

The Manifestation of Islam in Argentina

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## THE MANIFESTATION OF ISLAM IN ARGENTINA\*

In March 1995, a tragic incident understandably evoked public displays of Muslim religiosity in Buenos Aires. The incident—the death of the head of state’s son—provoked the irruption of ritual and religious aspects of Islam, unknown to most Argentines, on the country’s radio and television. The demise of president Carlos Menem’s first-born brought into the public arena with a vengeance the issue of ethnoreligious identity that had been kept under wraps since the end of the nineteenth century as a matter for the intimacy of family and community.

Carlos Menem, Jr. had been born in an Argentine environment of the Muslim faith, with his paternal grandmother reportedly a direct descendant of the prophet Muhammad.<sup>1</sup> The family home where he grew up was situated in a small, anticosmopolitan and monoconfessional milieu, his four grandparents—Syrian (Sunni) Muslim immigrants<sup>2</sup>—having settled in Catholic Argentina’s northwestern province of La Rioja. Whereas his mother,

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<sup>1</sup> Gladys Jozami, “La identidad nacional de los llamados turcos en la Argentina,” *Temas de Africa y Asia 2* (1993), 191.

<sup>2</sup> Although all followers of Islam share a way of life and ethical system, these immigrants in Argentina belong to one of two large branches, a Sunni majority and Shiite minority. Estimated by the former at 10-12 percent of Argentina’s Muslims, the latter have acquired an unexpected prominence since the Iranian revolution. Among the Shiites, there are the Alawites hailing from Syria, a small though vital subgroup, especially in Buenos Aires and the northwestern province of Tucumán. On both provinces’ Muslim institutions, see, respectively, M. A. Saleh de Canuto and S. Budeguer, *El aporte de sirios y libaneses a Tucumán* (San Miguel de Tucumán: Editorial América, 1979), pp. 90-92; L. Cazorla, *La inmigración sirio y libanesa en la provincia de Buenos Aires a través de sus instituciones étnicas* (Buenos Aires: Fundación Los Cedros, 1995), pp. 65, 68-72, 82-84, 130-34, 149-51. On Argentina’s Sunnis and Shiites, see S. A. H. Ahsani, “Muslims in Latin America: A Survey Part I,” *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* (July 1984) 456-57.

Zulema Yoma, publicly declared herself a Muslim, the father, a Catholic convert,<sup>3</sup> affirmed his adherence to the creed he had formally adopted in the early 1960s.<sup>4</sup> During his lifetime, Carlos, Jr. had identified himself as an Argentine Muslim, his self-portrait being that of someone who believed “in God, the Prophet and the Quran, but I am not a practicing Muslim. To pray at the mosque, to refrain from drinking alcohol or eating pork, that I do not do. But it is difficult to stick to such practices while living in Argentina . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Both parents’ religious identities became evident at different times after the death of Menem, Jr., shedding light on the constant interlacing of Argentina’s official culture, Western and Christian, with the parental Muslim ethnic identity. Immediately after the tragedy, the president received Christian spiritual assistance. From the province of Santa Fe, where the death occurred, to the Olivos presidential residence the cross was replaced by a crescent as the coffin arrived at the Buenos Aires Islamic Centre, historically the most representative of the Islamic tradition. Here, a brief religious ceremony was held. Once this was over, the Argentine chief executive took leave of his son by “crossing himself.” Instead, at the presidential residence, religious representatives of both creeds prayed by turns. While at the Islamic Centre the parental chain was defined by the mother’s family, in Olivos, both families—the Menems and the Yomas—were at a par. Incidentally, the head of state’s personal physician, Alejandro Tfelti, standing to the left of Menem, was seen with a Quran at the official ceremony, in line with the fact that, like the chief executive himself, he is the son of Muslim immigrants. Likewise, the decision to bury Carlos, Jr. at the Islamic cemetery confirmed the relevance of old family models. Though typical of an Arab society, such models—like the role of his uncles (and that of his maternal grandmother, next to whom he was buried in accordance

<sup>3</sup> That formal conversions are not unusual among Muslim adults is attested by other cases. For example, on José Selín Alí, see Jozami, “Identidad religiosa e integración cultural en cristianos sirios y libaneses en Argentina, 1890- 1990,” *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos* (April 1994), 109. Edited by I. Klich and J. O. Bestene, this *Estudios* issue was entirely devoted to Latin America’s Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian immigrants.

<sup>4</sup> During the first term of office of Carlos Menem (1989-95), a special assembly reformed the country’s constitution. Whereas the new text retains the previous constitution’s article 2, which provided support for the Roman Catholic church, it no longer requires that presidential and vice-presidential candidates be of the Catholic faith. Written in July 1994, a letter by the Federation of Arab Entities (FEARAB—Buenos Aires), an umbrella organization for some of the institutions created by Christian and/or Muslim Arabs, declared itself in favor of keeping the Catholic requisite for the country’s chief executives.

<sup>5</sup> S. Viau, “Yo Junior,” *Página/30* (March 1993).

with the rites inherited from her)—are still present among the migrants' offspring.<sup>6</sup>

These facts, in addition to a host of national and international developments of the past two decades, have revived interest in Islam in Argentina (which some local groups have been revitalizing since the 1980s), as well as given the country's Muslims a different perspective. Hence, the role played by the local Muslims' own traits, interwoven with the Islamic resurgence worldwide since the 1970s, can be detected. During that decade, this group's religious-cultural profile had seemed to "disappear,"<sup>7</sup> almost completely assimilating to Argentine society's Western characteristics, as a result of Muslim accommodation to Argentina. Such a 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 that 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 ethnolinguistic studies excepted.<sup>8</sup>

Against this backdrop, our sights are set on quantifying the Islamic presence in the country and identifying where this minority's heaviest concentrations are. Based on various data from the Immigration Directorate, in particular the statistics on arrivals, as well as on the lists of disembarked passengers (which the shipping companies handed to the authorities), and on

<sup>6</sup> Funerary advertisements in Argentina's national newspapers with the largest circulation revealed a massive use of Islamic symbols in relation to Carlos, Jr. This said, nuances were visible not only among Argentine society but also within the Argentine-Arab community. Whereas the Argentine-Arab Chamber of Commerce, one of the foremost institutions among the latter, resorted, like the majority, to the crescent, the Syro-Lebanese club Honour and Fatherland, as well as the Catholic Orthodox Archbishopric of Antioch, opted for the cross. For its part, the La Rioja Syro-Lebanese Society refrained from using any religious symbols. Such a diversity confirms the presence of various identities among yesterday's Arab immigrants, a group which some assume to be quite homogeneous. See *La Nación* 16-22 March 1995; *Página/12*, 16 March 1995; *Caras*, 17 March 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Jozami, "El retorno de los 'turcos' en la Argentina de los noventa," Paper presented at the International Conference "Discriminación y Racismo en América Latina," Universidad de Buenos Aires, 23-25 November 1994.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, E. Biondi Assali, "La comunidad musulmana de Tucumán, Argentina: Análisis etnolingüístico," Working Paper 17, CICE, Buenos Aires, 1988; by the same author, "Alternancia de los códigos español-árabe entre los bilingües de Tucumán, Argentina," *Caravelle* 52 (1989), 33-55; by the same author, "Actitudes y valoraciones hacia la lengua étnica entre los grupos migratorios de origen árabe en Argentina," *Encuentro* 215 (1990).

information on religion from various national and municipal censuses, such aims will ultimately result in an assertion of the value of official data; ethnic sources, whether published or oral, will also be taken into consideration.<sup>9</sup> Without forgetting their limitations, such statistics and other official data, which had not been studied in the Muslim case in depth, afford important results. Until these are compared with data from the countries of birth and/or provenance—assuming, that is, that Lebanese, Syrian and other countries' information on the departees has been kept—no definitive answers are possible about Argentina's Muslims, a group whose identity changes and the sequels of the high levels of bigotry directed against it have made research enormously difficult. In the light of such difficulties one must adopt an extremely cautious attitude as regards the validity and limitations of the sources for their study. If identifying Muslims in the documentation is in and of itself a problem to be solved, it follows that, for the time being, definitive conclusions of a quantitative-qualitative nature are even more complex.

#### FROM MAJORITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST TO LOW PROFILE IN THE PLATE

Most of Argentina's Muslims have been or are migrants, offspring and descendants of those who would nowadays belong to the Lebanese and Syrian national identities, in addition to other Arab minorities.<sup>10</sup> As a migratory current, their presence is recorded since early times, their arrival having taken place almost simultaneously with that of Christians and Jewish Arabs (although in smaller numbers than the former),<sup>11</sup> as jointly attested by official and local ethnic sources. From this angle, the Muslim influx is part and parcel of the study of Middle Eastern migrations that arrived in Argentina since the end of the last century. The Immigration Directorate's pub-

<sup>9</sup> Wherever the names of interviewees have been omitted, this is in deference to the wishes to those who preferred to remain anonymous.

<sup>10</sup> Considering Argentina's Muslim population as a subgroup of the largely Christian migration from Syria and Lebanon during 1862-1960, the bibliography on this still insufficiently studied current not only avails us of data but also of hypothesis on the Muslims. An idea of the corpus of published sources can be had by consulting several works, for example, I. Klich, "Introduction to the Sources for the History of the Middle Easterners in Latin America," *Temas de Africa y Asia* 2 (1993); M. W. Suleiman, "Los árabes en América Latina: Bibliografía preliminar," *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*, (April 1994). For the time being, the most complete and updated bibliographic aide is I. Klich, "Sources on the Lebanese and Other Middle Easterners in Latin America," Centre for Lebanese Studies, Oxford, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> On the interethnic links between Arabs and Jews, see Klich, "Arabes, judíos y árabes judíos en la Argentina de la primera mitad del novecientos," *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, (July-December 1995), 109-43.

lished statistics record a net balance of just over 100,000 people originating from the Middle East's relevant juridical-political units during 1890-1950, with the majority of the Muslim population having settled during 1905-14. This said, increases were also recorded during 1923-27, and more modestly during 1948-51.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1990s some Middle Eastern diplomats have come to consider that "Argentina is full of Arabs."<sup>13</sup> Truth be told, such a claim not only throws light on a recurrent overstatement during Menem's incumbency,<sup>14</sup> but also shines the spotlight on the repercussions among Arab envoys of various estimates by different sections of the old Arabic speaking community, which are inspired by a host of interests. According to the Maronite bishop of Buenos Aires, for example, Argentina's 32 million inhabitants include 1.5 million of Lebanese-descent, while among Brazil's 132 million there would be as many as 8 million people born in Lebanon or Lebanese descended.<sup>15</sup> Even more inflated are the numbers offered by those who choose to call themselves Argentine-Arabs. They push up the figure for those of Arab descent, mostly Syrian and Lebanese, to 2.5 million. In both cases the preeminence of Christians among this migration is emphasized.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Jozami, "El retorno de los 'turcos,'" table 1.

<sup>13</sup> Author's interview with the Libyan Cultural Centre director, Abdulhamid Hageg, Buenos Aires, June 1995. Hageg's viewpoint coincides with that of other Arab representatives consulted. For instance, Abdel Kader Ismael, a Buenos Aires-based head of the Arab League Office, used to proclaim in the 1980s that if every Argentine-Arab contributed \$1 a considerable sum would be raised for projects which the same Argentine-Arabs sought to finance with Arab embassies' monies. For these foreign envoys it is incomprehensible that the reported 2.5-3 million Arabs, figures that they have adopted from local community members, are unable to self-finance their ideas. It can be assumed that greater clarity on the subject would result from asking how many are aware of their ethnic origins, and what does it mean to feel that someone in Argentina has Syrian or Lebanese ancestors, rather than devoting exclusive attention to how large is the Argentine-Arab ethnic group. See, for example, Jozami, "La identidad nacional de los llamados turcos," art. cit., pp. 189-204.

<sup>14</sup> The counterpart to this overdimensioned Arab presence would be statements by Israeli officials on the relatively large number of Jews in president Raúl Alfonsín's administration. See I. Klich, "Lo latinoamericano en Israel," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas* (Cologne), 1994, p. 393.

<sup>15</sup> C. Merhi, "Les 10 millions de libanais du Brésil et d'Argentine. Songent-ils à revenir?," *Le Commerce du Levant*, 2 July 1992. Like others, Bishop Merhi's figures suggest that he tends to equate all Middle Eastern immigrants with his fellow countrymen. For a similar practice by a one-time Argentine immigration director and several Lebanese authors, see Klich, "Criollos and Arabic Speakers in Argentina: An Uneasy *Pas de Deux*, 1888-1914," in A. Hourani and N. Shehadi, eds., *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration* (London: I. B. Tauris for the Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1992), pp. 250-51.

<sup>16</sup> These figures are chiefly publicized by FEARAB and the Argentine-Arab Chamber of Commerce. Thus, Félix Elydd, the Chamber president in the late 1980s, remarked during a visit to Saudi Arabia that Argentina's population comprised "not less than 2.5 million of Arab descendants." *Arab News*, 28 May 1989.

Unlike Argentina's official statistics, the figures offered by the different strands of the Muslim community are principally based on oral sources. Like those of the rest of the Argentine-Arabs, these tend to acquire larger dimensions every day. Not surprisingly, therefore, the number of Muslims that is closest to the official statistics is that used in 1910, 1917 and 1940 by the Maronite Mission-linked Lebanese elites, as highlighted by the works of Alejandro Schamún and the bilingual Maronite paper *El Misionero/al-Mursal*.<sup>17</sup> That this is no accident is highlighted by the direct connection between the Buenos Aires-based Maronite Mission and Argentina's immigration authorities. Instead, Muslim self-estimates are close to 500,000 people, and exceed 650,000 in the opinion of an authoritative informant of the Buenos Aires Office of Islamic Culture and Divulgateion. Like the Maronites, however, Argentina's Muslims acknowledge the approximate nature of such figures and, in the absence of recent census data, the "impossibility of counting heads."<sup>18</sup>

Despite such Achilles' heels, these self-estimates are not only echoed by the press but also aired in an important academic publication devoted to the study of the world's Muslim minorities. Therein, the Imam Mahmud Hussein, an Islamic religious leader from Argentina, estimates that the country's Muslims number some 450,000, a figure which he admits is unstable and possibly inaccurate.<sup>19</sup> Other authors have mentioned figures ranging from 50,000 to 61,100 Muslims.<sup>20</sup> Presumably, the deflation that represents a veritable underestimation was that offered by an important French publication in 1952: it concluded that Argentina's Muslim population did not exceed 8,000.<sup>21</sup> Without alluding to Argentina specifically, the reference by another author on the Islamic presence in the hemisphere to 342,615 Mus-

<sup>17</sup> A. Schamún, "La colectividad siria en la República Argentina," *Assalam*, 25 May 1910; *La Siria nueva*, 1917; *El Misionero/al-Mursal*, 9 July 1940. This special issue of *El Misionero* celebrated Argentina's independence day and honored the country's president, Roberto M. Ortiz, whose wife was part of Argentine society's circle of ladies who early on began assisting the Maronites in Buenos Aires. Also worthy of note is the fact that one of Ortiz's sons completed his secondary education at the Colegio San Marón.

<sup>18</sup> Author's interview at the Office of Islamic Culture and Divulgateion, Buenos Aires, June 1992.

<sup>19</sup> See "Islam in Argentina: A Report," *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, January 1992, pp. 272-78. Compared to Ahsani's estimate of 370,000 Muslims less than a decade earlier, Hussein's figure represents an increase of nearly 22 percent that can neither be satisfactorily explained by the arrival of new Muslim immigrants, nor as a mere result of the natural growth of those already in the country and proselytism. Ahsani, "Muslims in Latin America," pp. 456-57.

<sup>20</sup> R. Delval, *Les Musulmans en Amérique latine et aux Caraïbes* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1992), p. 264; J. W. Wilkie, C. A. Contreras and C. Anders Weber, eds., *Statistical Abstract of Latin America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin America Center Publications, 1993), p. 346, table 1104.

<sup>21</sup> "Les Musulmans dans le Monde," *La Documentation française*, 9 August 1952.



lims living to the south of the U.S. would infer that their number in Argentina could not but be very small, in particular if the important Muslim communities from the Indian subcontinent and the Far East in three Afro-Caribbean states are taken into account.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, such discrepancies, like an unscientific approach to the figures that is not above political considerations, is not exclusive to the groups hailing from the Middle East. The same used to be the case, for instance, with Jews, who largely arrived from Europe. Until the 1970s, the “very high” Argentine Jewish self-estimates “had not been seriously challenged.”<sup>23</sup> Judging by the scholars on the subject, the more than 200,000 people that are part of the Argentine Jewish community at present are considerably less than numerical strengths of the order of 540,000 Jews that were once held true by elements of their elite, that is to say publicly proclaimed before Israeli demographers vigorously deflated this and other numbers.<sup>24</sup> Without ignoring its limitations, the merits of Argentina’s census information for the study of the Jewish presence has already been amply demonstrated by Sergio della Pergola.<sup>25</sup> Even when acknowledging that Dominique Schnapper’s important methodological observations could prompt an upward revision of such results in the future, for the time being, Della Pergola’s demystifying demographic studies have more than halved the old Jewish self-estimates.<sup>26</sup>

Returning to the Muslims, Argentine statistics no doubt provide valuable information about them. In addition, the so-called disembarkation books, originally stored at the Immigration Directorate, are of undoubted interest. In fact, such books are nothing but simple passenger lists prepared during the voyage under the responsibility of the vessel’s skipper. The information collected derives from forms provided by the different shipping companies,

<sup>22</sup> A. Elkholy, *The Arab Moslems in the United States* (New Haven, 1966), p. 23. The contrast between Elkholy’s figure and that offered by Delval a quarter of a century later, i.e. 612,000 Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean, suggests that quantifying the Muslims is not only unstable and problematic in Argentina’s case. Delval, *Les Musulmans*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Klich, “Lo latinoamericano en Israel,” p. 392n.

<sup>24</sup> For references to 540,000 Jews, see, for instance, Wilkie, Contreras and Anders Weber, p. 346.

<sup>25</sup> See S. della Pergola, “Demographic Trends of Latin American Jewry,” in J. L. Elkin and G. W. Merx, eds., *The Jewish Presence in Latin America* (Boston: Allen & Unwyn, 1987), pp. 98-100.

<sup>26</sup> From a sociological perspective, Schnapper questions some of Della Pergola’s demographic conclusions, especially those on France’s Jewish population (a case that bears some resemblance to that of Argentina), which she considers weak in respect of the data on Canada, Australia, Switzerland and Italy. For this scholar, the apparent methodological problems elicited by Jewish demography are, in fact, problems of definition and identity, which are also relevant to other groups. See D. Schnapper, “Les limites de la demographie des juifs de la diaspora,” *Revue française de sociologie*, 28, (1987), 319-32.



and was recorded in their language, something which ended up determining “the available data’s greater dishomogeneity.”<sup>27</sup> Such lists include the names and other data on migrants who arrived in Argentina and comprise over 1,000 volumes.<sup>28</sup> The information consigned to these books represents a privileged source for the study of migratory movements as it allows new macroaggregated approximations, and for the first time the correlation of such variables as occupation, gender, marital status and age with their nationality and,<sup>29</sup> in our case, with religion. The information pertaining to the period 1882-1925 has been computerized and is part of a data base.<sup>30</sup> The latter shows that more than 80,000 of those who arrived came from Arabic-speaking countries,<sup>31</sup> with Muslims not being less than 19,747, that is to say over 23 percent.

That the data lacks homogeneity is confirmed by the multiple labels under which Arab arrivals were registered during 1882-1925. Such varied rubrics show an admixture of local, regional and national identities, as well as real religious affiliations. In and of itself, this rich and complex material’s item on religion shows the existence of some 33 different labels. But it would be a mistake to assume that only the above mentioned 19,747 were Muslim. Unquestionably, this is a highly incomplete assessment, relying as it does exclusively on those who were entered in passenger lists as Muslim or Muhameddan. A quick review of the lists indicates that some of those appearing under a host of other denominations—including of unknown faith, Arab, Turk, Ottoman, none, various, Catholic, etc.—would have also been Muslim. Indeed, the legitimacy of assuming that there are Muslims among some of those listed as Christian has already been demonstrated by

<sup>27</sup> F. Devoto, “Redes sociales y familia en las migraciones españolas a la Argentina: Una perspectiva regional desde los partes consulares (1910),” mimeo.

<sup>28</sup> Undeniably, discrepancies between Immigration Directorate statistics and the numbers yielded by the disembarkation books exist. Other than human error and documented book losses, this suggests that Directorate figures may have been arrived at using more sources than the passenger lists. Interestingly, Argentine diplomats requested data on migrants going to Buenos Aires from the authorities at major departure points. On the latter, see, for example, Archives de la region Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur et du departement des Bouches-du-Rhône, Marseilles, 4M-2151, Argentine consulate (Nice/Marseilles) to Special Commissioner on Emigration, 17 March 1888, 23 April 1892, 10 and 24 March 1893, 16 April 1894.

<sup>29</sup> Devoto, “Redes sociales.”

<sup>30</sup> L. Favero, “Le liste di sbarco in Argentina,” in G. Rosoli, ed., *Identità degli Italiani in Argentina* (Rome, 1993), pp. 1-22. To learn about the sources that are part of the CEMLA data base, see A. Bernasconi, “Utilización de los registros de desembarco argentinos: Posibilidades y límites,” Paper presented at the Jornadas sobre Redes Sociales y Migraciones, Universidad Nacional del Centro, Tandil, 1994; A. Bernasconi and C. Silberstein, “Las listas de desembarco y el estudio de la inmigración italiana a la Argentina (1882-1925),” mimeo.

<sup>31</sup> Jozami, “Identidad religiosa e integración cultural,” table 2, p. 104.

scholars working with Ottoman archival materials,<sup>32</sup> as well as Argentine diplomatic documents.<sup>33</sup> Other than a desire to avoid Ottoman attention and the lists' own possible flaws, this means that among Muslim arrivals, as was also the case among their Jewish opposite numbers, the process of adaptation to the country of destination had already started on board the ships in which they were travelling, whether by way of Hispanicizing their surnames and/or of mutations of faith.<sup>34</sup>

Based on such lists, Table 1 shows that from early on there was a continuous Muslim presence in the country. Although including only those who were labelled as Muslim, their percentage in relation to all the Arabs was not too far from contemporary Maronite estimates. Should this sample be compared with Immigration Directorate statistics, in this case with that of Syrian and Lebanese arrivals (which have already been at the centre of other researchers' concerns),<sup>35</sup> it is possible to verify that the years of greatest Islamic influx partly coincide with similar peaks in the arrival of Middle Easterners, regardless of religious denomination. The sample also shows that the country witnessed peak Muslim arrivals in 1905, 1906 and 1907. Indirectly, or unwittingly, a report penned by the Maronite superior, and sent to the Buenos Aires archbishop on 22 August 1907, coincides with the disembarkation lists' evidence inasmuch as it proclaimed that the Christians from Syria and Lebanon spread throughout the country, increasingly since the early years of this century. Towards 1907, their numerical strength was said to stand at nearly 30,000. According to the Maronite cleric, Syrian Muslims were considerably less in number, almost half as many as their Christian counterparts.<sup>36</sup>

Immigration director Juan Alsina also noted such a Muslim presence, and by 1909 called attention to the fact that among that year's 11,765 Syrian entries,<sup>37</sup> 6,428 were Catholic, 5,111 Muslim and 226

<sup>32</sup> K. Karpat, "The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860-1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17 (1985), 182.

<sup>33</sup> Klich, "Criollos and Arabic Speakers in Argentina," p. 255.

<sup>34</sup> A case in point is provided by the disembarkation lists' Alis and Bentolilas, a Muslim surname the former and Jewish the latter. Only 45 of the 143 Alis listed were registered as Muslim while no more than three of the 28 Bentolilas would have been Jewish. CEMLA data base.

<sup>35</sup> M. E. Vela Ríos and R. Caimi, "The Arabs in Tucumán, Argentina," in L. Martínez Montiel, ed., *Asiatic Migrations to Latin America* (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1981); J. Bestene, "La inmigración sirio-libanesa en la Argentina: Una aproximación," *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos* (August 1988); Klich, "Criollos and Arabic Speakers in Argentina."

<sup>36</sup> See D. Santamaría, "Estado, Iglesia e inmigración en la Argentina," *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos* (April 1990), 153.

<sup>37</sup> The Syrian rubric does not exclude arrivals from present day Lebanon. On the Argentine immigration authorities' various ways of cataloguing the Middle Easterners, see L. A. Bertoni, "De Turquía

Jewish.<sup>38</sup> More generally, the progressive rise shown in Table 1 was described by Alsina in the following terms: "For a number of years now, there are Muslims among the statistics of those hailing from Asia Minor and Syria."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Muslims had already settled in Argentina, and while their arrivals were recorded they had not yet organized themselves. Insofar as Islamic rituals were not being practised in public, the immigration director acknowledged that there was no awareness of any manifestation of religious worship on the part of these faithful. The latter point would seem to imply that this group's high masculinity index and dispersion, as well as bigotry, regional fragmentation and the low-profile nature of their religiosity, among other factors, combined in the decision not to single out the small, albeit identifiable, Muslim presence by the organizers of the Buenos Aires municipal census of 1909. Thus, according to this source the capital city's population was made up of Catholics, Protestants and Jews, as well as those belonging to other faiths, and the agnostic.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, Table 1 makes possible an evaluation of the Muslim minority's evolution during 1910-14. If, according to a distinguished and well-placed Druze observer from Lebanon, the Emir Emin Arslan, who served as the Ottoman empire's consul general in Buenos Aires during those years,<sup>41</sup> Muslims represented 15 percent of the more than 100,000 Middle Easterners by 1912,<sup>42</sup> the data base justifies extending the validity period of an estimate by Maronite publicist Schamún, namely that by 1917 "the Druze and other Muslims were approximately 30 percent" of the 105,000 Middle Eastern migrants.<sup>43</sup> In respect of all the Argentine-Arabs, such a percentage of Muslims coincides with that imagined by the community's Christians; their Islamic counterparts, however, are in favor of a higher percentage, in excess of 35 percent.<sup>44</sup> Also,

a Buenos Aires: Una colectividad nueva a fines del siglo XIX," *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos* (April 1994), 71n.

<sup>38</sup> J. Alsina, *La inmigración en el primer siglo de la independencia* (Buenos Aires, 1910), p. 96.

<sup>39</sup> Id. ant., pp. 88-89.

<sup>40</sup> *Censo General de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires, 1909).

<sup>41</sup> On Arslan's performance as a diplomat in Buenos Aires, see I. Klich, "Argentine-Ottoman Relations and Their Impact on Immigrants from the Middle East: A History of Unfulfilled Expectations, 1910-1915," *The Americas*, (October 1993), pp. 177-205.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Allard, "Les Libanais en Argentine de l'immigration à l'intégration," *Travaux et Jours*, Beirut, 48 (1973).

<sup>43</sup> *La Siria nueva*, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> Oral testimonies recorded by the author.

according to some Israeli observers,<sup>45</sup> two-thirds of the country's population of Arab ancestry are Christian, with the remainder Muslim and Druze.<sup>46</sup>

As highlighted in Table 2, Immigration Directorate data on second- and third-class migrants who landed in Argentina during the 1923-27 quinquennium positively shows that Muslims entered the country in those years.<sup>47</sup> Other information from the same Directorate indicates that the Muslim presence continued to rise until 1930 by dint of the migration. Thereafter, with the background of economic crisis first and the difficulties confronted by transatlantic shipping during World War II, arrivals remained relatively stable, with the small postwar influx of Muslims coming to an end in the 1950s. Unlike neighboring Brazil, Argentina ceased to be an attractive destination for Middle Easterners in general, and Muslims in particular, during the second half of this century. Since 1977, no Arab group appears among the nationalities listed in the annual migration statistics because their number is below 200 arrivals per year; instead, they have been officially lumped together with others in the undifferentiated category of "various."

Therefore, no significant increase between the older and more recent Syrians and Lebanese is observable between 1977 and 1990. As immigration, among other reasons, became scarcely relevant, the process of assimilation of the descendants of settled Muslims advanced. If in the 1930s the great mass of children of Christian Arab ancestry no longer knows Arabic indeed, "they do not understand our prayers and religious services"<sup>48</sup> the panorama is generally not very different for the local offspring of Muslims, except in the case of some significant minorities. Instead, the Muslims' masculinity index is even higher than among the Syrian and Lebanese migration as a whole. Thus, for example, of 3,508 Muslim arrivals during 1923-27, 2,697 were males and 811 females.<sup>49</sup> The gender mismatch is also highlighted by another official source. Indeed, according to the 1936 municipal census 2,366 Muslim males and 571 females lived in

<sup>45</sup> Klich, "Criollos and Arabic Speakers in Argentina," pp. 277-78.

<sup>46</sup> On the Druzes, a heterodox Islamic sect, see P. Hitti, *The Syrians in America* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1924), pp. 41-42.

<sup>47</sup> "Religión de los inmigrantes: Quinquenio 1923-1927," Immigration Directorate internal document, Buenos Aires.

<sup>48</sup> Jozami, "Identidad religiosa e integración cultural."

<sup>49</sup> "Religión de los inmigrantes."

TABLE 1

## MUSLIM AND MIDDLE EASTERN ARRIVALS IN ARGENTINA (1882–1925).

<i>Year</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Middle Eastern</i>
1882	2	15
1883	—	24
1884	—	15
1885	1	23
1886	2	48
1887	—	37
1888	5	45
1889	1	1,071
1890	8	188
1892	1	21
1893	1	49
1895	31	75
1896	—	134
1897	119	970
1898	302	933
1899	482	2,665
1900	7	608
1901	75	288
1902	194	926
1903	—	65
1904	170	570
1905	1,398	4,033
1906	1,391	4,688
1907	1,148	4,544
1908	813	4,811
1909	636	5,436
1910	2,658	10,831
1911	2,256	10,626
1912	2,743	5,973
1913	2,682	8,335
1914	972	2,986
1915	90	284
1916	29	148
1917	7	77
1918	35	51
1919	21	90
1920	194	1,622
1921	104	610

TABLE 1

CONTINUED.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Middle Eastern</i>
1922	107	1,186
1923	505	3,404
1924	365	2,888
1925	211	1,479

Source: CEMLA data

the capital city.<sup>50</sup> Such figures, as well as other data for the country as a whole, confirm the small female presence among these migrants (a fact that is corroborated by the oral testimonies recorded for a linguistic study of one of the Muslim subgroups),<sup>51</sup> with the skewed male/female ratio leading many men to consort with *criollo* womenfolk.

Just as information derived from national censuses allowed a more satisfactory approximation to the Jewish population's numerical strength than their own self-estimates, so the same is true for the Muslim's. The national census of 1947, and that of 1960, have made available a wealth of information. Given that subsequent exercises did not include a question on religious affiliation this turned more complex the already delicate subject of quantifying the country's Muslim population. The 1947 census identified 18,764 Muslims, that is to say 0.13 percent of Argentina's total population of 15,893,827. Of these Muslims, half resided in the capital city and Buenos Aires province; in absolute terms, there were also interesting concentrations in Santa Fe, Tucumán, Córdoba and Mendoza.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, there was also an Islamic presence in all other provinces, albeit far smaller in importance. As with the Christian Arabs, a relevant feature of Argentina's Muslims is their spatial agglomeration in urban centers and high degree of geographic dispersion.<sup>53</sup> Both patterns were partly motivated by the economic activity they performed, as they generally entered the labor market as itinerant salesmen, and also by the significant influence on such activity by networks of kinsmen, and those derived from their villages of origin.

<sup>50</sup> *Censo Municipal de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1936.*

<sup>51</sup> See n. 11, *supra.*

<sup>52</sup> A mosque is now being built in the provincial capital of Mendoza.

<sup>53</sup> For case studies on the early concentration of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants in the vicinity of the Buenos Aires port, as well as on their spatial distribution in Argentina's northwestern provinces, see, respectively, Bertoni; Jozami, "Aspectos demográficos y comportamiento espacial de los migrantes árabes en el NOA," *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*, (April 1987).

TABLE 2

## MUSLIM ARRIVALS (1923–27).

<i>Year</i>	<i>Quantity</i>
1923	1,567
1924	581
1925	325
1926	204
1927	831

Source: Immigration Directorate

Table 3 furnishes evidence of this behavior by comparing the censuses' published results and highlighting the population changes that took place between 1947 and 1960. In both years Tucumán and Buenos Aires retained their status as the foremost recipients of Muslims. In absolute terms, Buenos Aires historically had the largest number in relation to the total population; nevertheless, during this period the highest provincial rate was that of Tucumán. In the demographic changes that took place in some provinces the internal migration of the offspring of those originally arrived from the Middle East, among other variables, would have been influential. Here, the behavior patterns were similar to those of the global population belonging to the same socioeconomic strata.

With regard to the estimates for Muslim numbers for previous years, the group's contraction by 1947 can be explained by several factors: small population bases, reduced family nuclei, geographical isolation, marked gender imbalance and the attendant exogenous liaisons, assimilating pressure of a predominantly Catholic environment and the role played by school attendance, whether to state public establishments or private Christian ones. For the period 1947-60 the factors that explain the shrinkage of the Muslim population would be the same, albeit exacerbated by the population's inevitable aging and intensification of assimilation, as well as the relative irrelevance of immigration.

Nevertheless, in both censuses it is quite likely, although far from verified, that not a few Muslims concealed their true religious identity given the global society's bigotry vis-à-vis the population's non-Catholic members. A first and important pointer to this reality is provided by oral histories recorded in Argentina's northwestern provinces, whether with Antioch Orthodox migrants in Salta, or their Syriac Orthodox counterparts in the San-



tiago del Estero provincial town of Frías. Highly eloquent, these show that immigrants and descendants felt themselves to be under the Catholic population's intense scrutiny, and that even in the late 1950s they were still viewed as "strangers." For example, the daughter of Syrian immigrants recalled that her parents "had married at Salta's Orthodox church, but my school's nuns considered this invalid for they viewed it as a wedding of gypsies."<sup>54</sup>

If this was the reality among Christian Middle Easterners, prejudice was far more intense in respect of Muslims, as they were plainly deemed to be "heretics," at least judging by some pre-Vatican council Catholic documents.<sup>55</sup> Such is, for example, the case of a Catamarca provincial bishopric paper concerning the conversion of Aluise Cabur, the daughter of Syrian immigrants. Her secondary school education in a Catholic establishment led the local ecclesiastic hierarchy to authorize her baptism at the age of 18, in accordance with the practice followed in the case of infants, after her forswearance of the "heresy," that is to say her parents' Muslim faith.<sup>56</sup>

Returning to the question of numbers, it should be noted that the Maronites assumed that Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, as well as their local progeny, were 310,000 in 1940.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, a decade later an authoritative community observer estimated its numerical strength at 500,000<sup>58</sup> (a figure, by the way, that coincides with that mentioned in 1947 by the director of the Jewish Agency for Palestine's Latin American department).<sup>59</sup> If so, it is worth asking how one explains the extraordinary gap between census information and the 93,000-150,000 Muslims that should have been detected on the strength that 30 percent of the 310,000-500,000 were reportedly Islamic. To answer this question one must distinguish between the Muslim immigrant—the *musulmán de sangre* in ethnic parlance—and the self-perception of those born in Argentina, as reflected with limitations in census results. Regardless of the fact that Muslim leaders naturally call into question counts that put their following at no more than 0.13 percent of the Argentine population in 1947, and 0.10 percent in 1960, the marked quantitative

<sup>54</sup> Oral testimony recorded by the author.

<sup>55</sup> The equation of Muslim and "infidel" in a Benedictine priest's work is consistent with consideration of Muslims as heretics in Catholic church documents. Julián Alameda, *Las Iglesias de Oriente y su unión con Roma* (Buenos Aires: P. P. Benedictinos, 1929), p. 267.

<sup>56</sup> Baptism certificate of A. Cabur, 26 November 1958, Bishopric of Catamarca.

<sup>57</sup> See *El Misionero/al-Mursal*, 9 July 1940.

<sup>58</sup> M. Y. Abderrahmán, *Adalid rioplatense* (Buenos Aires: author's edition, 1954). Well-informed about the community's various national and religious sections, Abderrahmán, nonetheless, did not present this figure as an absolute certainty.

<sup>59</sup> Mentioned by Klich, "Criollos and Arabic Speakers in Argentina," p. 278n.

decline that had taken place by the 1960s has been confirmed by the Imam Hussein, an authority on this group. Moreover, Abdulhamid Hageg, an active participant in Muslim cultural and religious activities, remembered that when he first landed in Argentina in the 1960s he discovered among the Muslims that their youths were “bereft of an Islamic identity.”<sup>60</sup>

Shifting attention to their spatial distribution, the 1960 census provides valuable information on Muslim concentrations, as well as on local and regional differences, and also an opportunity to compare official statistics with data stemming from direct observation, oral histories and other unofficial sources. Compared to the total population, by 1960 the country’s foremost Muslim concentration was in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of San Cristóbal. This said, despite the distinctive color which the Islamic presence bestowed on San Cristóbal, Muslims coexisted there with, among others, an ample Catholic majority and a significant Jewish minority. Without overlooking the fact that as ethnoreligious groups Muslims and Jews had their own specificities, they also shared at the time a common feature: they were on the receiving end of Argentine society’s centuries-old prejudices, as well as of those arising from the Arab-Israeli conflict-inspired mobilization of their respective groups.<sup>61</sup> Other than San Cristóbal, Muslims were concentrated in the Buenos Aires neighborhoods of San Fernando and Vélez Sarfield, the greater Buenos Aires district of Tres de Febrero and the provincial cities of Balcarce and Berisso.<sup>62</sup> In sum, as with the Jews, the Muslim population is specially concentrated in urban areas, although the latter group is more uniformly represented in the cities and towns of Argentina’s interior.

If Buenos Aires congregated more than half of Argentina’s Muslims, an indication of the fate of small Muslim populations is provided by the case of Menem’s province of La Rioja, where all foreigners in the days of mass immigration were not more than 0.06 percent of the total population of 1914. The provincial capital and Chilecito attracted most Muslims, with internal migration, the difference between birth and death rates, as well as the Christianization of the immigrants’ offspring, accounting for the drop in the Muslim population during 1947-60. In such small, traditional and Catholic locations as La Rioja’s cities and towns the ‘strangers’ were these “Turks”—whether Muslim and Christian Arabs, or Jewish Turks—as well

<sup>60</sup> Author’s interview with Hageg.

<sup>61</sup> On the sequels of the first Arab-Israeli war among Arabs and Jews in Argentina, see Klich, “Arabes, judíos y árabes judíos,” pp. 128-29.

<sup>62</sup> On Muslim institutions in Buenos Aires province, see Cazorla, pp. 129-34.

TABLE 3

## MUSLIM POPULATION IN ARGENTINA'S PROVINCES.

No.	Province	1947			1960		
		Total	Muslims	%	Total	Muslims	%
01	Federal						
	Capital	2,982,580	4,952	0.20	2,789,181	3,911	0.14
02	Buenos						
	Aires	4,272,337	4,854	0.12	6,118,907	4,284	0.08
03	Catamarca	147,213	55	0.04	142,945	39	0.03
04	Cordoba	1,497,987	1,340	0.10	1,568,750	914	0.08
05	Corrientes	525,463	42	0.04	454,396	33	0.01
06	Entre Rios	787,362	599	0.08	704,263	330	0.06
07	Jujuy	166,700	95	0.06	204,566	43	0.02
08	La Rioja	110,746	71	0.06	109,302	57	0.05
09	Mendoza	588,231	1,262	0.21	726,901	902	0.12
10	Salta	290,826	132	0.06	350,787	67	0.02
11	SDan Juan	261,229	202	0.08	304,055	149	0.05
12	San Luis	165,546	65	0.04	152,087	43	0.03
13	Santa Fe	1,702,975	2,357	0.14	1,703,830	1,374	0.10
14	Sgo. del						
	Estero	479,473	56	0.03	404,313	21	0.01
15	Tucuman	593,371	1,796	0.32	664,168	1,647	0.24
16	Chaco	430,555	313	0.07	454,561	139	0.04
17	Chubut	110,754	154	0.14	123,252	63	0.05
18	Formosa	113,790	17	0.01	148,012	10	0.01
19	La Pampa	169,480	129	0.08	141,816	63	0.04
20	Misiones	246,396	32	0.01	299,811	12	0.01
21	Neuquen	86,836	24	0.03	93,196	15	0.02
22	Rio Negro	134,350	216	0.17	166,814	128	0.10
23	Santa Cruz	24,582	—	—	47,023	17	0.04
24	Tierra del						
	Fuego	5,045	1	0.02	7,033	1	0.01
	TOTAL	15,893,827	18,764	0.13	17,879,969	14,262	0.10

Source: National censuses.

as some other foreigners. Their children grew up in a milieu where the Catholic church exerted strong assimilating pressures. Attesting to this are the recollections of a grandchild of Muslim immigrant Mohamed Abdulkarim El Hayi, who went by the name of Aniceto Romero after entering the country. He remembers living with his mother in the town of Chamental, where the local priest not only baptized and married him, but was part of

daily life. Like other Muslim relatives and friends, he studied in Catholic schools. Such a levelling pressure was not only felt by Muslims, however. Indeed, the same informant recalls fellow *riojano* José Efron, born into a Jewish family but currently a Catholic convert.<sup>63</sup>

FROM INTIMACY AND SILENCE TO ISLAM'S ASSERTIVENESS IN FIN  
DE SIÈCLE ARGENTINA

Notwithstanding the aforementioned census limitations, the evidence provided by such an official source shows that by the 1960s Argentina's Muslim population was close to fading into insignificance. This was mainly due to the combined pressure of assimilation and prejudice. The great majority of the Muslim immigrants' descendants have been mothered by non-Muslims, as well as educated in state or Catholic schools. More than half of the Muslims who put down roots in Argentina did so in cosmopolitan Buenos Aires, where Islamic survival was less problematic than in the country's hinterland, despite the divisions along national (Syrian and Lebanese) or religious (Sunni, Shiite, Alawi and Druze) lines affecting one and the other. Aside from the case of president Carlos Menem, several oral testimonies reveal that among members of the same family that settled in such hardly pluralist environments as the province of La Rioja, where 99.1 percent of the 1947 population was Catholic, their children almost without exception lost the Muslim identity of their forefathers.

Nevertheless, some of those belonging to the same kinsmen or village networks and their offspring, especially those living in the capital city's "Muslim neighborhood" of San Cristóbal continued to adhere to the religion of their forefathers. In their case continuity was made possible by their relatively larger numbers and concentration in such a multiethnic society as that of Buenos Aires, the later arrival of relatives, their links with the Islamic Centre and more recently with the mosque. Unlike the abovementioned, a fraction of the remainder succeeded in sticking to Islam until the 1970s as a strong sentiment kept with difficulty within the confines of family and village networks, but almost without the benefits of immigrant replenishments. Against this background, the parents' generation sought to preserve their faith as best they could in private.

Argentine census information sheds light on the undeniable drop in the country's Muslim population, with Muslim leaders' self-estimates failing to

<sup>63</sup> Author's interview with Hugo Ayan, Buenos Aires, June 1995. Carlos Romero, another grandchild of Aniceto Romero and a cousin of Ayan, is today a vicepresident of the Argentine Congress' lower house. Educated in a Salesian school, Carlos is also a Catholic.

distinguish between projections based on Muslim immigrant numbers and their Argentine progeny's self-perceptions. Undoubtedly, the former, together with Immigration Directorate statistics and information from passenger lists, help in getting an idea of the magnitude of the contraction. Obviously, this would have been impossible through exclusive reliance on ethnic sources. Likewise, the latter would not have allowed for the formation of a clear and accurate picture of the Muslim population's spatial distribution. If until the 1960s, their decrease was accounted for by the immigrants' aging, the assimilation of their children and the lack of an unifying project to preserve their religious identity, two decades later Argentina's Muslims begun acquiring a higher profile within the Argentine-Arab community. In part, this came as a result of the Islamic resurgence worldwide, especially after the prominence acquired by Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states in the wake of the energy crisis of 1973, and the Iranian revolution of 1979,<sup>64</sup> as well as of developments on the Argentine scene. Unlike the 1930s, when some Islamic nuclei in Tucumán, Mendoza, Córdoba, Santa Fe, and of course in Buenos Aires, showed different signs of vitality, Muslims are now better equipped to sustain this resurgence, especially since the 1980s. By way of their newly built mosques and other forms of organization they seek to retrieve the Islamic identity of the Arab descended,<sup>65</sup> and even to attract to Islam those who do not have Arab ancestors. Like the mosques that went up in the 1980s, that is to say a century after the first arrivals, the Islamic Centre, established in the 1970s, has been a key factor in the recovery witnessed among Argentina's Muslims.

Among the most eloquent signs of their external affirmation in the country is legislation enacted by the Tucumán provincial legislature in 1992 which declared the Muslim new year (Hegira) and two other dates as non-working days for the local followers of Islam. A similar bill, submitted to Congress in July 1995, seeks to extend such benefits to all Muslims in Argentina.

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<sup>64</sup> On the Iranian inspiration of two of the first mosques built in Argentina, in addition to other aspects of Saudi-Iranian competition in the country, see Klich, "Criollos and Arabic Speakers in Argentina," pp. 258-59.

<sup>65</sup> Supported by the World Assembly of Islamic Youth, the Islamic Conference Organization and the Islamic Development Bank, a first international meeting of Latin American Islamic youth took place in Brazil in 1981. Aimed at leadership training, the gathering attracted more than 100 youngsters from several countries. Four years later, the Saudi news agency announced an Islamic summer camp in Argentina. See "Brazil Hosts Islamic Youth," *8 Days*, 21 March 1981; *Summary of World Broadcasts* (Caversham Park), ME/7849/iii, 15 January 1985.