

Latin America

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Muslims in Argentina

Most studies on immigration to Argentina¹ tend to associate Muslims with Arabs, without distinction. This error has its origins in the way immigrants from Arab countries arrived, especially from Syria and Lebanon. Before the Ottoman Empire territories were divided by national frontiers, all Arabs that arrived here were considered Turkish for the simple reason that they carried Turkish documents. Still today, Arabs in Argentina are popularly known as 'Turks', without necessarily any pejorative connotation. Argentina having been composed by waves of immigration, most new incoming groups were donned sobriquets: Jews were 'Russian', Italians 'Tanos', the Spaniards 'Gallegos', and the Arabs 'Turks'.

The first official data on Arabs in Argentina mentions '17 Ottomans' who arrived at the port of Buenos Aires in 1887.² In the first censuses Muslims do not even appear in the registers, since only Jews and Christians were offered specific categories. Muslims were considered as 'others', and were thus indistinguishable.

Today, the Republic of Argentina has only a small Muslim minority, and obtaining a clear picture of the Islamic community is still somewhat of a problem, although the national census does offer Islam as a clear choice. According to Imam Mahmud Hussain,³ there are currently about 450,00 Muslims in Argentina – less than 25% of the population – and only 40,000 consider themselves believers. According to Mujamad Hayer, director of the Oficina de Cultura y Difusión Islámica (Office of Culture and Islamic Diffusion), there are between 650,000 and 700,000.⁴

Arab immigration to Argentina was quite considerable in the late 19th century, after World War I and up to the mid-20th century, having become its third most important immigration wave. Of these immigrants, 40% are estimated to have been Muslims or children or grandchildren of Muslims.

Late 19th – early 20th century

Syrian-Lebanese immigrants in Argentina created institutions that denoted their cultural-geographic, more than their religious, origins. Indeed, Muslims, Jews and Christians comprised these institutions, joined by their 'Arab' identity. There were, however, properly Islamic institutions. These were established to preserve the religious legacy, including the Arabic language, that was being lost as years went by: most children of Syrian-Lebanese immigrants no longer spoke Arabic at home and were not interested in learning it. They clearly manifested an increasing tendency toward adopting the culture and customs of their host country.

Chronicles from the 1940s mention that it is rare for a Muslim Arab not to drink wine.⁵ And while the 'melting pot' tendency expressed itself in many ways, each immigrant group (even to this day) claimed its own specific part of the national mythology. For example, the gaucho, a farmer whose symbolic image includes the horse, the spear and his equestrian skills, is claimed by certain Muslims as their own, as they see similarities between the gaucho and the Bedouin. Some even maintain that the obscure origins of the word 'gaucho'⁶ are rooted in Arabic.

Carlos Saul Menem's presidency

The diffusion of Islam as such began as recently as 1973, with the foundation of the Centro de Estudios Islámicos (Centre of Islamic Studies) headed by Imam Mahmud Hussain, and has also served to attract Argentinians of non-Muslim origin to Islam.

But until the 1989 elections, Muslims in

Argentina went virtually unnoticed. Their institutions were only known in the neighbourhoods in which they functioned, or by the members of the community who attended the small Arabic or Islamic study centres.

However, this was to change when Carlos Saul Menem became President of Argentina. Of Syrian origin, his father, Saul Menem, and his mother, Mohibe Akil, had arrived from distant Yabrud at the beginning of the century and settled in La Rioja, a small, rather poor, province close to Chile. Menem's entry into power, beyond any ideological issues, revolutionized the country. Argentina now had a president of Muslim roots. Although Menem had embraced Catholicism, which he repeated whenever given the chance (up until the 1994 constitutional reform demanded that the president be a Roman Catholic), to people he was still a Muslim. His wife, who never abandoned Islam, professed her religion openly, and his son, who died in 1995, was buried in an Islamic cemetery.

The 'Arab-Muslim' aspect of the president's origins and close environment also began to acquire public resonance. Menem promised to visit Syria after becoming president, and one of his assistants admitted that Colonel Muammar Ghaddafi had contributed 4 million dollars to the electoral campaign. In addition, his sister-in-law Amira Yoma became government staff member, and her Syrian husband Ibrahim al Ibrahim – despite not knowing a word of Spanish – accepted a high position at the Buenos Aires International Airport (until he resigned in the middle of a scandal and fled the country). His brother was president of the Senate and his other brother, Emir Yoma, was his private secretary until he fell from grace due to money laundering accusations. His cousin Rima Siman was appointed to the Argentinean Embassy in Italy, while another cousin, Amira Akil, was employed at the embassy in Syria. These are but a few examples.

Menem played on ambivalence, not completely denying his roots. He even said that he was a descendant of Mohammed and appeared on very popular television programme dancing with an Arab odalisque. Meanwhile, *kebbe*, *laban* and *arak* were being served at the presidential residence when entertaining guests.

The controversial government of Carlos Menem resulted in its being rejected by certain sectors of Argentinean society. It also spurred scornful chanting about his Muslim roots in street demonstrations by the opposition: 'Traigan al gorila musulman para que vea, que este pueblo no cambia de idea, lucha y pelea con las banderas de Evita y Perón.'⁷

Still, it was not until the attacks on the Israeli Embassy and the central building of the Jewish community that Muslims made their grand public appearance in Argentinean society. On 17 March 1992, a bomb destroyed the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 people. About two years later, on 18 July 1994, an attack caused the death of almost 100 people at AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina – Joint Jewish Argentinean Association). Iran was accused of being responsible from the very beginning. There was talk of an internation-

al connection and a 'local' connection that would necessarily imply participation of members of the Islamic community in Argentina, although no one was incriminated.

With the objective of finding information on the 'fundamentalist Islamic' cells at any cost, Argentinean journalists travelled en masse to Ciudad del Este, a Paraguayan city near the border, since it presumably harboured terrorists. But no one found anything besides merchants of Lebanese origin.

Muslims in Argentinean media

The Islamic community – which up to then had been ignored by the media – as well as the words Shia and Sunna began appearing almost daily in the Argentinean media. Certain community leaders were invited to appear on major television programmes to explain the purported link of Islam with terrorism. The term 'fundamentalism' began to be used synonymously with Muslim, and the Islamic community became stigmatized because of its 'apparent' link to the attacks. In the first six months of 1996, *Diario Clarín*, the most important newspaper in Argentina, mentioned the word fundamentalism in 104 articles as a synonym for fanaticism, extremism and, in more general lines, religious Muslim extremism. In those 6 months, only 3 articles failed to associate fundamentalism with Islam,⁸ thus marking a tendency with regard to the association of a phenomenon with a community as a whole.

Islam today

The number of Muslims in Argentina is decreasing, and this is due to several factors. Firstly, in families of Muslim origin, customs are being lost, from the Arabic language to food and drink. Secondly, there is relatively little reading material on Islam available in Spanish. There is a growing tendency toward mixed marriages in which children lose all references to Islam, and there are too few study centres for disseminating Islam. This may, however, change in the future with the construction of the new Islamic Cultural Center King Fahd, financed by the Saudi government, which includes a school and a mosque with a minaret in the heart of Buenos Aires. It is considered to be the largest of its kind in Latin America.

The 1990s marked the 'public' appearance of Muslims in Argentina but, because of the attacks and the stereotypes created, Muslims were more worried about proving their innocence than about spreading their religion. But despite all of this, the last few years have witnessed an entirely new phenomenon: Islam has incorporated itself into Argentinean society as something more natural and acceptable. There is no longer an element of surprise when someone publicly claims to be a Muslim. Besides, the children and, especially, the grandchildren of Muslims are beginning to look for their roots and are trying to get closer to their own history and that of their ancestors, a phenomenon common to the both North and South America. ◆

Notes

1. The first Muslims to arrive in Argentina were probably descendants of the Moors that came with the first Spanish conquistadors before the country became independent. This, however, is uncertain.
2. Morandini, Norma (1998), 'El harén, los árabes y el poder político en la Argentina'. Ed. *Sudamericana*, Buenos Aires, p. 22.
3. Imam Mahmud Hussain is ex-president of the Asociación para la difusión del Islam en América Latina (Association for the diffusion of Islam in Latin America), and director of the Centro de Altos Estudios Islámicos de la Argentina (Centre of Advanced Islamic Studies of Argentina) and the magazine *Sufismo Viviente*, and is currently translating the Koran into Spanish. Interview by the author, 11 august 2000.
4. Interview by the author, 30 August 2000.
5. Peralta, Santiago (1946), 'Influencia del pueblo árabe en la Argentina, apuntes sobre inmigración', Buenos Aires, p. 297.
6. Public conference of Imam Mahmud Hussain, Buenos Aires, 24 September 1996.
7. 'Bring the Muslim gorilla so he can see that this people changes no ideas, struggle or fight with the flags of Evita and Perón.' The expression 'gorilla' refers to a contemptuous expression against the military that overthrew General Juan Perón. The enemies of Perón's followers are usually called gorillas. Although Menem comes from the peronista movement, many consider that his government has left the political banners of Perón and his wife Eva Duarte, better known as Evita.
8. Brieger, Pedro (1996), 'Some Reflections on the Diario Clarín and Fundamentalism'. MSANEWS (msanews@faith.mynet.net), Ohio.

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