Most studies on immigration to Argentina 1 tend to associate Muslims with Arabs, without distinction. This error has its origins in the way immigrants from Arab countries arrived in the country, especially from Lebanon. Before the Ottoman Empire territories were divided by national frontiers, all Arabs that arrived 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 invaded by waves of immigration, most new incoming groups were dubbed 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. In the first censuses Muslims do not even appear in the registers, since only Jews and Christians were considered non-Muslims, and as such were considered ‘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 censuses offer Islam as a clear choice. According to Imam Mahmoud Husain, there are currently about 450,000 Muslims in Argentina – less than 2% of the population – and only 40,000 consider themselves believers. According to Mujamad Hayer, director of the Office of Culture and Islamic Diffusion (Office of Culture and Islamic Diffusion), there are between 650,000 and 700,000 Muslim Argentinians today. 2

Arab immigration to Argentina was quite considerable in the late 19th century, after World War I and up to the mid-20th century, helping to destroy the social barriers and acknowledging the Arab identity. 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 their own institutions in their own languages and their own history and that of their ancestors, and territorialized Islam. There are, however, properly Islamic institutions. These were established to preserve the religious legacy, including 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. Chorones from the mid-1940s mention that it is rare for a Muslim Arab not to drink wine, 3 and while the ‘melting pot’ tendency expressed itself in many ways, such 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’ 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 Mahmoud Husain, and has also served to attract Argentineans of non-Muslim origin to Islam. But until the 1989 elections, Muslims in Argentina went virtually unnoticed. Their institutions were only known in the neighborhoods in which they functioned, or by 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, Sahel Mene- hem, and his mother, Mahfeh Ali, had arrived in Argentina from Damascus 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 its theological op- position, revolutionized the country. Argentina now had a president of Muslim origins. Although Menem had embraced Catholicism, which he repeated whenever given the chance (up to the 1994 constitutional reform demanded that the president be a Roman Catholic), to people he was still a Muslim. His wife, who never aban- doned Islam, preserved her religious identity. Menem’s origins, his family, his equestrian skills, is claimed by cer- tain Muslims in Argentina as being the reason for the growth of a Muslim minority.

Muslims in Argentinean after Menem

The Islamic community – which up to then had been ignored by the media – as well as the words ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslim’ began appearing almost daily in the Argentinean media. Certain community leaders were invited to ap- pear on major television programmes to ex- plain the purported link of some Muslims with terrorist acts. The term ‘fundamentalism’ began to be used synonymously with Muslim, and the is- lamic community became labelled because of its ‘apparent’ link to the attacks. In the first six months of 1996, Diario Clarín, the most important newspaper in Argentina, mentioned fundamentalism in 104 articles as a synonym for fanaticism, ex- tremism and, in more general lines, religious intolerance. In those 6 months, only 3 articles failed to associate fundamentalism with Islam, thus marking a tendency with regard to the reception of Islam in Argentina 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 Islami- c 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 1995 marked the ‘public’ appearance of Muslims in Argentina but, because of the attacks and the stereotypes created, Mus- lims were more worried about proving their innocence than about spreading their reli- gion. But despite all of this, the last few years have witnessed 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 Islami- c 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.

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.


3. Imam Mahmoud Husain 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.


7. ‘Bring the Muslim gorilla so he can see that this people changes no ideas, struggle or fight with the flag of Evita and Peron.’ The expression ‘gorilla’ refers to a contemptuous expression against the military that overthrew General Juan Peron. The enemies of Peron’s followers are usually called gorillas. Although Menem comes from the peronista movement, many consider that his government has left the political banners of Peron and his wife Eva Duarte, better known as Evita.


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