

# The racist roots of Italy's anti-immigrant movement

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**T**he influx of thousands of migrants and refugees to Italy has sparked a proliferation of conspiracy theories about collusion between human rights NGOs and human traffickers.

Carmelo Zuccaro, a public prosecutor in Sicily, said on Italian radio in May that international NGOs "are in contact with human traffickers" and "some of them could be financed" by human smugglers. Zuccaro claimed "the destabilisation of the Italian economy" was the goal for both parties.

Italy's location along the Mediterranean has it on the front lines in dealing with migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa.

For decades, immigration to Italy was minimal, even as France, Germany and the United Kingdom welcomed thousands of immigrants, many from former colonies or overseas territories.

That changed when thousands of immigrants from as far as Peru, Nigeria and Bangladesh and as close as Romania arrived and formed communities in Italian cities and towns. The rapid change shocked the country, which some experts say was built on cultural and material racism, including internal discrimination towards southern Italians by those in the more prosperous north.

■ A common claim in Italy is that the new immigrants bring crime.

Zuccaro's claim that human smugglers colluded with NGOs – including Doctors Without Borders and Save the Children – quickly spread. Luigi Di Maio, a prominent parliamentarian with the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement), Italy's insurgent populist and most

popular political party, was quick to echo the sentiment. Matteo Salvini, who leads the Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant Liga Nord (LN) party, said NGO workers should be arrested and rescue boats sunk.

■ Racism in Italy historically was based on the north/south divide.

In 2016, the European Union's border agency, Frontex, said there were "clear indications before departure on the precise direction to be followed to reach the NGOs' boats," the Washington Post reported. The Financial Times wrote that Frontex had accused charities of colluding with smugglers but Frontex denied the report.

Zuccaro admitted he had no evidence to support his claim but he and a host of other figures continue to spread it. Experts said Zuccaro's charge is built on racist sentiment against Arabs and Africans that is pervasive in Italy.

"Italian society is built on racism," said Miguel Mellino, professor of postcolonial studies at the Università Orientale in Naples. "The first racial law was in 1937 and was a form of Italian apartheid in Ethiopia and Somalia."

Racism in Italy historically was based on the north/south divide. The more economically prosperous north looks down on the "criminal" south, whose residents often flocked north for work or a better life. The animus towards southerners was reflected in the country's prisons. "In the '50s and before, people in jail were almost entirely from the south and now they are migrants," Melino said. "It's how the Italian system manages migration."

A common claim in Italy is that the new immigrants bring crime. "I used to be able to leave my door open but now I can't let my wife walk to church alone," said Alberto, an Italian man from outside Milan who is married to an



**Unfounded allegations.** Carmelo Zuccaro, the chief prosecutor of the Sicilian port city of Catania, at the Senate defence committee in Rome, on May 3. (Reuters)

Ivorian immigrant.

Such claims are regularly repeated for political currency. The LN has historically led the way in espousing the most blatantly racist rhetoric. Mario Borghezio, a European parliamentarian representing the LN, was recently ordered to pay \$55,690 by a Milan court for making repeated racist slurs against Italy's first black minister, Cécile Kyenge. In a 2013 radio interview, Borghezio claimed that Kyenge wanted to "bring her tribal traditions to Italy."

The Movimento Cinque Stelle does not use the same sort of explicitly racist or white supremacist language expressed by the LN, preferring instead what experts term "dog whistles" – inferences that re-

call racist stereotypes without explicitly using racial epithets. Party leader Beppe Grillo was accused in 2015 of comparing immigrants to rats.

"The Movimento Cinque Stelle is often silent or has no active role in solidarity," said Camilla Hawthorne, a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Berkeley who researches racist attitudes in the United States and Italy. "They try to appeal to the nebulous category of people that they are 'real Italians' and are against 'foreign incursions'."

Despite such claims, the Movimento Cinque Stelle is Italy's most supported political party, polling at around 30%. To understand how

it can maintain such high-level support while using inflammatory language against migrants and refugees, one must consult Italian history.

"The history of northern Italy [in particular] is one of widespread prejudice," said Marcello Maneri, a professor of sociology at the University of Milano-Bicocca. "Racism towards southern Italy was replaced in the late '80s and early '90s with racism towards those outside the European Union. One result has been reactions marked by prejudice, discrimination and fear from people abroad."

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## The United States and the legacy of the 1967 war

Viewpoint



Gregory Aftandilian

**T**here is still a scholarly debate about whether the United States gave Israel the "green light" to launch the 1967 war.

US President Lyndon Johnson, bogged down in the costly Vietnam War but seeing Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser as a pro-Soviet threat to the region, supposedly urged caution to the Israelis. He told Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, who was visiting the White House in late May 1967, not to fire the first shot and he (Johnson) would do all he could to get the Gulf of Aqaba (which Nasser had closed) open to Israeli shipping, but if war were to take place, Israel would easily defeat the Egyptians.

On the other hand, when the head of Israel's Mossad spy agency, Meir Amit, went to the Pentagon in the first days of June and told US Defence Secretary Robert McNamara that he was going to recommend war to the Israeli government, McNamara only asked about the number of expected Israeli casualties and the duration of the war, Amit stated in a 2002 interview with Jeremy Bowen of the BBC. McNamara reportedly stated in response: "I read you loud and clear."

Regardless, the outcome is well

known. Israel defeated Egypt, Jordan and Syria in six days in early June 1967 and greatly expanded its territory. It took possession of the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, East Jerusalem and the West Bank and the Golan Heights.

Many Arab countries, believing the United States colluded with Israel, broke diplomatic relations with Washington for several years.

However, this war – a great victory for the Israelis and a humiliating defeat for the Arabs – has complicated the achievement of a regional peace ever since. Even Johnson, who was very pro-Israel, warned that by the time the United States was finished with the fallout from this war, it was "going to wish the war never happened."

After the war, Johnson set out parameters for US policy that the scholar William Quandt has noted has been remarkably consistent in terms of US policy: 1) there should be land for peace; 2) the status of East Jerusalem to be settled in peace negotiations; 3) settlements in the West Bank are obstacles to peace; 4) whatever outcome for the Palestinians should not include unrestricted return to homes within the 1967 lines and; 5) the United States would support Israel's qualitative military edge over its neighbours.

Although the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979 achieved "land for peace" for one section of the conflict – restoring the Sinai to Egyptian control in exchange

for diplomatic relations between Egypt and Israel, the issues of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, along with settlement building in the West Bank, continue to preclude an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

All US administrations since Johnson's have struggled with these issues and all have come up short. The popular perception in the Arab world is that the strong support the United States gives Israel encourages Israeli leaders to build settlements with impunity and ignore Palestinian national aspirations.

Although strong support for Israel has continued unabated under US administrations, it is misleading to think that the United States can simply dictate policy to Israel and the Israeli government will comply.

When the United States has applied strong pressure on Israel on settlements – such as in 2009 during former US President Barack Obama's first year in office – the most Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was willing to do was to freeze settlement construction for ten months and with caveats – such as exemptions for settlement construction in East Jerusalem and "natural growth" within existing settlements.

The United States can indeed support leaders interested in peace. President Jimmy Carter's mediation in the Camp David Accords in 1978 between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin

**The 1967 war has complicated the achievement of a regional peace ever since.**

was crucial to achieving an agreement but US presidents cannot "force" a deal.

The large number of settlements that have been constructed in the West Bank since the 1967 war do indeed pose a problem for a lasting peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Less land for the Palestinians means a less viable Palestinian state.

Ultimately, Israeli and Palestinian leaders have to agree on clear steps forward. Israel needs another Yitzhak Rabin who, as a hawk for most of his career, came to the realisation that indefinite control of the West Bank would not only dilute the Jewish character of the Israeli state but would make Israel a perpetual occupying power. His assassination was a severe blow to the peace process.

As for the Palestinians, as the weaker party, they also need a leader who has the courage to strike a deal that involves concessions but will ultimately lead to an independent state.

One legacy of the 1967 war is that the occupation of the West Bank has made the achievement of an Israeli-Palestinian peace that much harder to achieve and the United States is seen as the indispensable party to break the logjam whether or not it can actually do so.

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