during the Piazza Navona's clashes on October 29, 2008.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the central organization and its juvenile branch, CasaPound created a complex network of satellite entities, with the purpose of running its external relations' activities, which are mainly registered as 'not-for-profit organizations for social utility'<sup>32</sup> because of strategic reasons. This measure, indeed, has been primarily adopted to diversify CasaPound's sources of public funding, namely those considerable funds

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<sup>30</sup> "Students' Block," <http://www.bloccostudentesco.org>.

<sup>31</sup> For an account of the events see [http://www.corriere.it/cronache/08\\_ottobre\\_29/scuola\\_decreto\\_gelmini\\_studenti\\_protesta\\_polizia\\_563a1184-a5a5-11dd-8fd0-00144f02aabc.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/cronache/08_ottobre_29/scuola_decreto_gelmini_studenti_protesta_polizia_563a1184-a5a5-11dd-8fd0-00144f02aabc.shtml).

<sup>32</sup> 'ONLUS' (organizzazione non lucrativa di utilità sociale), in the Italian legal system.

allocated by municipalities and regional administrations for the organization of cultural and social events, while simultaneously distancing these satellite groups from the predominantly negative image and reputation that the central organization currently enjoys.<sup>33</sup> It is also important to underline the fact that, despite CasaPound's leaders proclaim the total separation of these entities from the central organization, an attentive analysis of their leadership, individual members, ideological drivers, and repertoire of activities reveals a perfect correspondence with those of CasaPound 'central'.<sup>34</sup>

The common thread that connects these organizations is their clear international vocation and activism, frequently disguised as humanitarian aid and solidarity toward 'those people fighting for their survival'.<sup>35</sup> As a matter of fact, they essentially function as CasaPound's external relations departments and, as such, they established partnerships with an heterogeneous assemblage of like-minded international actors, which include institutional personalities, extreme right-wing parties, NGOs, but also paramilitary groups, criminal organizations<sup>36</sup> and, as a recent addition, a terrorist organization – i.e. the Lebanese Hezbollah – as well. Interestingly, all of them mainly focus on and launched 'missions' in the same areas of the globe: Myanmar, Kosovo, Palestine-Lebanon, South Africa, and, since 2013, Syria also.

Against this backdrop, today the most active among these CasaPound's 'foreign ministries' is unquestionably *Solidarité Identités*, which, in close cooperation with the *European Solidarity Front for Syria* and Syrian government's officials, has been in first line organizing an endless stream of demonstrations and conferences in favor of the

<sup>33</sup> To have a taste of this Machiavellian system see <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2012/01/13/casa-pound-casa-senza-pound/183703/>. See also Gioele Dax, "Che c'entra la Regione Lazio con Hezbollah e Casapound?" *Popoff*, September 16, 2015, <http://popoffquotidiano.it/2015/09/16/che-centra-la-regione-lazio-con-hezbollah-e-casapound/>.

<sup>34</sup> For instance, the leaders of the most prominent among these organizations, that is, *Solidarité Identités* (Ada Oppedisano), *Popoli* (Franco Nerozzi), *L'Uomo Libero* (Walter Pilo), and *Fronte Europeo per la Siria* (Giovanni Feola), are all notorious members of CasaPound "central" as well.

<sup>35</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/Solidarité-identités-onlus-459792347406459/info/?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/Solidarité-identités-onlus-459792347406459/info/?tab=page_info).

<sup>36</sup> Explicit reference to the Greek xenophobic party *Golden Dawn*, which was indicted for a political homicide in 2013, and whose militants and parliamentary members have been arrested. See also Albanese *et al.*, *Fascisti di un altro millennio?*, 108-110.

Assad regime.<sup>37</sup> It is on this organization that we will now focus our attention, in order to try to bring to light what are the main drivers which underlie a change of strategy in neo-fascist organizations like CasaPound in their attitude towards Middle East terrorist groups and ‘terrorist states’.<sup>38</sup>

## CasaPound’s International Operations<sup>39</sup>

In the words of its leader, Sol.Id. justifies its very existence as:

[...] a charitable and humanitarian organization in nature, whose raison d’être is to provide assistance and support for those people fighting for their survival, for the preservation of their culture, and for the defense of their identity. In order to confront the threat represented by liberalist globalization, whose sole objective is the leveling out of the entire world under the yoke of the financial markets, it is essential and urgent to appeal for solidarity and active collaboration between those men who are still free and sincerely value the diversity of the universe and the plurality of its manifestations, embodied in every local community. It is out of this imperative obligation that Sol.Id’s volunteers decided to devote themselves to the assistance of all those men who, regardless of their location on the planet, want to keep on living on the land of their ancestors, according to their laws, cultures, rules, and traditions.<sup>40</sup>

In accordance with these stated goals, Sol.Id.’s alleged solidarity initiatives are mainly composed of five distinct projects in five different areas of the planet: South Africa, Kosovo, Palestine, Myanmar, and Syria.

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<sup>37</sup> From our analysis Solidarité Identités and the Italian branch of the European Solidarity Front for Syria seem to perfectly coincide.

<sup>38</sup> According to a 2014 analysis conducted by Alexandra David and Ely Karmon at the ICT, Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons against the civilian population and the rebel forces in order to advance its strategic military goals transformed it in a ‘non-conventional terrorist state’, <http://www.ict.org.il/Article/1132/Syrias-Chemical-Attacks-the-Strategic-Significance>.

<sup>39</sup> The main sources regarding CasaPound’s (disguised as Sol.Id.) international projects are its official website, <http://www.volunteers-solid.org>, and its Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/Solidarité-identités-onlus-459792347406459/timeline>.

<sup>40</sup> Translated from [http://www.volunteers-solid.org/?page\\_id=7](http://www.volunteers-solid.org/?page_id=7).

In South Africa, Sol.Id. supports the Afrikaner settlement of Kleinfontein, near Pretoria, since 2011. The initiative consists in a series of European seminars in which Sol.Id. volunteers promote the Afrikaners' cause, but they also provide material aid for scholastic and sport initiatives that take place in the South African settlement. Kleinfontein settlers are known for their zealous pro-Apartheid stances and blatant racist policies, such as the barring all Jews, Catholics, non-Afrikaans speakers, and obviously black people from settling in their community. Their motto is '*Ons God, Ons Volk, Ons Land*',<sup>41</sup> and their fundamental ideological reference is Hendrik Verwoerd, the mastermind behind the apartheid system, in South Africa.

Similarly, in the Republic of Kosovo Sol.Id. is in first line since 2011 in providing material assistance to the Serbian minority living in the recently formed Albanian enclave. This assistance does largely materialize in the form of educational materials, sport equipment, and financial aid to Serbian families 'in need'.

In the eastern Myanmar jungles, Sol.Id. volunteers conduct 'humanitarian projects' in defense of the insurgent Karen ethnicity, which has been the target of an alleged ethnic cleansing policy by the central government, for decades. Through these projects the organization created an infrastructure of educational and medical facilities, the so-called 'jungle clinics'. Interestingly, in 2010, Gianluca Iannone, CasaPound's autocratic leader, and Franco Nerozzi,<sup>42</sup> president of *Popoli* NGO,<sup>43</sup> together with a substantial group of comrades, clandestinely entered Myanmar from the Thai border, escorted by Colonel Nerdah Mya and his Black Special Forces, and spent a week visiting the Karen villages, in the area under their control.<sup>44</sup> Nerozzi has always rejected the accusations directed at him of having provided weapons, equipment, and military training to the Karen guerrilla

<sup>41</sup> 'One God, One Folks, One Land', <http://www.kleinfontein.net>.

<sup>42</sup> In 2002, Franco Nerozzi was also investigated by the Italian authorities for participating in a coup attempt, orchestrated by a group of contractors, in the Comoro Islands. See Valerio Renzi, "Roma, Casa Pound a convegno con Hezbollah. Ritirato patrocinio della Regione Lazio," *fanpage.it*, September 21, 2015, <http://roma.fanpage.it/roma-casa-pound-a-convegno-con-hezbollah-ritirato-patrocinio-della-regione-lazio/>.

<sup>43</sup> See *supra* note 34.

<sup>44</sup> Gioele Dax, "Che c'entra la Regione Lazio con Hezbollah e Casapound?" *Popoff*, September 16, 2015, <http://popoffquotidiano.it/2015/09/16/che-centra-la-regione-lazio-con-hezbollah-e-casapound/>.

fighters. Remarkably, the area under Karen control is at the core of the so-called drugs' 'Golden Triangle',<sup>45</sup> that is, along with Afghanistan, one of world's most extensive opium-producing areas since the 1950s, according to UN-ODC's reports.<sup>46</sup>

Another front on which Sol.Id. is also active is the Palestinian arena, where the organization cooperates with some local NGOs. With this regard, since 2014, the organization coordinates a goods and fundraising initiative, at the European level, in favor of the Palestinian people of the Gaza Strip and of the Lebanese refugee camps, «defenseless victims of the deplorable Zionist aggression».<sup>47</sup> A humanitarian mission to deliver these aid packages was scheduled for 2015. Nonetheless, this project seems to be in stand-by at the present time.

The most prominent among these international projects, in which Sol.Id. has been relentlessly engaged since the beginning of 2013, is definitely the support of the Assad regime and of his military, and goes by the name of *Mediterranean Solidarity Project*.<sup>48</sup> As mentioned in the introductory section of this work, CasaPound, through its proxy organization Sol.Id., has been at the forefront of the pro-Syrian campaign in Europe,<sup>49</sup> promoting an endless stream of initiatives – solidarity marches, demonstrations,<sup>50</sup> conferences, lectures in schools and universities, fundraising campaigns, distribution of pamphlets, public debates, etc. – oftentimes in coordination with the Damascus central government and the representatives of the Syrian expatriates communities in Italy.

As far as this project is concerned, Sol.Id.'s near-term objective is:

<sup>45</sup> The 'triangle' is composed of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand.

<sup>46</sup> For reference, see <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2014/December/opium-production-in-the-golden-triangle-continues-at-high-levels--threatening-regional-integration.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Sol.Id. official website. See *supra* note 39.

<sup>48</sup> For a detailed account of the project see [http://www.volunteers-solid.org/?page\\_id=40](http://www.volunteers-solid.org/?page_id=40).

<sup>49</sup> See *supra* note 8.

<sup>50</sup> The biggest event of this kind, by the name 'Hands Off Syria', took place on June 15, 2013, in Rome, and was attended by activists from all over Europe. For footages of the event see <http://video.repubblica.it/dossier/rivolta-siria/roma-corteo-pro-assad--non-e-un-raduno-fascista/132114/130635?ref=search>, and also [http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2013/06/12/manifestazione-assad\\_n\\_3429320.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2013/06/12/manifestazione-assad_n_3429320.html).

[...] to make our commitment stable by collaborating with the authorities and the institutions of the Arab Republic of Syria toward the opening of a local office on Syrian soil. [...] The office will house a branch of our European volunteering association, Sol.Id., through which we are raising funds and materials, especially medicines, to be earmarked for the appropriate Syrian facilities. If the competent and esteemed Syrian authorities will allow us, we intend to: a) open one of our branches in Syria. We believe that Latakia is the most appropriate location, due to its logistic importance; b) oversee the financing of the branch and the reimbursement of the local volunteers' expenses; c) carry out humanitarian missions there; d) periodically send helpful materials to the population;<sup>51</sup> e) coordinate our activities with the Syrian authorities for every project and/or future necessity.

Our local office aims to be multifunctional, [...] and the objectives are therefore the following:

1. Emergency medical support: a) facilitating the logistics for the handling and locating of medical materials and equipment coming from Europe to help the disadvantaged segments of the Syrian population within a context of critical emergency (with special regard to medicine for children); b) offering support to the hospital/health care structures that are already active on Syrian territory;
2. Cultural youth center: a) facilitating cultural and recreational gatherings among young Syrian people in a city such as Latakia where there has been a remarkable increase in demographics due to the internal relocation of the population since the beginning of the conflict; b) giving a chance to reciprocal acquaintance between the young Syrians and the young European volunteers through different activities (debates, web connections, report updates, continuing education courses, travels and meetings);
3. Ideal proximity to the family of the martyrs: a) giving concrete help to the families of the fallen soldiers through the distribution of essential, non perishable staples; b) providing ideal closeness to the families of the martyrs with memorials and events to honor their memory that can be organized in our headquarters.<sup>52</sup>

Apparently, the European and Italian extreme-right organizations' key political justification for this pro-Assad activism stems from the assertion that President Bashar al-Assad is the legitimate leader of the Syrian Arab Republic and of the Syrian people, which has been «the target of a historically unprecedented terroristic attack orchestrated

<sup>51</sup> According to the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), on January 27, 2016, «The Syrian community in Italy in cooperation with the Italian non-profit organization 'Sol.Id.' and the 'European Solidarity Front for Syria' has sent a humanitarian aid shipment to the Syrian people living under the terrorism war waged against Syria. The aid includes relief and food stuffs, medicines and medical equipment and wheelchairs and crutches for the injured», <http://sana.sy/en/?p=67646>.

<sup>52</sup> [http://www.volunteers-solid.org/?page\\_id=40](http://www.volunteers-solid.org/?page_id=40)



by the Western governments of USA, France, and Great Britain in cooperation with their allies in the Middle-East, mainly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey».<sup>53</sup> A Sol.Id. representative, Matteo Caponetti, also adds that for Syrian citizens supporting Assad «means defending their country, their land, their family, their people», and pointed to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, two key funders and providers of arms to the rebel forces, as the real instigators and perpetrators of the Syrian civil war.<sup>54</sup>

Of particular interest in this regard, is what emerges from a short interview addressed at Adriano Scianca, CasaPound's national representative for cultural affairs, in which he was asked about the foundations of the steadfast support that his organization accords to President Bashar al-Assad. For this reason, we decided to quote the most salient parts of this interview:

What are the main reasons for CasaPound's support for the Assad's government?

CasaPound supports Assad for three reasons: a) because he is the legitimate leader of a sovereign state, whose destiny should not be decided by a gang of Qaedist cutthroats, on the payroll of Western countries and of the regional feudal emirates, namely a terrorist force hostile to any arbitration; b) because he is the heir of a political current, the *Ba'ath* movement, which is inherently social-oriented, nationalist, modernist and mostly secular, that is, tolerant toward the different religious beliefs and hostile to fundamentalism.<sup>55</sup> As a matter of fact, Syria's [outstanding] welfare state and its public infrastructures are not even comparable to those of most Middle Eastern countries; c) because today, Syria is the designated victim of a criminal scheme, and therefore it is a moral imperative, before than political, to defend it.

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Maya Shwayder, "Assad's Unlikely Allies," *International Business Times*, April 20, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> The Arab social-nationalism, embodied in the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath parties, has always deeply fascinated the Italian neo-fascist thinkers. For example, decades ago, Claudio Mutti, one of the most rabidly anti-Semitic neo-fascist ideologues, who also converted to Islam, wrote a book about the commonalities between Nasser's thought and that of the famous neo-fascist esoterist Julius Evola. A further example of this fascination is the journey that the then-MSI's (Movimento Sociale Italiano, the main post-war fascist party in the Italian political system) leader Gianfranco Fini, together with Front National's Jean-Marie Le Pen, performed in 1991, in order to pay their homages to the Iraqi Ba'athist leader, Saddam Hussein.

What would you like to answer to those who accuse CasaPound of being an anti-Semitic and xenophobic organization? Is it plausible that one of the reasons for CasaPound's staunch support for Assad is its hostility to Israel?

These are laughable accusations. Moreover, the question itself is ill-framed. Why a xenophobe would care about the destiny of an extra-European country? And how come that supposed anti-Semites support the cause of a nation that is 90% Arab, namely Semite? I also don't see how this could be related to Israel. Moreover, it is false that anyone who criticizes Tel Aviv gains our automatic approval. For instance, the UN has promulgated many resolutions against Israel, but it doesn't mean that it enjoys our liking, rather the opposite.<sup>56</sup>

The threat of radical Islam is one that is felt keenly in Italy, and Assad is seen as a 'bulwark' against this, argues Vincent Della Sala, an adjunct professor of European studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, in Bologna.<sup>57</sup> These neo-fascist groups, Della Sala continues, «see Assad as a secular authoritarian leader [...] who is standing up to the United States and the narrow interests it is promoting». Della Sala adds: «What CasaPound and similar movements claim is that they stand for 'God and country' and that they see the rebel movements in Syria as driven by radical Islam, representing a threat to Christians in that country. Assad is seen as a strong man, which fits into their general view of a leader and as someone who can hold back radical Islam».<sup>58</sup>

From what emerges from this analysis, Assad's indisputable legitimacy to govern in Syria, Alawites' apparent tolerance and protection vis-à-vis religious minorities – i.e. the Christians of Syria – along with their firm anti-terrorism stance proven on the battlefield, are the chief drivers that motivate CasaPound, as well as numerous like-minded European radical-right movements and right-wing parties, to engage in initiatives in support of Bashar al-Assad. Thus, CasaPound's recent opening toward a historical ally of the Syrian

<sup>56</sup> This interview can be found at <http://www.atuttadestra.net/index.php/archives/190847>. The original source (<http://www.ideodromocasapound.org/?p=1297>) is not available anymore.

<sup>57</sup> Maya Shwayder, "Assad's Unlikely Allies," *International Business Times*, April 20, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

dictator, namely the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah – in the framework of an international conference held in Rome at the end of September 2015 by the name *Mediterraneo Solidale*,<sup>59</sup> which saw the participation of two prominent figures of Hezbollah’s political branch – should not come as a surprise.

In the eyes of this author, this event represents a watershed in the historical relationship between Italian neo-fascist groups and Middle Eastern terrorist organization, which have never come so close to each other to date. As hinted in the introductory section of this work, the unprecedented cooperation between CasaPound and Hezbollah could be interpreted in the light of the profound admiration that the Italian neofascism has always harbored – and constantly cultivated through its individual leaders – for the ‘revolutionary camp’ represented by the post-Revolution Iran and its allies, mainly Assad’s Syria and Hezbollah, in Lebanon. In order to bring this potential to fruition, however, ideological affinity had to be backed by further substantial incentives. The sense of urgency for the fate of the Christian communities of Syria, jeopardized primarily by the radical Islamist militias of ISIS<sup>60</sup> and Jabhat al-Nusra, and above all the unfolding refugee crisis engulfing Europe, whose root causes are to be primarily found in the dramatic civil war in Syria, constitute in all likelihood those *sine qua non* incentives.

## **THE CONFERENCE: ‘MEDITERRANEO SOLIDALE’**

The conference, named *Mediterraneo Solidale*, took place in the conference hall of Hotel dei Congressi in Rome, on September 26, 2015, and was attended by some three-hundred people.<sup>61</sup> The main organizers of the event were CasaPound’s ‘Foreign Ministry’, *Sol.Id.*, and its main online news outlet, *Il Primato Nazionale*. Interestingly, among the sponsors of the event also appear Hezbollah’s *Al-Manar TV* and the Iranian Cultural Institute in

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Mediterranean solidarity’.

<sup>60</sup> In this work we use the terms ‘ISIS’ and ‘Islamic State’ interchangeably.

<sup>61</sup> According to *Sol.Id.*’s estimates.

Italy.<sup>62</sup> At the beginning, even Lazio Regional Council decided to grant its sponsorship to the event.<sup>63</sup> Only at a later stage, that is, when the council's president Nicola Zingaretti was informed of the participation of two Hezbollah members, the council revoked its initial sponsor, by invoking the European Parliament's *Resolution P6\_TA(2005)0076*,<sup>64</sup> in which Hezbollah military branch is designated as a terrorist organization.<sup>65</sup>

According to Ada Oppedisano, Sol.Id.'s incumbent chairperson, who released a long interview about the rationale and inspiration behind this event on *Il Primato Nazionale*:

The Mediterranean should be rethought as a new beacon of civilization. This sea must stop to be only a graveyard of refugees, but should become a common ground for political synergies and solidarity. [In this conference] we will speak about these issues with representatives of the Mediterranean nations, but also others, since we promote the view of a broad Mediterranean, conceived not only as a geographical location, but also as a cultural space.<sup>66</sup>

Adriano Scianca, CasaPound's national representative for cultural affairs and director of the online newspaper *Il Primato Nazionale*, adds some insightful considerations pertaining the decision to convene an international conference to support Bashar al-Assad, in Europe:

Our position is clear. We are against those who, directly or indirectly, support terrorism, whereas we support those who fight terrorism. The greatest hypocrisy of the West is to try to fight ISIS, while at the same time criticizing ISIS' adversaries for possessing some undemocratic attributes. Its is

<sup>62</sup> Valerio Renzi, "Roma, Casa Pound a convegno con Hezbollah. Ritirato patrocinio della Regione Lazio," *fanpage.it*, September 21, 2015, <http://roma.fanpage.it/roma-casa-pound-a-convegno-con-hezbollah-ritirato-patrocinio-della-regione-lazio/>.

<sup>63</sup> See *supra* note 33 for a glance into the mechanisms that CasaPound employs to access public funding.

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2005-0076+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

<sup>65</sup> Antonio Rapisarda, "Ci sono CasaPound e Hezbollah, la Regione ritira il patrocinio," *IL TEMPO.it*, September 22, 2015, <http://www.iltempo.it/politica/2015/09/22/ci-sono-casapound-e-hezbollah-la-regione-ritira-il-patrocinio-1.1459726>.

<sup>66</sup> Redazione, "Mediterraneo solidale: il volontariato identitario a convegno," *Il Primato Nazionale*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/cultura/mediterraneo-solidale-il-volontariato-identitario-a-convegno-30256/>.

unconceivable to prevail [over ISIS] under these circumstances. Conversely, we believe that it is of paramount importance to create bridges with all those actors, also within [the world of] Islam, who are on the frontline in the fight against the Islamic State.<sup>67</sup>

In line with the project of creating a broad coalition of like-minded Mediterranean actors in order to oppose ISIS' terrorism – and in turn to halt the influx of refugees towards Europe – CasaPound invited, among twenty-four different speakers, also Mrs. Rima Fakhri,<sup>68</sup> member of Hezbollah's Political Council, and Sayyed Ammar al-Mussawi,<sup>69</sup> Hezbollah's International Relations Official. Given the great visibility that CasaPound's media outlets accorded to them, these two Hezbollah's figures were ostensibly the most awaited and revered of the speakers.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, the long list of speakers also comprised ambassadors, diplomatic delegations,<sup>71</sup> representatives of the Assad's regime, Syrian and Western NGOs, religious leaders belonging to the Syrian

<sup>67</sup> Giorgio Nigra, "Sol.Id: la lotta all'Isis riparte dal Mediterraneo Solidale," *Il Primato Nazionale*, September 24, 2015, <http://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/cronaca/sol-id-la-lotta-allisis-riparte-dal-mediterraneo-solidale-31040/>.

<sup>68</sup> Rima Fakhri was born in 1966 in Zrariyé, in the south of Lebanon, from a predominantly secular family. A mother of four and married to a businessman who is not a member of Hezbollah, she holds a B.A. in agricultural science from the American University of Beirut. In 1985, during her university studies, she decided to enlist in the ranks of the newly-formed Hezbollah, considering it the best way to serve her country. At the beginning, she mostly managed educational projects in southern Lebanon, but she was gradually promoted to more important positions, and soon became a member of the Central Commission for Women in Beirut, under Abbas al-Mussawi's leadership. However, it is under the new Secretary General (following the assassination of al-Mussawi, in 1991), Hassan Nasrallah, that she receives increased responsibilities, being entrusted with the creation of social centers for the sons of the Hezbollah's members. In 2004, she is eventually nominated member of Hezbollah's Political Council, sitting on a committee responsible for political analysis and monitoring events in Lebanon and in the rest of the world. In 2008 she earns an M.A. in international affairs from the Lebanese American University, signing up for a PhD as well. *Source*: Scarlett Haddad, "Rima Fakhri, la seule femme membre du conseil politique du Hezbollah," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, March 17, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Sayyed Ammar al-Mussawi was born in 1962 in the town of al-Nabi Shayth, in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon. He obtained a law degree in the Faculty of Law and Political Sciences at the Lebanese University. He worked as a political supervisor of al-Islam Radio (Sawt al-Mustad'afin) from 1985 to 1989. He was appointed deputy chairman of Hezbollah's Political Council from 1991 to 1995. Currently, he is the Political Council's appointed official in charge of Hezbollah's International Relations (namely Hezbollah's Foreign Minister), replacing his predecessor, Nawwaf al-Mussawi. *Source*: CIA's Open Source Center (July 13, 2009), via Wikileaks, [wikileaks.org/gifiles/attach/9/9419\\_Hezb-dance-card-1.pdf](http://wikileaks.org/gifiles/attach/9/9419_Hezb-dance-card-1.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> Corrado Zunino, "Roma, la strana coppia Hezbollah-Casapound insieme al convegno," *la Repubblica*, September 20, 2015, [http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/09/20/news/roma\\_convegno\\_mediterraneo\\_solidale\\_iniziativa\\_fascio-islamica-123310960/](http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/09/20/news/roma_convegno_mediterraneo_solidale_iniziativa_fascio-islamica-123310960/). The Rome's conference was also evoked in a short article which appeared on the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), <http://sana.sy/en/?p=56035>.

<sup>71</sup> From Mauritania, Iraq, Sudan, and Iran.

Melkite Rite, journalists, and of course a wide spectrum of CasaPound's personalities.<sup>72</sup> The conference was structured in four workshops, according to distinct but interrelated themes: ‘*identitarian* volunteering and international cooperation’; ‘Syria: a millenary example of religious coexistence’; ‘women’s role in the Arab societies’; ‘new synergies for building Mediterranean solidarity’.<sup>73</sup>

Rima Fakhri’s speech represented the central moment of the workshop on the role of women in the Arab and Islamic societies.<sup>74</sup> Along these lines, her discourse revolved around the crucial importance that ‘real’ Islam – as opposed to the distorted version that the terrorists of ISIS, and the alike, try to advance in the world – attributes to women, supposedly considered as equals to men, notably in their contribution to the creation of a just and peaceful society on Earth which adheres to the authentic Koranic precepts. She continued by explaining that, contrary to the total subjugation and virtual enslavement that women are exposed to under the Islamic State’s rule, Hezbollah – and progressive Shiite Islam altogether – highly values the role women play in the Muslim society, bestowing absolute freedom upon them, and assigning them to high-ranking positions as educators, physicians, journalists, public servants, etc., as demonstrated by her own example as a senior member of the organization’s Political Council.<sup>75</sup> Mrs. Fakhri concluded her speech by stressing the urgency of uniting forces against the obscurantist vision of radical Islamist terrorism, which greatly threatens the future of the entire world.

In our view, the goal that the Lebanese panelist wanted to achieve through her speech is twofold. In the first place, to boost Hezbollah’s vacillating legitimacy in front of a European audience which predominantly sees Islam as a conservative and even retrograde religion as far as gender equality is concerned, by leveraging the alleged parity

<sup>72</sup> A full list of the speakers can be accessed at <http://www.volunteers-solid.org/?p=622>.

<sup>73</sup> Redazione, “Hezbollah ed esponenti siriani all’incontro sul Mediterraneo solidale,” *Il Primato Nazionale*, September 17, 2015, <http://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/cronaca/hezbollah-ed-esponenti-siriani-allincontro-sul-mediterraneo-solidale-30603/>.

<sup>74</sup> Rima Fakhri’s full speech can be accessed on Sol.Id. Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/ilprimatonazionale/?fref=ts>.

<sup>75</sup> Ironically, Mrs. Rima Fakhri, who wears a black head-to-toe *chador*, is the only woman of the whole Hezbollah’s political leadership.

of rights and virtual freedom that her organization grants to women, as opposed to the brutal treatment that they receive under the Islamic State. Secondly, Mrs. Fakhri attempted to arouse in the public general contempt for the rival terrorist organization by showing how it mistreats women, invoking an extremely perverted interpretation of Islam in order to justify its vicious conduct. In tandem, these messages serve the primary objective of depicting Hezbollah as a fully legitimate partner in the current fight against jihadist terror – which has already covered Europe in blood on several recent occasions – and not as an integral part of it, as its status as a well-known FTO might suggest.<sup>76</sup>

In similar fashion, Ammar al-Mussawi ‘blackmailed’ the Italian rightist audience beginning his speech by stating that the entire humankind is under the grave threat of terrorism, and of those who maneuver it.<sup>77</sup> Al-Mussawi explains that the potential fall of the Assad’s regime will transform Syria into a ‘new Somalia’,<sup>78</sup> and underscores that the subsequent negative repercussions would not remain confined to the Syrian territory, but would rapidly propagate to whole Europe. To reinforce his argument al-Mussawi brings to the table the very sensitive issue, particularly dear to the Italian right-wing public, of the refugee crisis, which he claims to be the direct outcome of the war situation in Syria.<sup>79</sup> After presenting this nightmare scenario, the Lebanese panelist provides his ‘simple’ solution to the crisis: namely to accord a strong support to Hezbollah’s fighters and Assad’s military forces, which are at the forefront of this existential struggle against the murderous militias of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and ultimately embody the last

<sup>76</sup> Since 10/8/1997, Hezbollah has been included in the Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)’s list, following the US Secretary of State’s designation, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

<sup>77</sup> Here, the rhetoric explicitly refers to the Wahhabi ideology, Saudi and Qatari petrodollars, and the constant plotting of western intelligence agencies as the main enablers of ISIS’ terrorism and of the concomitant attempt to overthrow Assad from the Syrian throne. Ammar al-Mussawi’s full speech can be accessed on Sol.Id. Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/ilprimatonazionale/posts/983814105008202:0>.

<sup>78</sup> In an interview released to the Italian weekly magazine *Panorama* (October 7, 2013), Ammar al-Mussawi elaborates on this prospective scenario in which, in the event of Assad’s fall, we would experience a collapse of the Syrian army’s structure and a subsequent all-out war between its different factions to obtain hegemony over Syria, similarly to what happened in Somalia during the 1990s, <http://www.panorama.it/news/marco-ventura-profeta-di-ventura/hezbollah-libano-siria-assad-unifil/>.

<sup>79</sup> Italy is one of the main European destinations for dozens of thousands of migrants fleeing every year from the Middle East and North Africa.

bastion of defense of the European continent from the spread of radical Islamist terrorism. Al-Mussawi concludes his speech with the following remarks: «the uttermost priority is to extinguish the fire which is ravaging Syria [...] you have to raise your voices and ask your political leaders to re-examine their policies vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war and rectify them [...] President Assad is not the butcher portrayed by western media, but conversely he is one of the few statesmen who actually fight those terrorists and, by doing so, he also protects the minorities of his country, especially the Christians. Only together we will win! ».

The diverse array of panelists that participated in the conference expressed analogous positions regarding the common threat, represented by jihadist terrorism, and potential solutions, namely the creation of a solid Mediterranean coalition of forces capable of exerting influence on the respective governments in order to support the ‘righteous’ part in the Syrian conflict, the Assad’s regime. The underlying objective of this initiative is to halt the massive influx of migrants towards Europe and to protect the Christian minorities of the Middle East,<sup>80</sup> threatened by radical Islam. Most of the speeches were also vehemently imbued with anti US imperialism and anti-Israeli rhetoric, a fact which underlines a shared understanding of the current international order and of the perceived enemy.

## CONCLUSIONS<sup>81</sup>

The alliance that coalesced last September in Rome represents just the latest iteration of a constantly reshaping grouping of like-minded international actors which, regardless of their relative positioning on the political map, adhere to an analogous radical ideology

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<sup>80</sup> The paramount importance conferred to the safeguard of the Syrian Christians under the Islamist threat is well exemplified by the copious participation of leading religious figures, mainly belonging to Syrian Melkite Rite, such as the Rome Melkite Archimandrite Father Mtanios Haddad, among the conference’s speakers.

<sup>81</sup> This final section is the result of a fruitful discussion that this author had with ICT’s Dr. Ely Karmon, and with three of the most prominent Italian researchers who have investigated CasaPound’s social phenomenon: Dr. Matteo Antonio Albanese, Dr. Pietro Castelli Gattinara, and Dr. Caterina Froio.



permeated by militant anti-imperialist and anti-US/Israel sentiments. This highly heterogeneous ensemble of players decides to materialize across-the-board cooperation initiatives only under very specific circumstances, such as, for instance, after the outbreak of a war perceived as the newest front of a global struggle, waged by the imperialist powers, – the US and Israel above all – and their occasional allies, to destroy the few remaining pockets of resistance vis-à-vis a world order erected on financial capitalism and heading toward cultural homogeneity.<sup>82</sup>

The uniqueness of this new iteration of non-aligned global players rests, however, on bringing together in an operational framework two elements which have never come so close, namely a Middle Eastern terror organization, Hezbollah, and an Italian neo-fascist movement, CasaPound. These two organizations, which constitute the core of this recently-established Mediterranean coalition, must have identified in the counterpart, regardless of their apparent ideological vicinity, a potential vehicle for advancing mutual interests, congruent with their respective agendas. Against this backdrop, the Syrian civil war and its dramatic international ramifications functioned as a catalyst for the materialization of this partnership.

CasaPound, and the whole Italian neo-fascist galaxy for that matter, has always seen Hezbollah, its patron state Iran, and the various geographical declinations of the Ba'ath parties, with profound admiration, as highly successful examples of resistance against the overwhelming forces of American imperialism and global Zionism. On the mere ideological level, therefore, CasaPound's decision to seal an alliance of convenience with Hezbollah should be interpreted as part of its international crusade in support of the preservation of national identities, consistent with the principle of self-determination of nations, which is a central tenet of their fascist ideology. From this perspective, Assad's

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<sup>82</sup> See, for instance, the establishment of a broad and diverse coalition which included elements belonging to the Anti-Globalization and the Global Anti-War movements, NGOs, political parties, social movements, along with Hezbollah, as a result of the American invasion of Iraq, in 2003. *Source*: Ely Karmon, "Hizballah and the Anti-Globalization Movement: A New Coalition?" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch #949*, 2005, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hizballah-and-the-antiglobalization-movement-a-new-coalition>.

struggle, and that of its allies, is perceived as a defensive battle against those external forces that try to subvert this ‘natural order’.

On the utilitarian level, the potential explanation for this CasaPound-Hezbollah partnership is twofold. First and foremost, CasaPound’s pressing imperative is to halt the massive influx of migrants which is engulfing Italy, inevitably jeopardizing and diluting the national character of the country. Since the war situation in Syria is understood as the root cause of this unfolding humanitarian crisis, granting a staunch support to Assad’s coalition seems the natural route for a neo-fascist movement like CasaPound. Moreover, the fact that Lebanon is one of the major Middle Eastern hubs for dozens of thousands of Syrian refugees determined to sail toward the Italian shores unequivocally elucidates the reason why Hezbollah was assigned such a central role within this partnership undertaking. In the second place, CasaPound’s attraction to the Lebanese terror organization could be explained in the light of a possible conveyance of operational capabilities from one organization to the other. In other words, in its quest for increased national *consensus*, the neo-fascist group looks with great interest at those forms of so-called ‘direct activism’, namely the provision of a variety of social services to the local population without the mediation of state institutions, that Hezbollah has been expertly conducting for decades in the areas under its control, and which are known as its socio-economic *Dawa* infrastructure.

From Hezbollah’s standpoint, a potential defeat of the Assad’s forces in the battle for Syria represents an existential threat, since the terrorist organization owes much of its power to the strategic politico-military alliance with the Syrian dictator. A demise of the governmental coalition would likely engender a shrinkage of the Lebanese group’s national, regional, and global leverage, and even its possible disappearance from the maps. As a consequence, Hezbollah decided to seize the opportunity offered by a positive convergence of exploitable international developments – mainly the generalized contempt for the atrocities that ISIS perpetrates in Iraq, Syria, and Europe, the thorny refugee crisis, and the formation of a European right-wing front in support of Assad’s

warring factions – to launch a propaganda campaign and bring the pro-Assad line into the European public discourse. An additional driver for this campaign relates to the legitimacy-building process in which Hezbollah has been engaged since its designation as a terrorist organization by the European Union in July 2013, in order to rebuild the group's damaged public image as well as its reputation as a legitimate international actor, notably in the confrontation with the radical Islam's threat.

They certainly recognized CasaPound, and the European radical right block at large, as well-disposed interlocutors, eagerly willing to give a voice to an otherwise unheard orator.

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