

Summary:

(Un)covering Islam and Its Fifty-Year History in a South American Frontier Region

By John Tofik Karam

George W. Bush hardly finished his declaration of War on Terror after September 11, 2001 when the news reached the border between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, usually called the tri-border area. Based on unsubstantiated allegations that this frontier zone harbored terrorists, multi-governmental forces targeted the mostly Muslim Lebanese and Palestinians who, since the 1950s, migrated to the two main cities of the Triple Border: Foz do Iguaçu in Brazil and Ciudad del Este in Paraguay. Through the first decade of this twenty-first century, varied governmental reports and news stories that cast doubt on their political loyalties and economic practices nearly buried the fifty-year history of Muslim Arab migration to this South American crossroads.

The baseless idea of terrorism in the “tri-border” region was frequently conveyed by citing other media and U.S. government press releases. News stories of a supposedly terrorist-infiltrated Triple Border were validated not by speaking with Muslim Arabs about their own history in the frontier zone, but rather by referencing other (unfounded) news and governmental reports produced elsewhere.

Muslim Arab peddlers first crossed the densely forested and sparsely populated border between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina in the early 1890s, just after the town of Foz do Iguaçu was founded in 1889 on Brazil’s side of the border. It was only in 1951, however, that one of these itinerants from the Barakat family definitively set up one of the first shops of clothing and accessories on the nascent Brazilian city’s main avenue.

Joined by migrants from other villages in the Bekaa Valley and South Lebanon, Sunni and Shia established the region’s first Muslim charity association on the Brazilian side of the border in the late 1970s. But the founding members of what was called the *Sociedade Beneficente Islâmica* (Islamic Benevolent Society) were not interested in religious piety. Many of them had previously set up the *Clube União Árabe* (Arab Unity Club) in Foz do Iguaçu. According to an early migrant who helped found each entity and went on to become a city government administrator, it was hoped that an explicitly Islamic organization in Brazil could better attract donations from Muslim-majority Arab Opec states, then flush with capital from oil price hikes. In order to gain official and not-for-profit recognition, the group came up with its first charter by copying that of Brazil’s first Muslim charity association, the *Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana*, founded in 1929 in the São Paulo. At the time of its creation in the late 1970s, this Islamic Benevolent Society of Foz do Iguaçu drew upon and continued the then half-century Muslim Arab civic history of South America itself.

By the early 1980s, Sunnis and Shias (and many non-Muslims too) began mobilizing to build the very first mosque in Foz do Iguaçu. Of course, that Arabs were a driving force behind the commercial puissance of the Triple Border led many political leaders to lend their support to the founding of an Islamic space of worship. In 1981, a Foz do Iguaçu city councilor of non-Arab origins helped propose the bill that donated a

sizeable plot of public land to the *Centro Cultural Beneficente Muçulmana* (Muslim Benevolent Cultural Center), the organization that was established to spearhead the construction of the mosque and an adjacent community center.

The mosque's head cornerstone was set in March 1983 and its actual opening was celebrated in May 1987. In collaboration with pro-democracy leaders at the twilight of military rule in South American borderland, the opening of the mosque epitomized the return of civil society to the Brazilian side of the border.

By the early 1990s, a historically overlapping relationship was split apart and institutionalized between wealthy Sunnis partial to pan-Arab nationalism and mostly Shias sympathetic to the Iranian revolution. Rather than be simply construed as either sectarian or derivative of developments in the Middle East, however, this institutionalization can only be fully grasped in terms of greater class disparity within the Muslim Arab community as well as the maturation of civil society at the border.

In terms of migration history, Sunnis from Baloul and Lala had made up the majority of Arabs in Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este in the 1970s, but from the mid-1980s onward, Shia from others villages in the Bekaa Valley and South Lebanon began to set up shop too. Nearly all came to work, but their journey was marked by Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon (1982 – 2000).

By the mid-1990s, there were almost equal numbers of Sunni and Shia Lebanese in this South American borderland. At this time, unconfirmed government press releases and akin news coverage unduly blamed the aforementioned mosques and all Muslim Arabs in Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este for the 1994 bombing of a main Jewish community center in the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires, almost twenty hours away by car. Although reflecting the nascent democratic order at the border, Muslim Arabs were arbitrarily targeted and indiscriminately disenfranchised as their fifty-year history in the Triple Border was almost buried. Such a "covering" of Islam was exacerbated after 9/11 when Muslim Arabs in Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este were accused of supporting al-Qaeda. The rumor that Bin Laden visited the region's mosques particularly shocked Muslim Arab residents, local news agencies, and municipal-level border governments.

In this regard, a local Muslim Arab leader recounted one of his interactions with a reporter from the Associated Press. Based out of São Paulo, the U.S. reporter first asked the local leader for an interview over the phone, but the latter insisted on a face-to-face meeting. After a few days, the reporter arrived and confessed that he expected to land on a dirt airstrip, and travel through the jungle until reaching "Taliban-type soldiers" at the Triple Border. He deleted the news story that he had already begun writing in this mold and published a more balanced story about the border. The local leader concluded that most news stories are slanted because few non-local journalists spend the necessary amount of time in the frontier zone to gain a sense of its half-century-long Muslim Arab history.