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Shi'i Islam in Chile

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Definition

Shi'i Muslims are supporters of Ali and his descendants, who refused to submit to the legitimacy of Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs and defended the power of imams in the line of Ali. This refusal had a double component: dynastic and social. In reference to the first aspect, its origin goes back to successive fights that started soon after the death of the Prophet, who died without naming a successor. In the aftermath of leadership disputes, Ali was murdered and his son Husayn died in Karbala. From this arises Shi'i Muslim's principle political dogma; the first three caliphs were illegitimate, the fourth, Ali, should have received the caliphate at Muhammad's death and thus all Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs were usurpers, as the imam or caliph can only be Ali's descendant. The second, social, aspect refers to the fact that Muslims who

adhered to the Shi'i movement were mostly new Muslims – mawali – Iraqi or Iranian, which the Umayyad caliphate kept at a secondary rank (Maillo 1996).

Introduction

During the government of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909), the condition of the Ottoman Empire started to change in multiple directions. On one hand was the spirit of progressive Tanzimat reforms, which were specially bounded to the development of culture and science. On the other hand was the feeling that the Sultan's rule were dictatorial in addition to a depressed economy that struggled to improve. This last aspect is especially noticeable in the almost nonexistent industrialization and direct dependence on agriculture and cattle industry, with no access to further consumer goods (Kasaba 2008).

To the above we must add the increase in taxes and imposition of military expenses, which caused the rural drift (depopulation) that brought the first main Arabic wave of migration to South America, during the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. There was an important number of Christian-Arabs who came from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. There were also a number of Muslims who came from Syria and Lebanon. This exodus was caused primarily by the arrival of Turks to the Middle East, which obliged Muslims (Shi'is) and Christians to

migrate from perceived oppression, installing themselves in the territories of Syria and Lebanon (Sükrü 2010). This was mainly due to the fact that the arrival of the Ottoman Empire in the Levant area also had a religious aspect obliging these Muslims (Shi'is), like the Christian Arabs, to emigrate, a product of oppression because they did not belong to the ascendant Sunni ideology of the Ottoman Empire. Shi'i and Christians who remained in the area sought refuge in the mountains and the interior of the Syrian-Lebanese territories, leaving the Caliphate administration to itself in the coastal areas of Tripoli, Beirut, and Saida (Agar and Saffie 2005).

These same factors contributed to a migratory movement of different waves that arrived to Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina. In fact, most of the first Shi'i arrived in Argentina and later, due to economic problems, moved to Chile (Pacheco 2006). Many of these immigrants held the passport of the Ottoman Empire, and thus they were called "Turks" in Chile (Olguín et al. 1990).

For most, the journey was not only a human sacrifice, but also an economic burden, considering that crossing the Atlantic took over 60 days in severe and hard conditions (Arancibia et al. 2010). The port of arrival was Buenos Aires. From there, the trip continued to Mendoza and after 4–7 days on mules, they finally crossed the Andes. The other possibility was sailing, crossing the Magellan Strait and heading north, arriving to Talcahuano or Valparaíso (Arancibia et al. 2010).

The year 1885 is considered the starting point of Arab immigration in Chile, being 1900–1930, the period of the highest number of incoming migrants. This can be explained by the need for a labor force and the news spreading in the Middle East that Chile was a land of opportunities (Arancibia et al. 2010).

The migratory process can be divided into three periods: from 1900 to 1914, known as the time when over 50% of the immigrants arrived; 1915–1920, a time of decrease because of World War I, and finally, the time from 1920–1930, after WWI, when immigrants still arrived (Olguín et al. 1990).

Characteristics

Most of the immigrants that arrived to Chile were single men, less than 30 years of age, and in general they had no profession nor formal education as they were mainly peasants, shepherds, or craftsmen, coming from cities such as Aleppo, Homs, Beirut, and Damascus. Most of them married Chilean Catholics, who imposed their religion within families (Rebolledo 1994). This led to the loss of identity in the first generation of immigrants, as well as the absence of schools or organizations that could have helped maintain cultural and religious identity and education (Agar 1983).

However, as immigrants settled down, meeting places developed giving birth to a series of institutions that helped maintaining their roots; clinics, social clubs, charities, societies, newspapers, etc. (Del Amo 2006).

A group of immigrants (mainly Palestinians) professed the catholic orthodox rite and as they had no place to practice their religion, they soon were able to build their first church (Akmir 2009). Muslim immigrants, mainly coming from Syria and Lebanon, gathered at homes to practice Arabic, to pray, and read the Qur'an (Solimano 2008). At the same time, the American community maintained important contacts with foreign communities, especially in Argentina, bound to the Alawi sect. In that sense, the Shi'ism is a really important component in the identity of the first Muslims that arrived to Chile, different from those coming in the 2nd and 3th stages, who were mostly Sunni.

Main Developments

Around 1926, the "Sociedad Unión Musulmana" (Muslim Union Society) was founded. Its purpose was to honor the Muslim and Arabs in Chile, as well as offering charity and cultural performances (Hassan 1941). Documents and history of those who belonged to this society show there were both Sunni and Shi'i members, alternatively and peacefully working together in the board of directors. Some directors were the misters Mohammed

Sufan, Assad, Taha, Alberto Farran, and Yuseff Mushsin (Hassan 1941). This society had no place for prayer until 1989, when the Mosque as-Salam was completed and inaugurated by the Prince of Malaysia in 1996.

During the first stage of immigration, the Muslims who arrived were not few, 1,498 according to the census of 1907 (Memoria 1907). Numbers declined by 1920 with only 390 Muslims arriving (Dirección General de Estadísticas 1925). This could have been because of conversion, once they married and became part of the Chilean society. Other possible reasons include: the lack of religious leaders and no Islamic schools, which was why the first generation of Muslim children born in Chile did not learn their faith and had no knowledge of Arabic. Even so, there was an increase of Muslims, up to 1,431 in the 1970s (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas 1970) and up to 2,894 in the census of 2002 (Censo 2002), for the conversion of young descendants.

Around 1984, there was a camp for Muslim youth in Argentina, where 4 young Chileans took part. These were Muslims following the religious tradition of their ancestors, who, motivated by other young Argentineans, started passing on to others their identification with the past. Groups started to gather at homes and as they grew more and more, asked for permission to meet in the "Colegio Árabe" (Arabic School).

An important part of the Sunni community, mainly their leaders, hoped for a Mosque. They got in contact with the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Brazil, toward the year 1985. They also got in touch with the "WAMY" (World Assembly of Muslim Youth), who came to Chile and carried out a training camp close to Rancagua. At the same time, the Sunni leaders Kamal Sufan and Taufik Rumié bought a piece of land in Ñuñoa, where later on the Mosque as-Salam was built. This last brought some difficulties among the leaders of the Sunni community and the Saudi imams, who came during the first operation time of the mosque.

On the other hand, the construction of the mosque placed Chile within the Islamic world, shown by the arrival of missionaries of the

movement Yamaat Tabligh, who came to Chile at least once a year, converting people little-by-little.

The growth of this community was also due to the fact that many descendants of the first generations saw Islam as a way to recover identity. That is how many of the young Shi'i started coming to the mosque. A complex situation developed. While there had been no conflicts among Sunnis and Shi'is before, tensions began to appear in the 1980s. Some new members were considered sectarian by other members of the community. Around 1992, the mosque declared itself as Sunni center, closing the entrance to Shi'i, who counted for the majority of the young members of the community.

At the same time, a Pakistani businessman coming from the North, arrived in Santiago looking for workers. One of them, after working for some time, decided to migrate to Brazil, where he visited the Shi'i mosque and met the Lebanese sheikh, Sheikh Ghassan Abdallah. This sheikh knew about some relatives who had come to Chile and also about a Muslim community there. He decided to start a Shi'i community and became its spiritual leader. Their mosque was formally established in 1998.

Also known as the "Center of Islamic Culture" it obtained legal recognition in 2012 with the name "Muslim Community Imamita" or "Muslim Community of Chile." Its incorporation principles state that it represents the Islamic twelfth imamate and that it wishes to contribute to improving the religious, cultural, and social levels of Muslims. It also works for brotherhood through the studies and diffusion of Islamic culture, as well as charity activities that widen spiritual, social, and economic conditions of the Islamic community in Chile.

At present the Shi'i Muslim community offers marriages, Kumail's plea – serves to ward off evil from enemies, festivals in remembrance of Imam Hussein, Ramadan, and, externally, active academic participation in universities and colleges; public policy in cooperation with government authorities; conferences and diplomas in the military academic field; inter-religious dialogue with

the Catholic Church; and interactions with the media.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Islam in Chile](#)
- ▶ [Muslim in Chile](#)
- ▶ [Shi'ism](#)
- ▶ [Sunni-Shi'a divide](#)

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