

"Whether Italy Likes It or Not, We Are Its Children." An Interview with Imane Barmaki of 'Yalla Italia'

Michaela De Marco (August 30, 2009)



Her last name is Persian, her first name is Arabic. “Geographically, I am Moroccan, culturally I am Italian, and historically I am Francophone. I am an identity puzzle that is composed in a harmonious manner without any problems.”

Imane Barmaki was born in Morocco and moved to Italy when she was 13 years old. “I belong to what is called the second generation of immigrants.” She defines it in this way because on paper she is a “foreigner” (a non-EU citizen) and not Italian, but believes that this fact can also be positive: “Since I live straddling two cultures, this has taught me that there isn’t only one way to see reality.”

Imane dreams of one day obtaining Italian citizenship, who submitted her request nearly two years ago: “Simply because it is important to have this identification. In addition, with citizenship I would not have to renew my residence permit every year. Renewing it last time had a negative effect on my identity because it underscores the fact that I am not Italian, which is not true. My colleague from Yalla, Sumaya, once wrote: ‘Whether Italy likes it or not, we are its children.’”



Imane is on the staff of Yalla Italia (Let's Go, Italy), a new monthly insert in "Vita Non Profit" (<http://beta.vita.it/> [2]) that focuses on Muslim integration in Italy. We asked her to talk about this new editorial initiative that has proved to be very successful not only in Italy but also abroad.

Tell me about yourself. How have you structured your project?

We are the second generation of Muslims in Italy with a great desire to express ourselves. We started writing with the specific goal of fighting stereotypes. We are a bit fed up with clichés and so we want to make a positive contribution rather than play the role of victim. We are people with multiple, layered cultural identities, and we simply present these nuances and complexities in a straightforward way. Yalla Italia is a blog on paper, a concrete space where we, the second generation of immigrants, have the opportunity to write freely about our point of views on a monthly theme that we decide. It is a new window that opens onto the unknown world of 'new Italians': those who have distant roots, from the Maghreb to Kashmir. It is a virtual bridge between the spheres of migration of our parents and Italian society, which crosses into integration and which cannot be translated as 'assimilation,' but rather 'sharing' some common features and 'validating' other aspects of our cultures of origin. In short, it's a meeting point between tradition and modernity, between the tension of the Europe of the future and a return to our roots. I personally joined this project because I wish that immigration, from being illegal and in constant danger, was understood and acknowledged.

How did this project come about? Who initiated the idea? From what need did this project emerge?

Yalla's initial editorial board was comprised mainly of university students and other young people who participated in the "Integration Program" launched in Milan's schools. According to statistics provided by the City Council two years ago, Milan is host to 23,000 young Muslims. The aim of the magazine, therefore, is to provide an opportunity to discuss those aspects of immigration that are commonly ignored or are reluctantly covered by mainstream Italian media, thanks to the voices of those people involved in this process.

In your opinion how is the issue of the "Middle East" or more generally, the "Arab World" presented in Italy?

Just after the attacks in Gaza on Friday, January 9, the editors of Vita held a meeting that let a ray of hope into our hearts. Around the same table sat the Muslim young women of Yalla Italia and two members of UGEI (Union of Young Italian Jews) to discuss the implications of what was happening in Gaza. I was not personally present due to force majeure, but my colleagues told me that it was difficult not to get carried away by the emotions and sorrow, by the vindication of the rights of its own people. The young men were present because they wanted to escape the diktat of war and during the meeting they immediately took the opportunity to break the siege. The act of remaining there was a way of going beyond that logic that has no way out. Even if you had had lost a friend or relative in Gaza. Even if the day before someone had burned your flag in the town square. Then, once we came face to face, we realized that we spoke the same language and that we want the same thing in the first place. Differences remained, even profound ones. The points of view were far apart. But just seeing and talking to each other has made our differences and our distances far from "insurmountable." The other was no longer an enemy. So much so that we had the same request: that it does not end here, that we go forward. We wanted to begin with ourselves and then move to the relationships with others to make room for peace. This does not mean giving up our points of view and our history; beginning with oneself means not censoring anything. That is why we are fighting for the rights of everyone, even those different from us, so that we can talk about ourselves out in the open, without the violence that suffocates the differences.

What difficulties have you encountered over the course of your daily activities?



There are problems and there always will be. The most important thing is that they become a positive force going forward while maintaining a certain quality. We are not professional journalists, and perhaps that's why the initiative has been so successful. What we want to present is the "normalcy" of everyday life, but unfortunately "normalcy" is not news in Italy.

What kind of response have you received so far?

It has proved to be very positive both in Italy and abroad. We found ourselves on the cover of the most popular news site in the world, The New York Times, which published an article on the "phenomenon" of Yalla Italia by Elisabetta Povoledo entitled: "[Italian Magazine Tries To Narrow Gap With Muslims](#) [3]." In March, the global edition of The International Herald Tribune printed a big article on Yalla Italia. Even Al Jazeera will publish an article very soon. The thing that amazes me personally is why we've received so much attention from the foreign press and not from our own country.

The Italian version of this article was published in "[Incontro Mediterraneo](#) [4]" (Translated by Giulia Prestia)

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