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Re-establishing Islamic Learning in Al-Andalus, Cordoba

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Citation

Kettani, A. (1999). Re-establishing Islamic Learning in Al-Andalus, Cordoba. *Isim Newsletter*, 3(1), 41-41. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17307>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Universidad Islamica Averroes
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The revival of Islam in Al-Andalus, the Spain of today, has been a cherished ideal of many Muslims. After the fall of Granada in 1492, the brutal persecution, forced conversion and expulsion of the Andalusian Muslims (and Jews) by the Spanish Catholic Church and royal court obliterated a famed multicultural society. Today, Islam – and with it Islamic learning – is making a comeback.

In spite of the horrors during and after the Christian Castellan Conquista, apparently wiping out any presence of Islam in the country, a feeling of identification with a Muslim past remained alive in the hearts of many Spaniards, especially in the Andalusian south. This historical identification also finds expression in an increasing number of conversions to Islam, a process that began soon after the death of Franco and the return of democracy and freedom of conscience to the country. Thousands embraced Islam within a short span of time and their numbers continue to increase. By the 1980s the new Muslims started to form associations. Mosques were opened, mainly in Andalusia, but also in other places like Madrid, also for the benefit of the rising number of migrant Muslims. The autochthonous Muslims include people from all walks of life, men and women, the majority being in their twenties at the time of their conversion.

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In 1989 the government of Spain granted official recognition to Islam, thus acknowledging its roots in Spain. The government requested the Muslims to organize nationally, which they did under the auspices of the ‘Comision Islamica de España’ (The Spanish Muslim Commission) which represents the Muslim community. The commission negotiated an agreement (signed in 1992) with the government over the rights of Muslims, the most important aspect of which concerns education. It stipulates the right to establish Muslim schools and universities. Moreover, the State committed itself to include Islam and Arabic in the curricula of the public schools for those students desiring to follow the courses. The Comision Islamica de España devises the curricula and recruits teachers.

The Universidad Islamica Averroes was established within the 1992 agreement. Named after the famous Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rusd, the university was opened in 1995 in the old medina of Cordoba, near the famous Mezquita Aljama, the Great Mosque (now a Catholic Cathedral). Attached to it, a new beautiful small mosque was built, with its Andalusian minaret on the street. Some neigh-

bouring buildings were purchased since then, allowing sufficient space for expansion in the future. The founders of this private Andalusian Spanish university consider it to be the resurrection of the medieval university situated in the Great Mosque (Mezquita Aljama) during Muslim times. The university is run by a board, which is headed by Prof. A. Mahtar M’Bow (Ex-Secretary General of UNESCO). The university is a member of the Federation of the Universities of the Muslim World and has cooperation agreements with several universities in Europe and the Muslim world.

The Universidad Islamica Averroes offers Islamic education to all those desiring it, be they Muslim or not. Its plans of education are adapted to the Spanish system by using credit hours. The academic year is divided into two semesters, giving 21 credit hours per semester, i.e. a total of 168 credit hours for the 4-year course. The courses are divided into three important themes: Arabic language and literature, Islamic studies and Andalusian studies. The languages of education are Arabic and Spanish, but Persian and Turkish are also taught.

In September 1996, the university initiated a correspondence course offering a pro-

gramme identical to that which is conducted *in situ*. The university has a dedicated staff and faculty, most of whom are Spanish Muslims. Students have to pay a tuition fee; however, for the studies carried out *in situ* (\$2000 per year) no valid candidate has been rejected on the grounds of inability to pay. The university has a scholarship programme to aid deserving students. The fee for the correspondence course is very modest (\$400 per year), but no scholarships are available in this case. ♦

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