

South America

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The following description of contemporary Muslim worship in Sao Paulo, Brazil, is part of a larger inquiry into the Syrian-Lebanese diaspora community of the city. The research was conducted in June and August 2000.

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The Mosque of Elisa Whitaker Street (the only Shi'i mosque).

Of the eight mosques in Sao Paulo, all are Sunni except for one Shi'i mosque. The Shi'i mosque, founded in 1983, located on Elisa Whitaker Street in Bras, a commercial district famous for its inexpensive clothing stores. On the Muslim sabbath, a visit was paid to the latter. The mosque is walled, and the gated main entrance of the building is covered with marble. Featuring two bronze-coloured minarets and an exposed orange brick tower, the mosque is apparently under construction. The Sunni mosques found in the area of this Shi'i edifice stand in sharp contrast due to their angular, unadorned concrete.

The mosque houses a library with a collection of Arabic works on philosophy, economics, religion, a collection of works translated into Portuguese (e.g. *What is Islam?* and *The History of Islam*), and pamphlets from Tawheed (a publishing house in Teheran, Iran) concerning religious holidays, duties and doctrines, some of which have Qur'anic verses in Arabic transcribed into Roman characters. The Shi'i mosque also distributes a bimonthly magazine, *Uruba*, the latest cover of which features a photograph of a line of men with hands crossed at their bellies and bowed heads, praying inside another mosque – the Mosque of Brazil (the actual sanctuary of which was closed during the author's visit, due to a flood at the beginning of the year). Eight or ten pages at the end of the magazine are written in Arabic, but the remaining, larger portion is in Portuguese. *Uruba* provides coverage of recent events, such as the visit of the Pope to Jerusalem, Israeli attacks on Lebanon, and a story presenting 'Our position on the settlement', which discusses the status of negotiations with Israel. Doctrinal treatises on Islam and politics appear with

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relevance to the Muslim world and to Muslim participants in the Brazilian polity. It deals with 'human justice' in Islam, with an explanation of the concept of 'consultation' – presumably the article, written in Portuguese, is referring to *shura* – and its importance in the protection of political liberty, with quotations from Muhammad Abdu and Rashid Ridha.

In the context of religious holidays and devotional duties, the unity of the larger whole of Muslims was exemplified by a report on the Hajj with photographs overlooking the Kaaba in Mecca. On the back cover of the issue, Muslims gathered for prayer, wearing white clothing and skull caps, inside of an unnamed mosque with the headline in Arabic: 'The Hajj is a world Islamic congress'. Back in Sao Paulo, for the celebration of the Feast of the Sacrifice, for which a sheep was sacrificially slaughtered at the Sultan Club, meals were served at various mosques in the community.

Sunni and Shi'i

Informants at the Shi'i mosque reported cordial relations with the Sunni mosques. One informant, the president of the congregation, said that he did not like to use such categories at all, not only sectarian categories within Islam, but also the distinctions between religions in general: Christianity and Islam, for example. This was justified by his view that such categories were divisive and even harmful. The mosque offers Arabic lessons for children, while *madrasas*, separate from this mosque elsewhere in the city, also offer Arabic instruction. Both the Sunni mosques and the Shi'i mosque include large assembly halls for functions other than prayer: *ʿid al-fitr*, the Ramadan, the Prophet's birthday, marriages, parties and – in the case of the Shi'i mosque – the birth-

days of the twelve imams, and *ʿashura*. Women do not attend *jum'a* at the Shi'i mosque, and only a few could be seen in the back of the Sunni mosque at the time of the author's visit.

Inside the sanctuary itself, the floor is covered with eight grey patterned rugs, upon which was printed in English and Arabic: 'To Sao Paulo mosque from the Islamic Republic of Iran'. At the cultural centre annexed to the Mosque of Brazil, where prayer was temporarily held, there is a surprising recurring image, that of a kneeling camel. Around the freshly painted white walls of the Shi'i mosque are the names and birth dates of the twelve imams (the people of the house – *ahl al-bait*), and the *shahada*, all printed in Farsi Arabic script. At the centre of the sanctuary is a *mihrab*, with a rectangular tile depicting the 'visit of Hussein' (*ziyarat al-Hussein*) next to it. There is also a podium with pictures of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Great Mosque in Mecca. The windows at the top of the rectangular dome and along the walls are frosted white and green, diffusing white light throughout the space, while a breeze wafts in traffic noise from the open front door. A bookshelf containing Qur'ans donated by Saudi Arabia can be found along with disassembled Qur'an stands. Above, on a balcony railing, there is a large painting depicting Karbala.

Ninety per cent of those who frequent the Shi'i mosque are Lebanese, with other congregants in small numbers from around the Arab world, including Syria, Libya, Iran, Jordan, and Egypt. The Mosque of Brazil is equally dominated by Lebanese adherents, purportedly with few Syrians and Palestinians. The number of Brazilian converts at the Shi'i mosque was approximately 30, the Sunni mosque counting approximately 500 members. The main outreach programme of



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the Shi'i mosque was the three-month-old 'Imam Hussein Project' for distributing food, clothing and toys, or other items donated to the mosque, around the city.

Imam and shaykh

Newly arrived from Iran, an imam swept in, dressed in a white cloth turban, a long, brown outer cloak, and a grey vest. He wore a beard and brown tinted glasses. The son of the permanent imam, who was out of town at the time, reported that the purpose of the imam, in addition to his recitation and sermon for *jum'a*, was to help the members solve problems and to interpret Islamic law: for example, to determine whether particular goods purchased in Brazil, a non-Muslim country, were permissible. Sometimes there would be no imam for a week or two. The imam from Iran circulated with a charismatic air, shaking hands and greeting the 25 men assembled by this time. He then read from a prepared text.

The shaykh at the Mosque of Brazil was from al-Azhar in Cairo and reported that all of the shaykhs in the Sunni mosques of Sao Paulo were Egyptians from al-Azhar. He attributed this presence of al-Azhar shaykhs to an outreach programme implemented by Nasser. The shaykh recited the Qur'an with the aid of a simple microphone for one hour. A one-page summary of the text was translated into Portuguese and distributed prior to the service. The majority of the congregants apparently could not follow the sermon (although many did speak Arabic), as they were unaccustomed to the Arabic of the Qur'an.

At the Shi'i mosque, after the imam spoke, the worshippers prayed between four white lines in the front of the room, before the *mihrab*, while latecomers arrived unnoticed. Most of the men, wearing socks or nothing on their feet, after leaving their shoes in the *hammam* just behind the sanctuary, removed their belts and picked up a plastic, beige-coloured disk (*masbah*) from a wooden box. After prayer, reverting to Portuguese, the men talked and made plans. The imam, now more casual and curious, asked how long I had studied Arabic, and where. He asked about religious studies in the USA, whether it was called 'theology', and whether there were religious universities. When I left, he was sitting in a pool of sunlight, leaning against a column in the sanctuary.

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pression continue to create new waves of emigrants, including highly skilled groups, professionals, investors and the youth.

Twenty years after the revolution, diasporas have gained in importance and they impact in diverse ways the political environment in Iran. Some members of the exilic community engage in political activism aimed variously at the reform or overthrow of the Islamic regime. Moreover, members of the diaspora influence the foreign policy of the countries where they have become new citizens. Not surprisingly, a struggle has ensued over the control of the diaspora.

Iran's policy of controlling the diaspora is complex, diverse, and implemented through the chain of embassies, consulates and all the power that diplomacy and statehood bring into play. Moreover, Tehran uses satellite broadcasting; allows artists, film makers, films, singers, and sport teams to travel abroad; builds mosques and religious centres; offers material rewards for those using these services; and gathers information on exilic communities.

The opposition in exile was quick to note the shift in policy. Debates have been going on about the extension of state repression to the diaspora and how to confront it. According to one political trend, the Islamic regime should not be allowed any space in the diaspora. This involves a boycott of its export products, sports and art groups, and other in-

tellectual inroads into the exilic community. It also dismisses return to the homeland, or engaging in intellectual and publishing activities there.⁹ However, a large number of Iranians who do not support the Islamic state demonstrated strong attachment to their first homeland when a soccer team visited Australia, Canada and the U.S. in the late 1990s. The visit of the pop singer Googoosh to Canada and the U.S. in 2000 also rallied tens of thousands of nostalgic audiences to her performances. She had been denied the freedom to perform in Iran since 1979.

The de-territorialization of a sizeable population of Iranian dissidents has a far-reaching impact on the political destinies of Iran. Today, the struggle between the diaspora and the Islamic state goes on everywhere – at conferences and demonstrations, in print and broadcast media, and on the internet. However, convergence of political interest between the two sides has developed in the wake of the rise of 'the reformist movement' in and outside the government. Browsing through the diaspora press, it is often difficult to distinguish between the reformist trend in Iran and in exile.

This article is based on research in progress and a paper presented at the 34th annual meeting of the Middle Eastern Studies Association of North America, November 2000.

Notes

1. These are quotations from the first part of a well-known panegyric *qasida* by Sa'di.
2. Cited in Navid Azadi, 'Gharib-e dar sarzamin-e gharib-e-hā' (Strangers in the land of strangers), *Shahrivand*, Vol. 9, No. 452, 28 January 2000, p. 20.
3. *Canadian Almanac and Directory 2000*, Toronto: Micromedia, 1999, p. 1-48.
4. Aryanpur-Kashani, A. and M. (1983), *The Concise Persian-English Dictionary*, Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications.
5. Ibid.
6. The exact words, *sāl-e now-e milādi rā be ʿomum-e hamvatanān-e masih-i tabrik migu'im*, can be found in other papers (e.g. *Sāyebān*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1998, p. 2).
7. See, for instance, Himani Banerjee (2000), *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*, Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
8. Navid Azadi, *ibid.* footnote 3 above.
9. For a survey of the politics of return see, for instance, Azadeh Sepehr, 'Honar-e bāzgasht va bāzgasht-e honari' (The art of return and the artistic return), published first in *Qāsedak* (Europe), reprinted in *Kārikātor*, Toronto, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1997.

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