



# Islam in Spain: A Story of Many Strands – Part I

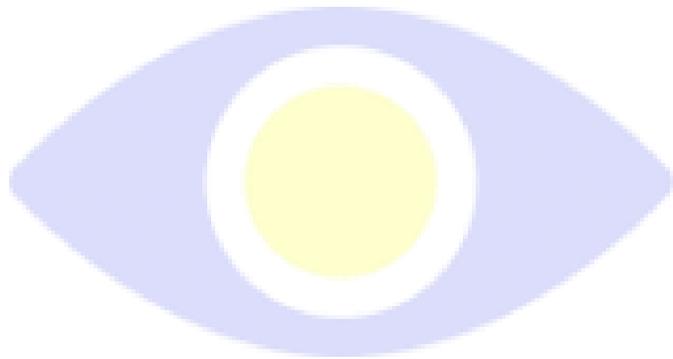
**By: Ana Belén Soage**



## Islam Returns

Islam's long history in Spain began in 711, when the Muslim commander Tariq bin Ziyad landed in the place that now bears his name – Jabal Tariq, “Gibraltar”. The Muslims he led went on to conquer most of the Iberian Peninsula, which they called Al-Andalus, and developed a flourishing civilization that lasted almost 800 years.

In the end, though, disintegration and decline set in and the last Muslim outpost, Granada, was “reconquered” by Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon in 1492. The Catholic monarchs marked the victory by signing a treaty with Sultan Boabdil whereby Muslims were allowed to stay and granted a degree of religious tolerance.



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The treaty was not respected. As part of the consolidation of Spain as a nation-state, Muslims and Jews were forced to choose between converting to Christianity or going into exile. Those who converted – or pretended to – were regarded with suspicion and considered a fifth column for the Turks. Finally, in 1609 Philip III signed the order of expulsion of an estimated 300,000 *moriscos*.

For the next three-and-a-half centuries, the Muslim presence in Spain was negligible except in Melilla and Ceuta, two enclaves on the Moroccan coast occupied by Spain since the 15th and the 16th centuries, respectively. Morocco was forced to recognize Spanish sovereignty over the disputed territories in the 1860 Wad-Ras Treaty, which put an end to the so-called “African War” and opened the door for settlement of Muslims and Jews in the two cities. Their numbers increased in the 1930s due to the establishment of the Protectorate, which brought with it economic development.

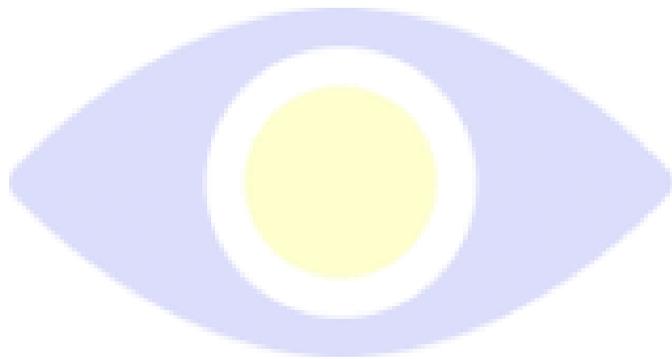
Still, the number of Moroccans living in Ceuta and Melilla remained in the low thousands and they made up only a small percentage of the population. In addition, they were only granted resident status, even if they were born in the enclaves. [1]

The first wave of Muslim arrivals to mainland Spain in recent history began in the 1950s and accelerated in the mid-1960s as a result of the excellent relations between the Franco regime and the Arab world. Tens of thousands of young men from Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco came to study medicine and other vocational degrees at Spanish universities.

Spain’s appeal to Arab students in the European context was clear: compared to other countries, Spain offered fewer bureaucratic restrictions, lower living costs, and scholarships and financial assistance during a student’s stay.

The Muslim Brotherhood was part of the story. The networks of friendship and support of these students gradually evolved into associations, frequently led by members and sympathizers of the Brotherhood, which had a significant following in the countries they came from at the time.

Deeper links with Spain were forged as well. Several thousand went on to stay in Spain, pursuing their chosen professions, marrying Spanish women, and becoming Spanish citizens.



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In those years, Spain was a confessional state where non-Catholics could only practice their religion in private. However, by the 1960s the regime had become less doctrinaire, and Vatican Council II provided an additional push towards liberalization. The 1964 Law of Associations offered official recognition to multiple cultural, professional, recreational and charitable associations, including some established by Muslims.

And so the Islamic Center of Granada and the Muslim Student Center of Granada, which had been set up in 1963, were registered in 1966 alongside the newly-created Association of Muslim Students in Spain.

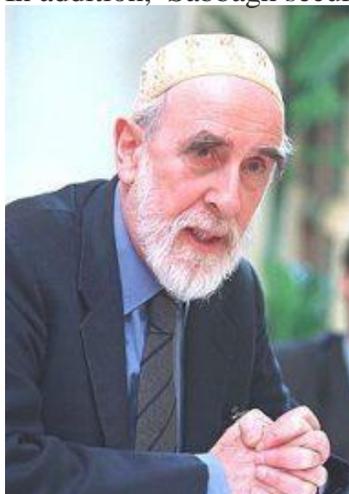
In 1967, the passage of the Religious Freedom Act allowed non-Catholic religious associations to register as such. The Islamic Association of Melilla did so in 1968. In 1971, the Islamic Association of Ceuta followed suit.

Also in 1971, the Muslim Association of Spain (Asociación Musulmana de España, AME) was registered in Madrid by Riay Tatary, a Syrian student of medicine with links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Nizar Ahmad al-Sabbagh was another prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Spain in those years. He fled the Baathist regime in Syria and settled in Granada in 1966. The small Muslim community soon accepted him as their natural leader, not least for his personal charm.

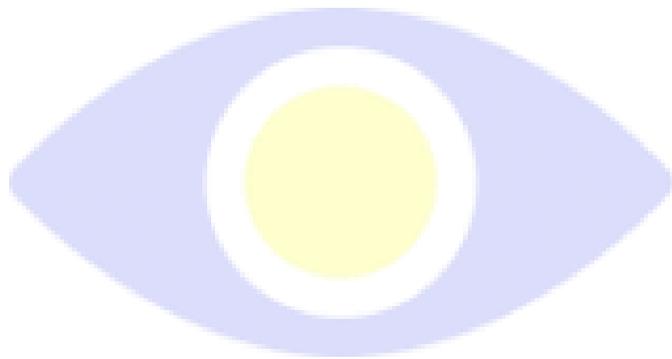
But he also won favor for his contacts with the Saudi-backed Muslim World League and World Assembly of Muslim Youth, which gave him access to financial resources.

In addition, Sabbagh secured Kuwaiti support to launch a publishing company, La Casa



Islámica (The Islamic House). It printed literature about Islam in Spanish and translated the works of Islamist ideologues such as Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb and Abul A'la Maududi. Sabbagh did much of the writing and translating himself and became a reference for Spanish converts.[2]

FAbdulqadir al-Sufi



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Converts were growing in numbers at the time. Starting in the mid-1970s, the southern region of Andalusia saw the emergence of a community. Most of them were Spaniards, with some company from other Western countries. Many entered Islam through Sufism under the guidance of the charismatic Scottish convert Ian Dallas, known as Abdalqadir al-Sufi, who founded the Murabitun World Movement.

These converts shared a background in the radical left and the hippy movement and adopted an anti-capitalist reading of Islam. They rejected the national Catholicism of the Franco regime and reclaimed the Islamic heritage of Andalusia as they saw it, often pretending that their conversion enabled the rediscovery of their true identity. This encouraged them to identify with Andalusian nationalism, which was experiencing a revival.

The number of converts is relatively modest – most estimates vary between 5,000 and 20,000, although some go as high as 50,000 – but they have played and continue to play a prominent role within the Muslim community in Spain.

### **The Institutionalization of Islam in Spain**

After the death of Franco in 1975 and the “Transición” to democracy, there was a debate about the appropriate relationship between the state and religion. The 1978 Spanish constitution incorporated a compromise by decreeing that “no religion shall have a state character” but also that “the public authorities shall take into account the religious beliefs of Spanish society and shall consequently maintain appropriate cooperation relations with the Catholic Church and other confessions.”<sup>[3]</sup>

The subsequent 1980 Religious Freedom Act developed these “cooperation relations” with non-Catholics. In particular, Article 7 of the Act introduced the concept of *notorio arraigo*, or “widely known, deeply rooted status,” to privilege religious communities with a substantial presence in Spanish society. This would form the basis for the institutionalization of Islam in Spain.

By the mid-1980s, Spain was preparing to hold a celebration of its successful political transition. It would showcase the country as a modern, plural and tolerant democracy in 1992 at the Olympics in Barcelona and the Expo in Seville. The date was no coincidence: it commemorated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “discovery” of the Americas but also, and controversially, the end of the *Reconquista*, the “reconquest” of the Iberian Peninsula by the Christians, and the expulsion of the Jews.

The new Spain did wish to symbolically offset the historical injustice suffered by Muslims and Jews. This gave some urgency to the ongoing negotiations with the religious communities, in particular Muslims. The lack of a unified Muslim leadership had delayed the discussions,<sup>[4]</sup> but the AME finally presented a petition for Islam to be given *notorio arraigo* status in April 1989 and it was granted in July.

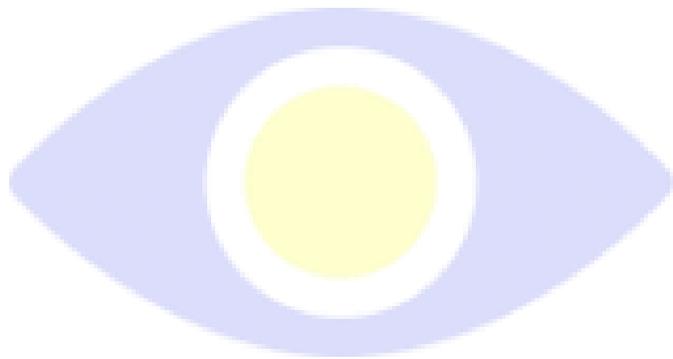
This opened the door for the Spanish state to negotiate an agreement with the Muslim community similar to that concluded with the Catholic Church, but the authorities demanded a sole interlocutor as the representative of Spain’s Muslims.

The converts decided to take the initiative, supported by the Madrid delegation of the European Council of Mosques, which had just been established by the Muslim World League. They formed the Islamic Committee of Spain (Junta Islámica de España, JIE) under the leadership of Mansur Escudero. In September 1989 they set up the Spanish Federation of Islamic Religious Entities (Federación Española de Entidades Religiosas Islámicas, FEERI), also headed by Escudero, in order to bring all Muslim associations in the country under its umbrella.

For his part, the Syrian Riay Tatory was unhappy about playing second fiddle to Escudero. In April 1990 he established another federation, the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de España, UCIDE), initially made up of the different branches of AME.

The conflict within the Muslim community has often been explained somewhat simplistically as a result of disagreements between “traditionalist” immigrant Muslims and

“heterodox” Spanish converts. In reality, both FEERI and UCIDE were less monolithic than that narrative implies. In



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fact, the conflict had much to do with personality clashes and personal ambitions, fueled by foreign countries (at the time, mainly Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Morocco) and international organisations (notably the Muslim Brotherhood) with competing interests and visions of Islam.[5]

Indeed, divisions within the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s were echoed at the Spanish level. Nizar Ahmad al-Sabbagh supported Abdalfattah Abu Ghudda, the leader recognized by the international Muslim Brotherhood. The prominent figure Riay Tatary and others opted for the branch led by 'Issam al-Attar, who advocated armed struggle against the Syrian regime.

In any case, many of those who had arrived as students or exiles fleeing political persecution and then settled in Spain were starting to feel that the Brotherhood had become irrelevant to their personal concerns, which were more focused on furthering their interests in their new home country.

Moreover, Sabbagh was assassinated in Barcelona in 1981, probably by the Syrian regime.[6] It came as no surprise when his replacement, Bahige Mulla Huech, decided to dissolve the Brotherhood branch in Spain in 1985.[7] Revealingly, he was behind the creation of FEERI through the European Council of Mosques, thereby thwarting Tatary's attempts to be the undisputed leader of Spain's Muslims. He was also behind the building of the Omar Mosque (popularly known as the M-30 mosque), the largest in Europe when it was inaugurated in 1992.[8]

In early 1992, the Spanish government's continuing insistence on a single negotiating partner representing Muslims prompted FEERI and UCIDE to set up the Islamic Commission of Spain (Comisión Islámica de España, CIE). The groups' respective presidents, Escudero and Tatary, became co-general-secretaries.

In April 1992, the Cooperation Agreement between the Spanish state and CIE was officially signed.[9] It granted Muslims a series of important rights: Islamic religious education at schools; *halal* food in public institutions; religious assistance in prisons and hospitals; accommodations

for Friday prayers and Muslims holidays; and the right to participate in the preservation of Islamic historical heritage.[10]

However, implementation of the Cooperation Agreement was hindered by a number of problems: a lack of funding, which rendered the Muslim community reliant on foreign money[11]; the decentralized nature of the Spanish state, where a wide range of powers over issues such as education, employment, and healthcare have been devolved to the regions;

procrastination by successive governments, especially those led by the right-wing Popular Party;

and increased concerns over immigration among Spaniards.[12] To make matters even more difficult, CIE's two co-general-secretaries seemed unable to agree on anything.[13]

### **Mass Migration and the Emergence of a New Leadership**

An additional problem was that the CIE was becoming increasingly unrepresentative of the growing Muslim population in Spain.

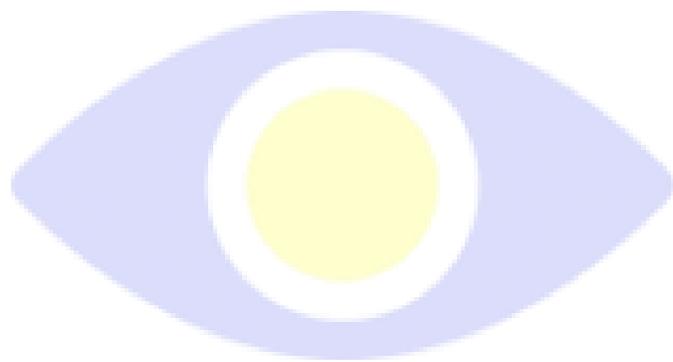
When the Cooperation Agreement was signed in 1992, the number of Muslims in the country was relatively low – around 200,000, including Ceuta and Melilla.[14] Over the next two decades, a booming economy attracted huge waves of migrants – the number of foreigners living in Spain soared from a few hundred thousand in 1987 to 5.2 million ten years later and peaked at

5.8 million in 2011. One of the largest groups was Moroccans. Their numbers jumped from 90,000 in 1996 to 420,000 in 2004 and over 700,000 in 2011.[15] Tens of thousands arrived from other Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan, Algeria and Senegal.

The new immigrants felt that the existing Muslim associations, led by middle-class Middle Eastern professionals and Spanish converts, did not speak for them. They were generally poorer and less educated and their main concerns were socioeconomic in nature.

Groups formed over the years reflect these changes. At one point, the largest Muslim organization in the country was the Association of Moroccan Workers and Migrants in Spain (ATIME), established in 1989 and now defunct.[16] The Association of Pakistani

Workers in Catalonia was funded in 1993 and in 2000-2001 it was instrumental in the occupation of



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churches in Barcelona by immigrants demanding their regularization, a move which received wide support from civil society and was imitated in other towns up and down the country.[17]

In addition, in the 1990s some of the Salafists fleeing the civil war in Algeria chose Spain as their destination, especially the Mediterranean coast, and started attracting followers.[18]

The sizable increase in the number of Muslims in the country made the implementation of the 1992 Agreement more pressing, but it also turned immigration into a political issue. Whereas in the early 1990s Muslims were usually perceived as temporary residents, by the end of the decade it had become clear that many had chosen to live in Spain permanently.

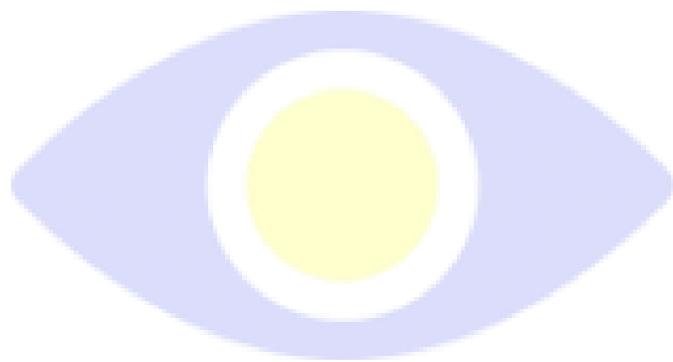
Disputes and troubles followed. In the 1980s and 1990s, local governments in Madrid, Valencia, and several Andalusian towns had promoted the building of “cathedral mosques” as part of a strategy to exploit their cultural heritage. By the early 2000s, by contrast, projects to build mosques faced loud “not-in-my-backyard” campaigns[19] and there were several racist incidents targeting the Moroccan community. The worst was an anti-Moroccan rampage in the southern town of El Ejido.[20] In Catalonia, a xenophobic party, Platform for Catalonia (Plataforma per Catalunya, PxC), was established in April 2002. Furthermore, the Popular Party government elected in 1996 showed little interest in the needs and demands of the Muslim community. Conveniently, it could blame inaction on disagreements within the CIE.

Nonetheless, the CIE’s diminished capacity to represent a larger and more diverse Muslim population did lead the government to put forward a proposal to revamp it as early as 1998. It was rejected by both FEERI and UCIDE.[21] Muslims who felt left out subsequently set up their own bodies, which often became the privileged interlocutors of regional governments, such as the Islamic Cultural Council of Catalonia (Consell Islàmic Cultural de Catalunya) and the

Islamic Cultural Centre of Valencia (Centro Cultural Islámico de Valencia). Meanwhile, in 2006 a new Moroccan leadership took control of FEERI, marginalizing the Spanish converts.

In 2011, after another government proposal to reform the CIE was blocked by FEERI, UCIDE

and several independent regional federations decided to create the Spanish Islamic Council  
“to



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replace the ineffective CIE.”[22] In response, the government issued a decree making it possible to join the CIE without being affiliated to UCIDE or FEERI.

In 2015 a new reform – contested by FEERI once again – reorganized CIE. It established a 25-member Permanent Commission which chose Riay Tatory as its president.[23]

[1] Sol Tarrés Chamorro and Javier Rosón Llorente, “¿Musulmanes o inmigrantes? La institucionalización del islam en España (1860-1992),” *Revista CIDOB d’Afers Internacionals* 115 (2017), pp. 165-185.

[2] Elena Arigita and Rafael Ortega, “From Syria to Spain: The rise and decline of the Muslim Brothers”, in Roel Meijer and Edwin Bakker (eds.), *The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), pp. 189-208.

[3] 1978 Spanish Constitution, Article 16, available at: [www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/espana/leyfundamental/Paginas/titulo\\_primero.aspx](http://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/espana/leyfundamental/Paginas/titulo_primero.aspx).

[4] The Jewish and Protestant communities were recognized as “deeply-rooted” in 1984. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists and Orthodox Christians would be granted *notorio arraigo* status in 2006, 2007 and 2010, respectively.

[5] M<sup>a</sup> Ángeles Corpas Aguirre, *Las comunidades islámicas en la España actual (1960-2008). Génesis e institucionalización de una minoría de referencia* (UNED: 2010). This does not mean that the tensions between immigrant Muslims and Spanish converts are not real. See Mikaela Rogozen-Soltar, “Managing Muslim Visibility: Conversion, Immigration, and Spanish Imaginaries of Islam,” *American Anthropologist* 114/4 (December 2012), pp. 611-623.

[6] The assassination remains unresolved, but the Muslim Brotherhood blamed the Syrian regime, which was known to target dissidents abroad. Earlier in 1981, ‘Issam al-Attar’s wife had been assassinated at their home in Germany during an attempt on his life.

[7] Arigita and Ortega, “From Syria to Spain,” op. cit.

[8] Corpas Aguirre, *Las comunidades islámicas en la España actual*, op. cit. pp. 89ff.

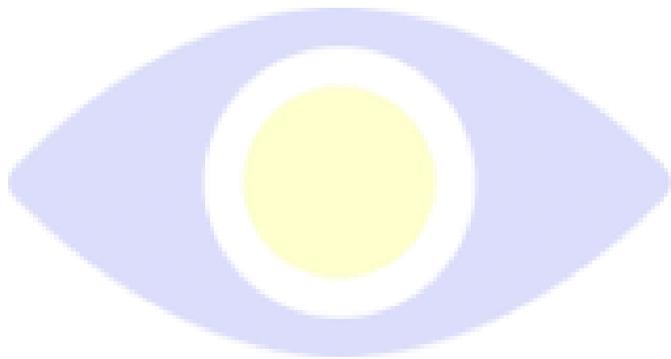
[9] That same year, agreements were also signed with representatives of the Jewish and the Evangelical Christian communities.

[10] Elena Arigita, “Muslim Organisations and State Interaction in Spain: Towards a More Pluralistic Representation?,” in Axel Kreienbrink and Mark Bodenstein (eds.), *Muslim Organisations and the State. European Perspectives* (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge: Nuremberg, 2010), pp. 73-92; Avi Astor, “Governing Religious Diversity Amid National Redefinition: Muslim Incorporation in Spain,” in Marian Burchardt and Ines Michalowski (eds.), *After Integration. Islam, Conviviality and Contentious Politics in Europe* (Springer VS: Wiesbaden, 2015), pp. 247–65.

[11] The media frequently depict foreign funding of mosques and other Muslim institutions in Spain as an obstacle to integration and a possible source of radicalization, e.g. Pilar Cebrián, “¿Quién paga las mezquitas? Las finanzas del islam en Europa,” *El Confidencial*, 17 January 2015, in: [www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2015-01-17/quien-paga-las-mezquitas-las-finanzas-del-islam-en-europa\\_623113/](http://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2015-01-17/quien-paga-las-mezquitas-las-finanzas-del-islam-en-europa_623113/); Ana del Barrio, “El descontrol de los imames reina en España,” *El Mundo*, 24 August 2017, in: [www.elmundo.es/espana/2017/08/28/59a2f334ca4741f4768b461e.html](http://www.elmundo.es/espana/2017/08/28/59a2f334ca4741f4768b461e.html)

[12] Immigration began to appear as an issue of concern for Spaniards in the late 1990s. It was mentioned by nearly 30% of those polled in 2001, and the percentage peaked at nearly 60% in 2006, when it became the main concern. It is now in the single digits. “Encuesta CIS: Así han cambiado las preocupaciones de los españoles desde los 80,” *Europa Press*, 7 October 2015, in: [www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-asi-cambiado-preocupaciones-espanoles-80-20151007191158.html](http://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-asi-cambiado-preocupaciones-espanoles-80-20151007191158.html)

[13] A good example would be the teaching of Islam in schools. Each of the Muslim federations drafted its own curriculum: FEERI presented a draft in 1993; UCIDE, in 1995. After extended



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consultations, a final curriculum was approved in January 1996, and in March the Socialist government and CIE reached an agreement to hire teachers. However, UCIDE rejected the teachers proposed by FEERI and vice-versa.

[14] José Marcos, “España, un país sin guetos para musulmanes,” *El País*, 28 August 2017, in: [https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/08/26/actualidad/1503771760\\_114737.html](https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/08/26/actualidad/1503771760_114737.html)

[15] Astor, “Governing Religious Diversity Amid National Redefinition,” op. cit., p. 254. The

other large groups are Romanians, Ecuadorians and Colombians.

[16] In 1989 ATIME had around 500 members and offices in Madrid, Valencia and the Basque country. By 2001, it had grown to 14,000 members and 15 regional offices. It was close to the PSOE and competed with the more radical Association of Moroccan Emigrants in Spain, aligned with the United Left Party, formed in 1991 and dissolved in 2001. See Aitana Guía, *The Muslim Struggle for Civil Rights in Spain. Promoting Democracy through Migrant Engagement, 1985–*

*2010* (Sussex Academic Press: Eastbourne, UK, 2014), pp. 42ff. ATIME was subsequently involved in several financial scandals and vanished into thin air in 2011. See “La asociación de inmigrantes marroquíes ATIME permanece ilocalizable desde hace un año, según el Ministerio de Empleo,” *Europa Press*, 25 September 2012, in:

[www.europapress.es/epsocial/cooperacion-desarrollo/noticia-asociacion-inmigrantes-marroquies-atime-permanece-ilocalizable-hace-ano-ministerio-empleo-20120925133914.html](http://www.europapress.es/epsocial/cooperacion-desarrollo/noticia-asociacion-inmigrantes-marroquies-atime-permanece-ilocalizable-hace-ano-ministerio-empleo-20120925133914.html)

[17] The protests started in Barcelona and spread to Madrid, Valencia, Málaga, Murcia, Almería... Churches, universities and townhalls were occupied by immigrants demanding their regularization. See Joaquina Utrera, “Los inmigrantes abandonan las iglesias de Barcelona tras

47 días de encierro,” *El País*, 8 March 2001, in:

[https://elpais.com/diario/2001/03/08/espana/984006014\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/2001/03/08/espana/984006014_850215.html); Josep Playà Maset, “En el Raval se habla urdu,” *La Vanguardia*, 20 April 2008, in:

[www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20080331/53449034610/en-el-raval-se-habla-urdu.html](http://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20080331/53449034610/en-el-raval-se-habla-urdu.html)

[18] Juan José Escobar Stemmann, “Activismo islámico en España,” *Política Exterior* 22/124 (2008), pp. 67-81.



[19] For example, in the Catalan town of Premià de Mar in May 2002, where the row over the mosque provided a stage for Plataforma per Catalunya. Mercé Pérez Pons, “Una manifestación contra la mezquita de Premià deriva en enfrentamientos,” *El País*, 19 May 2002, in: [https://elpais.com/diario/2002/05/19/catalunya/1021770446\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/2002/05/19/catalunya/1021770446_850215.html)

[20] The murder of a young Spanish woman by a Moroccan man in February 2000 unleashed a xenophobic rampage which targeted businesses and other property belonging to Moroccans as well as the offices of pro-immigrant NGOs. Tereixa Constenla and Ana Torregrosa, “Vecinos de El Ejido armados con barras de hierro atacan a los inmigrantes y destrozan sus locales,” *El País*, 7 February 2000, in: [https://elpais.com/diario/2000/02/07/espana/949878022\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/2000/02/07/espana/949878022_850215.html)

[21] Iván Jiménez Aybar, “Diagnóstico sobre la integración jurídica y social del Islam en España: bajo la sombra del 11-M,” *Revista Hesperia. Culturas del Mediterráneo* 5 (2006), pp. 235-256. Jiménez Aybar dubbed the divisions within the Muslim community “the new *taifas*,” a reference to the little kingdoms the caliphate of al-Andalus disintegrated into in the XI century.

[22] Jesús Bastante, “Las principales entidades musulmanas acuerdan la creación del Consejo Islámico Español,” *Periodista Digital*, 3 April 2011, in: [www.periodistadigital.com/religion/otras-confesiones/2011/04/03/religion-islam-consejo-islamico-espanol-organizaciones-democracia-espana.shtml](http://www.periodistadigital.com/religion/otras-confesiones/2011/04/03/religion-islam-consejo-islamico-espanol-organizaciones-democracia-espana.shtml); “Mounir Benjelloun: Es importante la participación de todos en el Consejo Islámico Español,” *Webislam*, 29 April 2011, in: [www.webislam.com/articulos/61414-mounir\\_benjelloun\\_es\\_importante\\_la\\_participacion\\_de\\_todos\\_en\\_el\\_consejo\\_islamico.html](http://www.webislam.com/articulos/61414-mounir_benjelloun_es_importante_la_participacion_de_todos_en_el_consejo_islamico.html). By then, more than three hundred of the Muslim associations registered – i.e. over a third – were outside the CIE.

[23] Josep Playà Maset, “Gobierno interviene en las asociaciones islámicas,” *La Vanguardia*, 17 September 2015, in: [www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20150917/54435310295/gobierno-interviene-asociaciones-islamicas.html](http://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20150917/54435310295/gobierno-interviene-asociaciones-islamicas.html)