

Islam in Latin America: The Rise, Challenges and Current Situation

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Islam as one of the youngest and second largest religions of the world has more than 1,5 billion adherents. Although Islam was founded in Saudi Arabia, in a short period of time the religion crossed all borders and spread all over the world. Because Islam is a perfect and complete religion, Islam is a religion of justice, mercy and kindness.

As the world developed, people moved from one side to another carrying their cultures and religions with themselves. In consequence of migration processes, Islam religion also spread and developed crossing the continents.

In a conference of Latin American Muslim leaders in Istanbul in 2014 President of Turkey Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan noted that “Muslim sailors arrived in America in 1178”¹. Some people thought that president Erdogan gave a little evidence for justifying his claims. However, there are some historical hypotheses and evidence, which enable us to believe that it was not just a claim, it makes us believe that the representatives of Islam world came to New World before Christians.

According to some evidences, Muslims who lived in Spain and Western Africa came to American continent five centuries before Europeans. *In the middle of X. century under the rule of Caliph Abdullah Ibn Mohammed (888-912) Muslims with African origin came to undiscovered American continent from Spanish port of Palos². After a long period, they came back from “strange and interesting lands” with a huge amount of trophy. Such hypothesis can be presented that exactly Muslims guided and accompanied Christopher Columbus and other Spaniards in their voyages towards “the new world”³.*

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1 *Muslims Found Americas Before Columbus Says Turkey's Erdogan*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30067490>

2 Rebecca Fachner, “Did Muslims Visit America Before Columbus?”, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/23662>

3 *Muruj Al-Masudi, Adh-Dhahab* (Arabic), Vol. 1, P. 138.

Among another historical hypothesis Sultan of Mali Abu-Bakr II put in his mind to sail to another side of the great water for more power. He reached to these lands in 1331 with 2000 boats⁴. But before he planned to go to Mecca for a pilgrimage.

Sultan Abu-Bakr was mainly accompanied by Mandingo tribe, which was further described in Hindu divinity Quetzalcoatl. This divinity has always been described as strong, black man who was in a white dress and reached to the land in six cycles. The image presented by ancient Hindu sagas corresponds to Abu-Bakr's arrival to the new land. There were also some similarities between cultures of Mandingo tribe and Hindu such as sacrificing of black animals, using conical hats, obtaining some same divines and worship ceremonies proof that Mandingo tribe headed by Sultan Abu-Bakr traveled to American continent two centuries before Columbus⁵.

Some of Islam historians claim that the role of Muslim mariners and astronomers in the discovery of the New World is undeniable. The relations with Islam and the New World were possible with maritime contacts established by African Muslim sailors. There are some claims that Arab coins had been found in the coasts of South America dating back to 800 AD⁶.

Granada, the last stronghold of Spain was conquered in 1492. Ferdinand and Isabella declared the end of Muslim domination in Spain and the Iberian Peninsula. Thus, they could reestablish Roman Christianity in Spain. It is not surprising that mainly in the same year Columbus launched his voyage which led to the discovery of the new continent. For running from the prosecutions, Muslims either left these lands, or coercively accepted Christianity.

The role of Muslim scientists in the success of Western travelers, researchers can also provide the proof of their success. For example, Vasco de Gama the famous Portuguese traveler consulted with prominent Muslim astronomer Ahmad ibn Majid on the west coast of Africa where they met.⁷ Another prominent Muslim navigator Piri Muhyi'l-Din Reis formed a map of the western hemisphere nearly in XIV century. It can be suggested that the map could only be possible to be

4 Ivan Van Sertima, *They came before Columbus: African Presence of in Ancient America*, Crown Publisher, 1976, p. 51-70.

5 "Mansa Abubakari II, the Emperor of Mali who travelled to America", <http://en.lisapoyakama.org/mansa-abubakari-ii-the-emperor-of-mali-who-travelled-to-america/>

6 S. A. H. Ahsani, "Muslims in Latin America: A Survey—Part I" *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 5, 1984, p. 454-463.

7 Rafael Guevara Bazan, "Some Notes for a History of the Relations Between Latin America, the Arabs and Islam", *The Muslim World* 61, 1971, p. 284-92.

made after the first-hand experience in Southern America. The map was only found in 1929. (ibid)

Famous American historian and linguistic, specialist on linguistic interference problems of Harvard University Leo Wiener mentioned in his book “Africa and the discovery of America” written in 1922 that Columbus was aware of the arrival of Mandingo tribes to the new world, their spearing in the Caribbean basin, and the discovery of this territory before him. He composed III volume books about the linguistic correspondences among some Hindu and African tribes⁸.

If taking the above-mentioned hypothesis as the main point of departure, it wasn't surprising that Columbus and his ship crew were influenced by Muslims. Thus, when crew landed to the new world they called Indian temples “mesquitas” which means masjid or mosque from Spanish language and Inca army was recalled that of Turks⁹.

Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that most of the researchers prefer to launch the Islam history in Southern and Central America after the discovery of the new world by Christopher Columbus in XV. century.

From the beginning of Columbus's discovery Latin America had witnessed three waves of immigration from Muslim countries. But tyrannically catholicize policy against Muslims in the region caused gradual disappearance of Islam, but some Muslims secretly remained faithful to Islam who were called Moriscos (Andalusian Muslims who remained in Spain under Christian rules after 1492). There are some historical claims that the first wave was weakened and even eradicated after Catholic Inquisition. They were burned alive at the stake for apostasy¹⁰.

From the beginning of the XVI century, the representatives of Islam religion in Southern America were African slaves who were brought to the continent from northern and western Africa. Thus, Islam was spread throughout Brazil, Argentina, Columbia, Venezuela and states in Caribbean basin. As the New World was ready to import workers and new religion as well. But they didn't want to be treated as slaves, thus in 1758, an armed revolt was raised by Muslims in Haiti.

8 Leo Wiener, “Africa and the discovery of America”, <https://archive.org/details/africadiscoveryo02wienerich>

9 Rafael Guevara Bazan, “Muslim Immigration to Spanish America”, *The Muslim World* 56, 1966, p. 173- 87.

10 M. Ali Kettani, *Muslim Minorities in the World Today*, London Mansell, 1986, p. 191-92.

In 1830 Muslims with African background could obtain a chance to establish a short-lived Muslim state in Brazil (*ibid*). From this period the slaves became free, and the wave of immigration from India and Pakistan caused to the beginning of the new period for Islam to be spread in this region.

According to some historians between 1830-1960 Arabs massively migrated to Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and Columbia. These migrants mainly came from Palestine, Bangladesh, Syria, Lebanon and Pakistan settled in urban areas such as Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago de Chile. This migration wave was quite intensive, they arrived as indentured servants. This tendency was only weakened in 50-70's of XX century, because of the dominance of military regimes and economic crises in many Latin American states.

Latin American culture and architecture had benefited from the influence of awesome Islamic heritage between XV and XIX centuries, during both three waves of Muslim immigration. Currently, its traces are still visible in cities such as Lima (capital of Peru), Cholula (archeological side of central Mexico) and Guatemala City (capital of Republic of Guatemala). Covered Women (in Spanish Tapadas Limenas) is famous in Lima¹¹. During these ages women in Peru wore hijab totally covered their extremity besides one eye. That was a sign of nobility and freedom, but not fear and compulsion¹².

Currently, there are some Islam communities in Latin America which gather all Muslim migrants, their children and even other people who converted to Islam. The first Islamic association was established in the suburbs of Buenos Aires in 1917 and a year later an Islamic center was formed inside the city. Today, the biggest Muslim community in Latin America is situated in Argentina which was formed one year later than Islamic association. It is estimated that more than 3,5 million of Argentinians have an Arabian root¹³.

There is a little number of people converting to Islam in Latin America. Although the number is not big, the people who converted to Islam say that there was a deep emptiness inside them and they find completeness in Islam. Some religious books were published in Spanish, the number of Latin Americans who realized pilgrimage to Mecca is gradually increasing each year¹⁴.

11 "Growth of Islam: Latin America", <http://muslimobserver.com/growth-of-islam-latin-america/>

12 "They Covered Everything but One Eye: Meet Las Tapadas Limenas, Mysterious women in Peru", <http://mvslim.com/las-tapadas-limenas-mysterious-muslim-women-in-peru/>

13 M. David Sills and Kevin Bagget, "Islam in Latin America", *SB7I*, Vol. 15.2, 2011, p. 28-41.

14 Vincent Lofaso, "Argentine's Muslim Minority", <http://www.coha.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/12/ArgentinasMuslimMinorityArticle-1.pdf>

There are a lot of mosques in Latin American countries. One of them is the most beautiful mosque of Argentina was built in Buenos-Aires by local Muslims in 1989. Besides, there are some mosques in different regions and cities, especially in the cities of Argentina bordered with Brazil and Paraguay.

Argentina is one of the countries of Latin America where Islam is flourishing. Many mosques, community buildings are being built with the financial aid from Saudi Arabia. Nine Islamic centers actively serve for Muslims. Argentina is a country of Latin America with the biggest Muslim community. The headquarters of the most active Islamic community of Southern America–Islamic Organization of Latin America is situated in Argentina. This organization gathers all Muslim who live in the region.

Besides, there are some other Islamic communities in Bolivia, Chile, Columbia, Costa-Rica, Guyana, Venezuela, Trinidad y Tabaco and etc.¹⁵.

Another interesting fact is connected with the President of Argentina Carlos Saul Menem during 1989-1999 who had a Muslim background. His parents were immigrants from Syria who came to Argentina in XIX century. Carlos Menem was born and grew up in Muslim family. He graduated the university from the law and joined a policy when he was young. But he had to convert to Christianity because in this period it was a Constitutional prerequisite to be Christian Catholic in order to run a candidacy for being President or Vice-President of Argentine Republic. Menem's ex-wife Zulema Yoma's thoughts about her husband was very interesting: "*Menem abandoned Islam and converted to Christianity in 1966 only because he wanted to become president of the nation*"¹⁶. It again shows that he was and is a Muslim at heart. According to Menem's personal initiative in 1994 the referendum for Constitutional amendments was held in the country. Thus, the prerequisite to be Catholic for electing President and Vice-President was abolished¹⁷. Exactly, Carlos Saul Menem was the first head of state of Latin American countries who had his official visit to Turkey in 1992¹⁸.

15 "Muslim Organizations in Latin America", <http://www.latinodawah.org/links/links2.html>

16 Pedro Brieger, "Muslims In Argentina", *ISIM Newsletter*, Vol. 6.1, June 2000, p. 33.

17 "Constitution of Argentina, Executive Power, Chapter I/Section 93", http://publicofficialsfinancialdisclosure.worldbank.org/sites/fdl/files/assets/law-library-files/Argentina_Constitution_1994_en.pdf

18 González Levaggi, "Turkey and Latin America: A New Horizon for a Strategic Relationship", *Perceptions, Journal of International Affairs*, Winter 2013, Volume XVIII, No. 4, p. 99-116.

There is an Islamic cultural center in Buenos Aires named after King Fahd of Saudi Arabia who ruled country during 1982-2005. The biggest mosque of the Latin America is situated in the territory of the Islamic Cultural Center. The construction of the center was finished in 1996. The total square of the Center was 20000 sq. and 3400 sq. were presented to Mosque construction. This decision was made after Menem's official visit to Saudi Arabia. Besides the construction of mosque, library, two schools and park were realized there¹⁹.

Some Latin American states show support and tolerance to Muslims women's clothing which is significant for them. For example, in Argentina according to 2011 law, women are free to wear hijabs in public. Their persecution is estimated as the violation of Federal Law and their rights. Beside Muslim women are free to take photographs using their headscarves for their national ID cards²⁰. In the same year, Chile government announced that they support school girl to wear hijab who was prohibited by school²¹.

Most Muslims in Latin America live a modest life, generally they are characterized as kind and honest-minded people, they are responsible and quick-witted and faithful. They even take a position in an administrative staff of country where they live. One sample is connected with Nayib Bukele who was elected a mayor of the capital of El Salvador, San Salvador in 2015. His father was the leader of Muslim community of El Salvador²².

Today the relations between Latin American and Muslim countries such as Turkey, Azerbaijan and Arabian countries are very important mainly for Muslims who are full-member of this society.

The relations between Turkey and Latin American countries can be traced back to the XIX. and the beginning of XX. centuries when various people migrated to Latin America from the Ottoman Empire. They became known as "El Turco" as they possessed the Ottoman Empire passports. All know that the Ottoman Empire was a multicultural state embraced by many nations who lived in peace

19 "Аргентина – страна с арабскими корнями", <http://islamdag.ru/vse-ob-islame/24926>

20 Lofaso, *age*.

21 Chilean government supports Muslim school girl use of 'hijab' <http://en.mercopress.com/2010/11/11/chilean-government-supports-muslim-school-girl-use-of-hijab>

22 "Muslim Population in Latin America Grows 25% Amid Radicalization Concerns", <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/08/24/state-data-muslim-population-latin-america-caribbean-grows-nearly-25-3-million-since-2010/>

for centuries. The migration process continued during World War I.²³

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic, Turkey actively involved in the development of mutual relations between Latin American countries and Turkey as the important part Turkey's expansion foreign policy²⁴. Besides, diplomatic, economic and strategic, also significant cultural relations such as football, music, television soap operas and etc. were also established between Turkey and Latin American countries (LAC) which enabled the strengthening relations between LAC nations and Turkish people²⁵.

Turkey's relations with LAC countries as one of the most developed Muslim states of the world is also significant for all Muslims living in this region. Turkey is a country which has always been opening its doors for all Muslim of the world. In 2014 with the organization of Turkey's Directorate for Religious Affairs Turkey hosted "The First Latin American Muslim Leaders Religious Summit²⁶. About 76 religious leaders from Latin American countries (LAC) came together for discussing the problems and the issues which Muslims encounter in the Latin American region²⁷.

The period of establishment of relations between Azerbaijan and LAC countries begins only after the collapse of Soviet Union when Azerbaijan gained its independence in 1991. Today Azerbaijan established diplomatic relations with thirteen LAC countries and these relations are gradually increasing²⁸.

But along with all positive facts, many difficulties and obstacles stay before Muslim to spread, thrive and flourish Islam in Latin America. There are some reasons which prevent the development and spreading of Islam in region: the lack of knowledge about Islamic culture and religion, irregular religious practice of

23 "Turkey's relations with Latin American countries", http://www.mfa.gov.tr/i_turkey_s-relations-with-the-latin-american-and-the-caribbean-countries_en.mfa

24 İbrahim Kalın, "Turkey and Latin America", <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ibrahim-kalin/2015/02/14/turkey-and-latin-america>

25 Murat Önsoy, "Latin America Turkey Relations: Reaching out of Distant Shores of the Western Hemisphere", *Turkish Foreign Policy: International Relations, Legality and Global Reach*, ed. Pınar Gözen Ercan, Palgrave Palgrave Macmillan, London 2017, p. 237-258.

26 "Turkey's religious diplomacy toward Latin America", <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/2014/11/14/turkeys-religious-diplomacy-toward-latin-america>

27 "Turkey hosts Latin American Muslims in conference", <http://www.worldbulletin.net/haber/148091/turkey-hosts-latin-american-muslims-in-conference>

28 "Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan", <http://www.mfa.gov.az/content/738>

some Muslims, and also the big number of Muslims who are not able to preserve their religious identity. Some of Muslims refuse from their religious faith and culture, because they think they are not accepted to the society because of the pressure of people with different thoughts, thus they aren't able to be adapted to society. Besides, the number of Muslims whose Spanish are fluent and know Spanish culture in order to spread Islam religion is quite little. The lack of schools and teachers for getting knowledge about Islam, lack of books, audio and video remedies, the lack of strong collaboration between heads of Islamic communities, the lack of communication between Muslims in all level- individual, family, institutions and organization levels, lack of competence persons to create relations with Mass Media for propagating Islam, lack of relations between Mass Media of Latin American with Mass Media of Muslim countries all over the world²⁹.

According to the most recent data presented by the International Religious Freedom Reports in 2015, an estimated number of Muslims inhabited in Latin America and the Caribbean is 2,990,000 in comparison in 2010 with 2,290,000 Muslims. It means that during 5 years the number of Muslims grew nearly 23% and Shiites currently outnumber Sunnis³⁰.

According to some official sources, 1.5 million Muslims live Brazil; 750,000 in Argentina; 10,000 in Colombia; 100,000 in Venezuela; 14,000 in Panamá; 81,200 in Suriname and 60,000 in Trinidad and Tobago³¹.

In Latin America Muslims have always been uniting according to their national identity. Their characteristic feature was their love to the countries which opened arms for them and they always make their contribution for the development of the country. They have always been working on hard works. Most of them come together for establishing communities, religious centers and mosques.

Islam religion is the fastest growing religion in the world and as the part of the world Latin America is not an exception. There are some reasons that cause to the growth in a number of Muslim populations in Southern America. This can be directly connected with the demographic situation of Muslim in this region. As a part of a world Latin American countries is also affected by the globalization processes. The political processes in the Middle East urge Muslims to leave their

29 Латинская Америка, 1996, № 6 (номер, посвященный Аргентине)

30 "Report of International Religious Freedom", https://findit.state.gov/search?query=Muslims+in+Latin+America&affiliate=dos_stategov&search=

31 "County Profiles", <http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/profiles>

native lands and to migrate to more stable and secure regions of the world. Thus, Latin America hasn't been immune to such crisis where migrants come from war-ravaged countries, such as Syria, Iraq and etc.

Recent years, Brazil as the country where large number of Muslims inhabited opened its doors for thousands of Muslims from the Middle East countries³².

At least it should be mentioned that Latin America is a region where three monotheistic religions – Christians, Muslims and Jews live in peace and mutual collaboration. Because the members of all religions repeatedly noted that all of them passed very hard and difficult period while migrating to this region, Muslims and Jews had unbearable history of inquisition and persecution, they suffered much but could survive only because they believe that there is a little room in the region to envy and hostility, and today they live in friendship, peace and solidarity.

Today, the policy of big and imperialist states against the Muslim countries is a base action against Islam and to all adherents of this religion. In a such difficult period for all Muslims of the world, we all should be solidary with each other. Muslims in foreign countries should form a strong civil society, thus influencing to state and governmental organizations of states, do their bests for preventing these ongoing unjustness against Muslims within the states where they live. So, great responsibility also lies on the shoulders of Muslims of Latin American countries.

32 “Road to Rio: Brazil Offers Syrian Refugees A New Home, But The Economic Puts Their Latin American Future in Question”, <http://www.ibtimes.com/road-rio-brazil-offers-syrian-refugees-new-home-economy-puts-their-latin-american-2360493>

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