

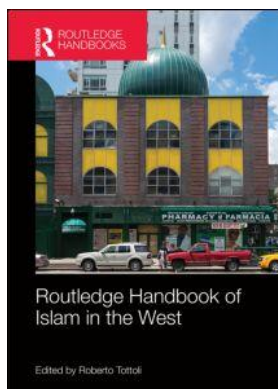
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 03 Oct 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West

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Muslims in South America

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315794273.ch10>

Marco Gallo

Published online on: 20 Aug 2014

How to cite :- Marco Gallo. 20 Aug 2014, *Muslims in South America from: Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West* Routledge

Accessed on: 03 Oct 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315794273.ch10>

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Muslims in South America

History, presence, and visibility of a religious minority in a Christian context

Marco Gallo

The study of Muslims and Islamic presence in Latin America has been for a long time unsystematic if not completely neglected, but in these last years a renewed interest is appearing. This is due to various different reasons but, above all, to the growing public presence of Islam not only on a global scale, but also in Latin America. It is obviously difficult, if not impossible, to summarize this history and this presence; not only because Latin America is not a homogeneous region, but also because this new Islamic presence has produced a lot of different reactions and discourses: politics, religious institutions, universities, the media, and the internet above all are producing an impressive amount of data and new sources. These sources may have been analyzed on an urban, regional, or national level but still require a complete analysis. Furthermore, much of this data is coming from Islamic groups, and is often limited to an apologetic approach. This is also strongly related to the historical problem of the first Islamic presence in Latin America.

The first presence of Muslims in South America

Every narrative about beginnings swings between myth and history. The problem of the first Islamic presence in the New World is no different. In recent times many theories have been produced to demonstrate a pre-Columbian Islamic presence in the Americas; but, to be honest, they are essentially pseudoscientific theories that would backdate the discovery of America to the Phoenicians or to the Muslims of the first Caliphal period, often only as a result of ingenious readings of written sources or archeological data (Taboada 2010). A different and more complex question is whether it is possible to speak about the physical presence of Muslims in the New World in the very first times after the conquest, that is, before the arrival of Muslims among the black slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The few scholars who have dealt with this problem agree in emphasizing the limited numbers but diverge considerably with regards to the interpretation of the collected data. It is certain that the *moriscos* that appeared before the Inquisition in the New World during the sixteenth century were few in number, and it is not easy to identify them, also because the few references to the “sect of Muhammad”

in the New World are often inserted within speeches concerning certain religious relativism or generically Protestant ideas. In the Americas, in other words, the newly converted Christian who practiced his original religion secretly appears to have been uncommon. Even if it seems reasonable to admit that numbers were relatively modest and even insignificant (Taboada 2004b: 115–32), this does not make those individual cases less interesting. A famous case is that of Estevanico, a Moorish slave who survived the shipwreck of 1527 en route to Florida. His unusual history has offered a compelling subject both to the historians of the age of the conquest and to those who study the invention of tradition; while Estevanico has been celebrated by generations of Africans and African Americans as the first man of color to reach American soil, others have begun to explore his Muslim faith with a certain degree of fantasy (Vanoli 2010).

Setting aside these first and episodic cases, there is much substance to the hypothesis of a colonial Islam, brought by the African slaves, even if Islamic communities don't seem to have existed in a truly organized sense in the colonial period. An exception to this is the Brazilian groups of African origin called generally Malês, a word derived from the dialect Yoruba *imalé* (i.e. Muslim, natives of Mali). These Muslim slaves had a strong capacity for organization that manifested in different rebellions. The most famous of these incidents, known as the rebellion of Mali, occurred in 1835 in San Salvador de Bahia (Kent 1970). Perhaps only in Brazil do we have some trace of a surviving Islamic community attested to by an Arabic traveler around 1865 (Quiring-Zoche 1995: 115–24). And we may add to these traces the mysterious amulets with Arabic texts discovered in Bolivia and dating back to the nineteenth century (Cerezo Ponte 2005: 339–358).

This research and the growing possibilities given by the archeological approach could offer new data about the first Islamic presence in Latin America, but it seems sufficiently true that, in any case, we are speaking about marginal phenomena. Also after independence, Islam in Latin America was perceived as something absolutely remote. The true big change began in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Latin America moved from the post-independence consolidation phase to begin its integration in the world economy. The independent republics moved to strengthen the use of two elements in their economies, land and labor (Skidmore and Smith 2005: 40), and to provide labor the Latin American elites in several countries hoped for immigration above all from Europe. But this immigration process also dragged people from other lands: Indian Muslims passed through the English Caribbean and arrived in Panama; some Bengalis were in Venezuela and in Colombia, in the valley of the Rio Cauca (Navarrete 1997: 75–91). Small numbers at first, but by around 1870 a new impressive wave of immigrants from the Ottoman empire changed the situation again. They were mostly from Lebanon and they were above all Christians, but not exclusively. With the Maronites and the Orthodox Christians, Jews and Muslims arrived from the Ottoman territories.

In this first context, it is not always easy to recognize Muslims; the different numbers of them assumed by historians are strongly determined by the kind of sources used or by their interpretation. For example, the registers of some ports, such as Buenos Aires or Santiago de Chile, clearly testified the number of Muslim immigrants, and sometimes these numbers could be verified with the national census or the archival data of the Ottoman Empire. So, for example, in Chile the census of 1895 recorded 79 Turkish citizens, 58 of whom were indicated as “Mohammedan,” who lived in different towns of the Chilean territory. Later on, in the census of 1907, the number of Muslims had risen to 1,498, all of them foreigners, thus representing 0.04 percent of the population. Sometimes we know only the place of origin, and in this case it is often difficult to distinguish among Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Moreover, sometimes we may find the case of immigrants that decided to hide their identity using a Christian name or declaring a different religious affiliation.

Some scholars indicate the presence of more than 1,500,000 Muslims in South American countries (taking into account that the Arab migration to these lands consisted of a Christian majority, and a percentage must have been Muslim). However, it is more probable that this figure is to be halved and that there were no more than 700,000 Muslims. In this regard, it is very difficult to get definite numbers, given the lack of archival sources, so that it is not easy to estimate the presence of Muslims accurately. We can thus say that at the end of the nineteenth century and until the mid-twentieth century the Muslim community in different countries of South America, whatever its total number, was rather scattered and unorganized: there were very few, and poor, Islamic centers and very few organized groups and religious activities (sometimes, as in Colombia, we have records of reunions for Ramadan). In other words, from many points of view, in these first decades of immigration Islamic identity was something perceptible merely as residual, and exactly thus was it still perceived by scholars in the second half of the twentieth century (Reichert 1965: 194; Delval 1992: 267). It has been observed (Taboada 2010) that, curiously, during this first period the greatest vitality was present in minority confessions in the *dar al-islam*: for example Shi'ism in Argentina or the Baha'is in Chile, Panama, and Ecuador.

It is difficult to suggest a unique attitude of Latin American governments towards "Arabs" and "Turks" (terms used at the time with a racial connotation and without religious implications). Even if Islam was not so evident, the significant presence of "Arabs" or "Turks" sometimes produced strong reactions in Latin American society and in governments. In general the new states favored immigration from Europe; an example of promoting the entrance of particular social groups through specific policies was the immigrants from Central Europe in Chile (Agar and Rebolledo 1997). Often "Arabs" were viewed as "second-class" people. In some countries the arrival of certain races of immigrants, such as Arabs or Chinese, was considered a danger due to the risk of interracial marriage, adding a racist argument that this could even produce physiological deformations. This happened, for example, in Argentina, where Institutions and the media spoke about this immigration as something dangerous for the Nation, because "Turks" were conceived as "biologically" inclined to "parasitical activities" (Noufourri 2009: 128). But, setting aside these negative perceptions, in general immigration policy in Latin America permitted easy entrance to the ethnic groups coming from the Ottoman Empire. In Brazil, for example, an explicit change in Brazilian immigration policy contributed to the flux of immigrants from Syria and Lebanon who (in contrast to other groups of immigrants who sought employment as farmers in the coffee plantations) directed themselves to the biggest cities to find work above all as merchants. São Paulo, in particular, was and still is the most important place for the Islamic presence in Brazil.

The twentieth century: the social emergence of the Islamic groups

At the end of the nineteenth and in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Latin America faced the most relevant immigration from the Ottoman territories. Recent studies (Akmir 2009) calculate in these terms the Arabic demographic impact in Latin America around the year 1926: Brazil 162,000 Arabs; Venezuela 3,282; Colombia 3,767; Ecuador 1,060; Chile (in 1930) 6,703; Argentina (in 1914) 64,369.

But, given these data, it is not always easy to identify any Islamic identity or attitude among these men and women from the actual regions of Syria, Lebanon, or Palestine. This phenomenon could be determined by different reasons: perhaps by a certain "inquisitorial" attitude of the local church or Creole society; but more by the difficulty of practicing Islam in a non-Muslim land in a context of complete cultural isolation, taking into consideration the presence

of women in the Islamic community in that first wave. Moreover, in that isolated context, these first immigrants tended to organize themselves in groups defined more by their common language than any religious identity; that's why "Arabs" in their early associations mixed amicably together as Christians, Jews, and Muslims (Klich 1995: 109–43). It is also possible to observe the effects of this trend in the changing of names: generally new generations did not impose Islamic names and sometimes changed their original names (Jozami 1996: 67–85). Confirming a widespread rule, the less educated immigrants tended to quickly lose their cultural distinctiveness and not transmit it to their children.

This also happened in the case of Islamic traditions; however, there were still enough signals of activity during the first half of the twentieth century. It is difficult to ascertain the knowledge and use of the Arabic language among immigrants during that period, but in any case it is true that throughout these decades there was important production and circulation of Arabic texts (books, journals, magazines) in Brazil and in Argentina. The first newspaper in Arabic appeared in São Paulo in 1895, and by 1914 there were fourteen Arabic-language newspapers, an output that surprised even the immigrants (Truzzi 1992: 45). These publications initially focused on issues in the Middle East, such as the domination of Syria and Lebanon by the Turks, but over time they began to turn their attention to events within the colony in Brazil. The same impressive production is also attested to in Argentina. The first Arabic newspaper was the *Sada al-Yunub*, published in Buenos Aires by al-Juri Yuhanna Sa'id in 1899. In the same year, also in Buenos Aires, *Al-Subh* appeared. In 1908 in Cordoba Aziz Hakim published *al-Hakim*. And later were published, among others, *Assalam* (Buenos Aires, 1902) by Wadi Sam'un, *Al-Zaman* (1905), *Al-Mirsal* (1913), *Al-Shams* (1915), *Al-Ittihad al-Lubnani* (1915), *Al-Istiqlal* (1926), *Al-'Alam al-'Arabi* (1933), *Al-'Uqab* (1936), *Al-Jami'a al-Lubnaniyya* (1937), *Ahlan wa-Sahlan* (1940), *Al-Watan* (1943), and *Al-Rafiq* (1944).

This incomplete list shows the intense cultural activity that permeated the Arabic (even if, obviously, not necessary Islamic) communities in Brazil and Argentina, a presence that was particularly strong in Brazil and Argentina, but that in these years was also visible in other Latin American Lands. So, for example, there were also publications in Chile: the first was *Al-Mursid*, published in Santiago by al-Khuri Bulus al-Khuri in 1912, followed by *al-'Awatif* and *Al-Mumir* in 1916, *Al-Sabiba* in 1918, *Al-Watan* in 1920, and *Al-Islah* in 1930 (Amo 2006). But also in Cuba (the first was *Al-Irtiqa' al-Suri* in 1914), in Mexico (the first was *Al-Siham* in 1905), but also in Uruguay and Venezuela (for a more complete description of the Latin American Arabic publications, see Amo 2001).

Moreover, during that period the first forms of Islamic associations appeared. So, for example, in Brazil in 1929 Muslims organized the Sociedade Beneficente Musulmana to care for the Muslim peoples of São Paulo. This society, in addition to the contributions of the Syrian-Lebanese immigrants, raised money from the governments of Arab Muslim countries in the Middle East (Pitts 2006: 58). In the same sense, in Chile the Sociedad Unión Musulmana was founded on September 25, 1926, and the following year a society for Islamic mutual aid and charity (Centro de Cultura y Beneficencia Islámico) was also established. In Argentina, on November 15, 1931, Muslims founded their first religious institution. The main objective was to organize the Muslim community living in that region. Its original name was Asociación Pan Islamismo. Among the objectives of the institution were humanitarian principles based on charity, loyalty and fairness among all Muslims, following the principles of the Qur'an. In 1940 it was renamed Asociación Islámica de Previsión Social ("Islamic Association of Social Security") and later on, with the efforts and cooperation of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants who had settled in the country, and with the desire to maintain their religious and cultural traditions, it purchased some land in a central area of the town. Thus, in 1957, the General Assembly

decided to change the name again to the final Centro Islámico (“Islamic Center”). At the same time other Islamic groups in Argentina founded their own association; for example, in 1931 the Asociación Unión Alauita (“Association Alawite Union”), in 1936 the Asociación Islámica Alauita de Beneficiencia (“Islamic Alawite Association of Charity”), and in 1943 the Asociación Pan Alauita Islámica (“Pan-Islamic Alawite Association”) (Akmir 2009: 88–9).

A new wave of immigrants from Islamic lands arrived after World War II. This was both as a result of the new economic prosperity of some Latin American regions (above all Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia) and the political and economic crises in the countries of origin. Certain influxes occurred from Palestine in 1948 and 1967 and Lebanon in 1975, at the beginning of the Civil War, but also, in the 1970s and 1980s, from African countries (Senegal, Nigeria, Republic of Congo). Among the nations of reception, the countries who received the most Muslim immigrants in the last decades were Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. For example, while there were a few Muslims among the earliest Syrian-Lebanese immigrants to Brazil, they began arriving in large numbers straight after World War II. Although reliable statistics are not available, it appears that the majority of immigrants from the Middle East to Brazil after 1945 were Muslims, usually from Lebanon, but sometimes from Palestine, Syria, or Egypt, and occasionally from other Arab states. In addition to settling in cities where Syrian-Lebanese communities already existed, Muslim Arabs established their own colonies in other areas of the country, particularly in rapidly growing cities on the Paraguayan and Bolivian borders that offered exciting commercial opportunities. As a result, the Arab communities in such cities as Foz de Iguazu, on the Paraguayan border, and Corumbá, on the Bolivian border, are almost entirely Muslim.

Indeed it was starting from the 1980s, with a new democratic tendency, that a more active Muslim presence began to be perceived, not only in Brazil, but in several states of Latin America.

Until that period, the Islamic presence seemed to assimilate, almost completely, to Argentine society’s Western characteristics. This reality, and the strength of Argentine society’s prejudice *vis-à-vis* a minority hailing from a different culture, have translated into some obvious religious-cultural losses; among the latter is the loss of significant documents that would have facilitated a reconstruction of its historical development. Apart from other factors, an obvious casualty of such losses has been scientific research on Argentina’s Muslims; hitherto, neither scholars nor serious laymen have focused their attention on them, the late academic author of several ethno-linguistic studies excepted (Jozami 1996: 69).

The 1980s were the years in which in Buenos Aires, in the district of Constitución, thanks to the money of the Argentine communities, the al-Ahmad mosque was founded (1983). These were also the years during which educational activities with the goal of maintaining the use of Arabic amongst younger generations multiplied. With this purpose, the Islamic Center in Buenos Aires inaugurated Arabic-language courses and in 1990 finally founded the Colegio Argentino Árabe Omar Bin Al Jattab (“Argentine Arab School Omar Bin Al Jattab”), which is a secular school, where classes on religion are optional. The center also started to publish the magazine *La voz del Islam*, which soon became the flag of Sunni Islam in Argentina. It can also be argued that Argentine society “discovered” the existence of Muslims for the first time, not thanks to their cultural activities, but after the election of a president of Islamic origin who had converted to Catholicism, Carlos Menem (b. 1930), whose family was Syrian (Sunni) Muslim and had settled in the northwestern Argentine province of La Rioja. The second factor that determined a new attention towards Muslims in Argentina was the deep impression given by the attacks on the Israeli Embassy in 1992 and on the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) in 1994 (Méndez 2009: 39). This second attack, in particular, was Argentina’s deadliest

bombing ever: it occurred in Buenos Aires on July 18, 1994, killing eighty-five people and injuring hundreds. Even if the investigations didn't produce concrete results, many allegations have been made, above all those blaming the government of Iran (the attack was linked to Hezbollah); and in general more attention was given to Islamic terrorism. Not by chance, it is above all after this period that it is possible to observe a changing attitude in public Islamic speeches in Argentina: with a new attention to underlining the good relationship between Muslims and the other internal religious communities; and stressing the solidarity between Latin American Muslims and those in other Islamic lands.

Islam in Latin America today

It is difficult to estimate exactly how many Muslims live in Latin America today. Based on the most recent data, it is possible to say that there are around 500,000 Muslims in Argentina, of whom 60 percent are Sunni, 30 percent Shi'i, and 10 percent 'Alawi, a branch of Shi'i Islam (US Department of State 2010). In Brazil the official census says that there are more than 35,000 Muslims (2010 census) living primarily in the states of São Paulo and Paraná. In Venezuela there are more than 100,000 Muslims, concentrated mainly in Nueva Esparta State and the Caracas area (US Department of State 2007). Moreover, the statistics (Pew Research Center report 2009) say that there are around 110,000 Muslims in Mexico, 24,000 in Panama, 14,000 in Colombia, 9,000 in Cuba, 2,000 in Haiti, 2,000 in Ecuador, 2,000 in Bolivia, 1,000 in Paraguay, 1,000 in Peru, and 1,000 in Puerto Rico.

These are not the only numbers available (for a methodological discussion of the different data, see Taboada 2010), but they allow us to cautiously affirm that there has been a long-term numerical increase. This increase is confirmed by the number (certainly less quantifiable) of Islamic centers, clubs, schools, social charities, *musallas*, mosques, and even publications and websites. All these signs, together with the increase in the number of men wearing beards or of women wearing veils, lead us to conclude that Latin American Islam has become not only larger but also more visible, alongside the other communities throughout the world.

This transformation is also determined by many other factors. In recent decades a new kind of Islamic immigration has appeared: students, academic scholars, technicians, businessmen, and also religious experts sent to America to proselytize or to establish a Sufi center. But despite this new perspective, Latin American Islam continues to be mostly Arabic: it is not only a problem of numbers, but also of traditions, customs, publishing, and cultural activities.

But this new demographic and social impact has also been related to the processes of re-islamization that affected Muslim countries and that contributed to producing a new identity in South American Muslims. In this sense, the growing interest of Islamic countries toward Latin American Muslims is a new fact. In the preceding decades only Egypt paid any attention to these distant Muslims, but today there is a strong diplomatic presence of many Islamic countries: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and, at least until 2011, Libya. Oil money and the money of Islamic banks is behind the construction of several mosques and Islamic centers that appeared in Latin America in the 1990s. Two good examples are the mosques in Caracas (1993) and Buenos Aires (2001), both strongly financed and tied by a similar architectural style: the mosque of Caracas has a minaret of more than 100 meters; the impressive mosque of Buenos Aires rises in the district of Palermo and is considered Saudi territory.

These transformations have produced a new sense of belonging: now a lot of Latin American Muslims perceive themselves not only as connected to their original nationality, but also (and sometimes above all) as part of that global *umma* that in recent years has received a great deal of attention from scholars (Roy 2006). Not by chance, in this new cultural and social context, it is

also possible to detect an increasing interest in conversion activity among non-Muslims. Thus, among the new religious proposals offered by natives, Christians, and Jews, it is possible to observe a new phenomenon of conversion to Islam. This happens among Latinos in the United States, among Afro-Brazilians or Mexican, Bolivian, and Chilean natives (Taboada 2010). But it is true also that this new proselytism is not always accepted by Latin American Muslims. For example, in Brazil, among the “old” Muslims, there is widespread suspicion towards converts, and this is determined both by the perception of Islam as a patrimony of the Arabs (Montenegro and Moreira 2002) and by suspicion of forms of Islam other than orthodox and too close to New Age practices.

In any case Latin American Islam seems to be in a moment of evolution and growing exposure. But this exposure has not been produced only by internal causes or the new interest of the global Islamic economy. Sadly, the geopolitical changes of the past ten years have also strongly contributed to augmenting attention towards Muslim communities all over the world, including in Latin America. The solicitations following 9/11 and the new international conditions have pushed American Islam and Muslims towards higher visibility in everyday life and in the media. It has been well studied, for example in the case of Brazilian Muslims; it is true that, as early in the 1990s but increasingly after September 11, 2001, in towns such as São Paulo there are evident signals of a growing Islamophobic feeling. These events pushed the religious communities in Brazil (i.e. the Liga da Juventude Islâmica Beneficente in São Paulo) to react with public activities and declarations, with the intention of deconstructing the image of Islam as a religion connected to the violence (Marques 2011: 35–7).

Distinctions and perspectives

The data presented here show us a small presence in terms of numbers, but a presence that in recent decades has been able to consolidate its identity. It is always necessary to remember an obvious statement: Islam is not uniform and among its variations are also adaptations to the host land. This is also true for Latin America.

So, for example, we have the small Muslim community in Colombia, made up mostly of Lebanese and Palestinians emigrated in recent years (since the 1970s) and settled mostly in Buenaventura, Maicao, and Bogota. Related to this community there are some associations (the Asociación Benéfica Islámica de Bogota), mosques (in 1997 the Mezquita Omar ibn al-Khattab, the second largest mosque in Latin America, was inaugurated in Maicao), and schools (the Colegio Colombo Árabe Dar El Arkam in Maicao). There is also a clear increase in the rate of the groups coming from other countries in Africa and Asia. Along with this, the return of Colombian converts to Islam from the Middle East to their own country has broadened Colombian citizens' interest in the Islamic world.

In Chile the statistics are quite different: according to the 2002 census Muslims number around 3,000, including converts to Islam, and a large number of Islamic organizations are attested to and active in the country. The construction of the first mosque in Santiago began in 1988 and the second one was built almost ten years later, in a town in northern Chile, Iquique, which accounts for the largest Pakistani community in the region. In 2006 another new mosque was inaugurated in the town of Coquimbo. This articulated topography is also the expression of the plurality of Islam in Chile: the As-Salam Mosque of Santiago is for the Sunni community, but maintains relations with Jama'at al-Tabligh, an organization of Indian origin and well diffused in the Western world. Further, next to the mosque, there is also the Centro Islamico de Chile (“Islamic Center of Chile”), which is authorized to certify *halal* food. Muslim activity in Chile is also reflected in some institutions, for example the Centro Mohammed VI para el

Diálogo de las Civilizaciones, with its mosque inaugurated in 2007, or the Centro Cultural al-Mahdí, a non-profit organization, created with the help of a group of Chilean converts to Islam. In general, though the number of Muslims is small, mostly connected to past immigrations, the presence of Islam in Chile is strengthened and enhanced by many institutions and centers which have emerged in recent decades. The small number of Muslims seems to help the cohesion between various attitudes and groups rather than reproducing the division of the Muslim world. This recent evolution of the visibility of Muslim communities is further underlined by the fact that until the 1980s there were no religious leaders or centers for praying in Chile.

The Brazilian case is completely different (Montenegro 2000, 2002). As usual, there is no certainty about statistical data, and even if the most recent census speaks of 35,000, other sources (significantly of Muslim origin) estimate a presence of 600,000 Muslims. Setting aside this kind of exaggeration, in any case the Islamic presence in Brazil is a social reality. This has also been caused by the new immigration that started around the 1970s and that determined a diffusion (helped by Saudi or Iranian money) of new mosques that were built in the regions of Paraná, São Paulo, Mato Grosso, Goiás, Distrito Federla, and Mina Gerais (the mosque of Rio de Janeiro was inaugurated only in 2007). These mosques were above all Sunni, but there was also growth in the Shi'i community in São Paulo. These were also years of new conversions; today there is still an internal debate that divides Muslims of Arab origin – usually called “brasileños” – and the new converts without Arab origins. Not by chance, among the newly converted the language of communication is Portuguese, used both in the mosque of Rio de Janeiro during the Friday sermon and in the courses offered by the Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana Chagas (2006), while in the mosque of Pari (Salah al-Din) in São Paulo, which belongs to the Liga de Juventude Islâmica, the sermon is in Arabic (with translation in Portuguese). As in other parts of the world, for the “old” Muslims Islam is not only the sacred texts, but also a series of cultural traditions (amulets, rituals, etc.) perceived as Islamic, while for the new converts to Islam, the religion is codified above all in an emphasis on the sacred texts organized in a more abstract system. But Brazilian Islam is actually more complex than this Manichean distinction: there are African Muslims from Angola, Mozambique, Senegal, and Ghana, who in 2005 founded a mosque in São Paulo dedicated to the black muezzin Bilal al-Hasbashi (Cavalcante 2008). There is a group of converted Muslims, related to the Jama'at al-Tabligh, who in 2007 founded a *musalla* in the Paraís district of São Paulo. There are also Sufi communities, not as important as in Argentina.

Indeed, the most important Islamic presence in Latin America is in Argentina: as we have seen, the number of 500,000 Muslims is probably correct, divided among Buenos Aires (the majority: between 160,000 and 200,000 people) and other provinces such as Mendoza, Tucumán, Rosario, Cordoba, and La Rioja. There is no need to underline the plurality of associations and cultural institutions, grounded in the national past of the country. Given its numbers and its history, it is clear that Islam in Argentina is different and fragmented. There are many confessional distinctions among the Muslim communities: Sunni, Shi'i, or 'Alawi; but there are also many distinctions defined by ethnic origin or the relationship with the state. As has been stated, there is a multiplicity of myths of the origins, forms of association, speech, and modalities of construction of the public presence inside these identity constructions (Montenegro 2010: 1).

Not by chance, in the 1990s the contribution of Saudi Arabia converged in Argentina, giving birth to the new Centro Cultural Islamico Rey Fahd (“Islamic Cultural Center King Fahd”), which includes the largest mosque in Latin America in the central district of Palermo in Buenos Aires. It is an impressive 20,000 square meter building that operates also as a kindergarten,

school, and housing for students. But it is significant that for the “old” Muslims in Buenos Aires the mosque of reference remains the al-Ahmad.

In another sense, from the point of view of the new forms of associations, it is significant that the Organización Islámica para América Latina has been created by Muslims of Argentina with the aim, as they stated, of “coordinat[ing] and encourag[ing] the Islamic activities and projects in Latin America” and of “encourag[ing] the relationships ... with the other Islamic communities in the World” (www.islamerica.org.ar/oipal.htm). In a similar direction there is also the experience of the Conferencia Islámica Iberoamericana, with seats in Cordoba and Bogota, constituted under the influence of Iberian converts and Latin American Muslims.

In a different sense, Latin American Islam, represented by lands such as Argentina (but also Brazil or Chile), is also the expression of a new tendency in international dialogue for the relationship among cultures and religions. Among examples of this is the Foro Tripartito Latinoamericano y Caribeño about Interreligious Cooperation organized for two years in Buenos Aires. There is the project Alianza de Civilizaciones, originally inspired by Spain and Turkey in 2005, which determined the regional seminar organized in Argentina with the title “La Mujer y la Alianza de Civilizaciones. Oportunidades y desafíos.” It is necessary to underline also the Comité Interreligioso por la Paz (COMIPAZ) in the city of Cordoba, and the Instituto de Diálogo Interreligioso de Buenos Aires and Sant’Egidio Community. Moreover, recently, the encounter with Jorge Bergoglio – archbishop of Buenos Aires – in the Centro Islámico de la República Argentina (CIRA) has made Catholic–Islamic dialogue in the country official.

These new tendencies are part of a complex redefinition of Islamic discourse and activities in Latin America. This redefinition, as we have seen, is strongly related with the new cultural, economical, and social global perspective, but also has a deep regional impact. In other words, the new Muslim identities that are growing in Latin America today are deeply involved in a reconstruction of the history of their presence in these territories. Not by chance recent years have seen the first encounters about the importance of the Arabic (and Islamic) presence in the history of the Argentine Nation. In this sense an example is the international congress held in Buenos Aires in 2008 with the title “Dos siglos argentinos de interculturalidad cristiano – judeo – islámica”. An example among others of a tendency that will inevitably be important in the future: the American past, in its global perspective, needs to be rewritten from the other points of view. And the American Islamic past of Islam could be one of them.

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