Islam in Mexico: Defining a National Islam

The Muslim community in Mexico is as old as the own colonization of the country by Spain, given the great influence of the moors during that time. It can be seen in the adaptation of Islamic names and references to wars with the infidels, among other elements. It is likely that in the search for the Indies, Christopher Columbus had brought Arab translators. In México, there are three identifiable historical phases of Islam: obligatory concealment of the faith; necessary or pertinent concealment; and re-islamization of immigrants, conversion of non-Muslims and preaching of Islam. Currently is it said that there are approximately two to three thousand Muslims and probably eight thousand originated from Islamic countries and of Muslim descent, but not devotees. Many do not practice the religion, but limit themselves to accept their Muslim cultural heritage.

Dozens of Muslims come periodically to install themselves in Mexico. It is estimated that there are five to eight hundred Mexican converts. Three groups can be identified: Tzotzil Indians of Chiapas, converts through Sufism and those who entered by personal interest, approach through the language or the history of Islam. The real division of Islam in Mexico is between the conservatives tied to some tendency of the Islamic religion, and the Mexican way of Islam.

Constitution of a Muslim space

Given the number of Muslims practitioners, the community did not have a meeting place during week days. They met at the Pakistan Embassy, and by hosting diverse events, they managed to attract up to 200 people. It was not until the middle of the eighties that the Islamic Cultural Center of Mexico was initiated. In 1993, the first office of Islam in Mexico was opened; there they offered courses on Arabic language and on Islam. From this initiative emerged conferences, exhibits and a website in Spanish, all which contribute to the diffusion of Islam in America. In the Federal District, the Muslim community has 200 members, 50 percent of which

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1 Summary of original full-text article by Zidane Zeraoui entitled “El islam en México: definiendo un islam nacional”. This article was presented as collaboration in the Islam in Latin America project at Florida International University.
are Mexican converts. Other Muslim communities exist in the cities of Veracruz, Monterrey and Guadalajara.

Omar Weston, leader of the Muslim movement in México, dedicated himself to the diffusion of the Islam message, without an emphasis on gaining followers. His policy of opening the mosque to non-Muslim so they could know about Islam without necessarily converting was not to the liking of the Saudi Arabia Ambassador, who contributed in the acquisition of a space for Muslims in Mexico, as he has previously done in Los Angeles. Weston proposed a local Islam, with national colors, not closed to non-Muslims and that would also extend the message of Islam outside of the mosque. His purpose was to give Muslims solid bases of Islam so they could go back to their communities and disseminate the message. Other followers of Islam, as José Luis Sánchez, indicate that the problem is the lack of a Koranic school. Those who come into Islam in Mexico did so because of their own search and not because of a diffusion of Muslim beliefs. In 2003, a mosque was built in Xoxocotla. The Islamic Cultural Center of Monterrey opened its doors to a community of 100 to 500 Muslims; in Guadalajara, a prayer site was also opened.

Many of the conversions to Islam are attributed to an approach to Sufism. The Sheik Amina Teslima al Yerrahi started da’wah (preaching about Islam) among non-Muslim Mexicans. She breaks with the traditional stereotypes in Islam being a Muslim woman, interreligious leader, pacifist and head of the Sufi Order of Mexico. Target of the fundamentalist sectors, she asserts that a woman can lead the prayer at the mosque but that it is left to the Muslim community to accept or reject any practice.

The arrival of Arabs to Torreón started in 1885. Currently the Muslim community of the region consists of 35 to 40 families. The religious pressure of the beginning of the century Mexico and the weight of Catholicism led to the abandonment of the Muslim religion. In 1989 the Guadalajara mosque was inaugurated; its communities are Shiite and the majority is from the south of Lebanon. The Shia Islam appears again from 1979 when the Ayatollah Jomeini brings down the power of Iran’s Shah and instituted an Islamic republic in the country. Is because of this that this particular community has become more political and it centers on political issues of the Middle East in contrast to the community of the Mexico City whose primary concern was strictly religious.
Differences and conflicts

In 1998, the embassy of Saudi Arabia financed the opening of a *musala* in Polanco where the Islamic Cultural Center of Mexico transferred. In 2001 the Educational Center of the Muslim Community (CECM, by its Spanish acronym, Centro Educativo de la Comunidad Musulmana) was created. The Friday gathering is one of the most attended of the rest of the *musala*. One of the difficulties is that Friday is a holiday on Muslim countries, but in Mexico it is a work day and as such, the believers are not able to participate in all the religious activities of the *musala*.

The Salami Center of Mexico is the first Spanish speaking Salafi organization and the only one in Mexico. The Salafi condemn the liberal route of Islam, Sufism as a non-Muslim element and they follow a Wahhabi tradition. From the establishment of the *musala* of Euclides, the Salafi leader, Ruiz, broke with the Educational Center of the Muslim Community and denounced Omar Weston as a leader in favor of *bid’ah* (innovations to Islam) and practices distant from the Saudi Salafiya. The *Salafi* community renewed their links with the Islamic authorities of Saudi Arabia. They do not accept female leadership (like the Sheik Amina) among other claims within the practices of the Muslim communities in Mexico. In this way, the Salafi Center has become isolated from the national Muslim community.

Indigenous Islam

The indigenous Islam emerges from the permanent desertion from Catholicism by the indigenous. With the arrival of two Spaniards to the Chiapas region, an Islamic tradition commences, creating economic activities such as the preparation of foods and carpentry, and a Koranic school to give jobs to the indigenous converts. They arrived in the moment in which the Protestant indigenous community was being expelled from San Juan Chamula in the seventies and installed outside of San Cristóbal. They accepted the new faith as a way of survival. Three hundred Tzozils converted to Islam. It was a proposed Islamic society with an economic and political plan to liberate the community from capitalism, usury and wage-earning work. In spite of this, there was a rupture within this organization for lack of understanding of the indigenous logic; the leaders insisted that the indigenous eat bread instead of tortillas, and that they dress in more European attire (suits) instead of their usual clothing, among other restrictions.
In spite of the exit of the *murabitus* (Muslim leaders), the indigenous continued to consider themselves Muslim, Reading the Koran in Arabic even though they introduced some of their more traditional elements. This could give way to a Mexican Islam, impregnated with the Mayan culture. the Islamic Cultural Center has sought they way to create their own Muslim modality, liberal and national, without breaking with the official vision, that is still represented by the Educational Center of the Muslim Community. On the other hand, fundamentalists seem to be unsuccessful because of their lack of openness. It would seem as if the events of September 11 2001, far from obscuring and marginalizing Islam in Mexico, gave way to a new vitality and important reemergence.