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Argentina

PEDRO BRIEGER

Latin Islam since 11 September

The attack on New York's Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 had negative repercussions all over the globe, including in Argentina. Since then, leaders of the Muslim community in Argentina have been invited by the mass media to explain the causes of the attacks, as if Muslims all over the world were in some way linked to the terrorists and their ideas. Although they were approached with respect on many radio and television programmes, there were clear expressions of discrimination and ridicule of Muslims and their beliefs.

At dawn on Sunday, 14 July 2002, the main cemetery of the Muslim community of Argentina was the object of an attack. Just a few miles from the centre of Buenos Aires, taking advantage of the fact that the cemetery does not have special security, unidentified persons entered and desecrated about 150 graves. Although the graves were not completely destroyed and the buried bodies remained untouched, it was clear that the intention was to cause as much damage as possible to the maximum number of graves. The Islamic Cemetery of Buenos Aires was inaugurated in 1961, and

against cemeteries are always the work of the police, who in this way attempt to settle internal political issues of the country. 'We are already familiar with this story', writes Kollman, '[e]very time there is a moment of convulsion in the Buenos Aires police corps, a spectacular desecration of graves takes place.... Just like with the Jewish cemeteries, the attacks were now against Muslim graves. The idea is to create an international impact and to put Minister Cafiero (chief of security of the province of Buenos Aires) on the spot.³ Kollman is convinced that the attack on the Islamic cemetery is a discriminatory act, given the fact that 'there is no history of desecration of Catholic cemeteries, and here the Muslims are clearly a scapegoat, as Jews are in other cases.' Beyond the internal Argentinean political motivations that the facts may be based on, and even

Personal experiences

When consulted on the subject of discrimination, most of the members of the Muslim community tend to say that there is no discrimination in Argentina. Imam Mahmud Husain, ex-president of the Association for the Spreading of Islam in Latin America and director of the Centre of Higher Islamic Studies in Argentina, has tried on more than one occasion to organize the Islamic community politically, but his attempts have failed. Husain compares the experience of the Muslims with that of Jews, who organize themselves easily because 'they have a historic experience of persecution, they are in a hostile environment. The Christian environment is hostile to Jews, and as a minority they need to always be represented politically. This has not been the case with Muslims. We could say that Judaism as a minority always acts with a minority awareness, whereas Islam as a minority acts with a majority awareness. Tradition itself has led Islam to do so, because it sees itself as all peoples, all persons, all races, and all cultures. It does not see itself as a minority.'

Nonetheless, until the reform of the Constitution in 1994, advanced by ex-president Carlos Saúl Menem, Muslims were discriminated against at some of the most important government levels, such as access to the presidency, which was off limits. As admitted by his ex-wife, Zulema Yoma, Menem abandoned Islam and converted to Christianity in 1966 because his main ambition was to become president of the country and the 1853 Constitution prevented non-Catholics from holding that position. According to that Constitution, when taking office the president and vice-president had to swear by saying 'I, [name], pledge by God our Lord and these Holy Gospels, to perform with loyalty and patriotism the function of president.'⁴ Once in the presidency, Menem promoted the reform of the Constitution, and since 1994 the only requirement to become president is to have been born in Argentinean territory or be the child of a native citizen.⁵ The reform also altered the pledge, and when taking office the president and vice-president now vow to 'perform loyally and with patriotism the function of president (or vice-president) of the Nation and observe the Constitution of the Argentinean Nation, respecting its religious beliefs.'⁶

It is only when one delves into the personal experiences of Muslims in Argentina that discrimination comes out into the open, going beyond the typical association of 'Turkish' (which equals Muslim or Arab), which Muslims have already come to accept as part of the country's folklore. The architect Hamurabi Noufour, son of Syrian parents, is professor of Islamic and Mudejar Art since 1998 in the departments of Architecture, Industrial Design, Dress Design, and Textile Design at Buenos Aires University. In December 2000 he was informed that his position at the Faculty of Architecture would be revoked, although he would continue in the other departments. He was verbally told that his subject, 'although culturally interesting, is not pertinent to the official programme',⁷ which Noufour considered to be an act of discrimination. He promptly complained in a formal letter to several academic institutions and to the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI). Noufour

gave a great deal of publicity to his situation, and although he never received an official answer from the university, in October 2001 he was informed that the subject would be reinstated to the architecture faculty. Noufour, who was a cultural aide at the Islamic Centre of the Argentine Republic (CIRA), affirms that despite his problem he is not discriminated against for being a Muslim, although 'there is always some kind of differential consideration when they find out I am a Muslim.'

One of the most symbolic cases of an openly anti-Islamic attitude took place on television. In September 2001, after the attacks on the Twin Towers, the journalist Guillermo Cherasny, known for his public statements in favour of the military taking armed action against the democratic system, said in a broadcast of his television programme *Brokers* that 'Arabs and Muslims are damn nazis'. These words gave cause to a public legal complaint of CIRA against the journalist – which is not over yet.⁸

It is still very difficult to determine if the desecration of graves at the Islamic Cemetery was an anti-Islamic action. The ambiguous relationship between misunderstanding, ignorance, and discriminatory attitudes against minorities, and the particularities of Argentinean politics, which always contains elements of violence, do not allow us to arrive at a clear-cut conclusion. In any event, regardless of the intention of those who desecrated the graves, for the Islamic community of Argentina this was yet another link in a campaign against Islam that was only enhanced after 11 September. Concurring with the journalist Simon Birinder of the *Buenos Aires Herald*, one could also say that, more than discrimination, 'it is unfortunate but true, that few Argentines really understand what Islam is about.'⁹

Notes

1. This information and the citations in this article, unless stated otherwise, are based on a number of interviews with those directly concerned conducted by the author in 2001 and 2002.
2. *Clarín*, 16 July 2002.
3. Raúl Kollman, 'Profanadores y policías', *Página/12*, 16 July 2002.
4. Roberto Pedro Lopresti, *Constitución Argentina*, edited by Unilat (Buenos Aires, 1998). (Article 93 of the Constitution, pp. 62–3).
5. Article 89 of the reformed Constitution. See *Constitution op.cit.* p. 61.
6. '[D]esempeñar con lealtad y patriotismo el cargo de presidente (o vicepresidente) de la Nación y observar y hacer observar fielmente la Constitución de la Nación Argentina respetando sus creencias religiosas.' Art. 93 of the reformed Constitution, see note 4.
7. Quoted in the letter of Hamurabi Noufour to the architect Bernardo Dujovne, Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, Design, and Urbanism of the University of Buenos Aires, 6 December 2000.
8. *Noticias judiciales*, no. 817, year IV, 25 September 2001 (www.habogados.com.ar/).
9. Simon Birinder, 'Argentines and the Real Face of Islam', *Buenos Aires Herald*, 10 February 2002.

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Islamic Centre in the heart of Buenos Aires.

there is little movement because – as Zulema Hamze, secretary of the cemetery since 1984, notes – there are only about 4 to 5 funerals per month.¹ The media did put the cemetery in the spotlight on the occasion of the funeral of ex-president Carlos Menem's son, Carlos Facundo Menem, who died in an accident under unclear circumstances in March 1995.

The motives of the assailants were unknown, since no pamphlets were found explaining their actions and no anti-Islamic slogans were painted. On Tuesday, 16 July, the newspaper *Clarín*, with the largest circulation in Argentina, dedicated its editorial to the desecration of the cemetery. Displaying the usual confusion between Arabs and Muslims, *Clarín* ran a headline that read 'The Desecration of the Islamic Cemetery' and proceeded to explain that 'aggression of this nature does not just attack one community in particular, in this case the Arabic one, but all of society.'² In contrast, for the journalist Raúl Kollman, who has investigated the repeated attacks against Jewish cemeteries and is the author of the book *Sombras de Hitler* (Shadows of Hitler), acts of violence

though the desecration of the graves may not have been targeted towards Muslims, the Islamic community did experience it as a discriminatory act.

Adalberto Assad, president of the cemetery and the Argentinean Arab Islamic Association, believes that 'this is another attack against our community by people who want to spread chaos in society. It also goes against the entire social fabric.' For Sheikh Abdul Karim Paz of the Shi'ite mosque at Tauhid of the Flores neighbourhood, 'it is the first time that the community goes through something like this; it is a very bitter moment. The message is terrible and deceitful.'

The desecration of the graves, however, is not the first violent act against the Islamic community in Argentina, since two of the three mosques in the country have been the target of attacks in the past. In January 2001, strangers threw a bomb against the façade of at-Tauhid mosque, and in June 1986, a few days before the inauguration of the mosque on Alberti Street, an explosive device blew up the windows facing the street.

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