

# Islamist Extremism and Jihadism in Latin America: A Longstanding and Underestimated Phenomenon

## Part Two



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# **Islamist Extremism and Jihadism in Latin America, a longstanding and underestimated phenomenon (Part 2)**

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Part one of this report can be read [here](#).

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## Introduction

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Islamist extremism has been present in Latin America since the early 1980s, facilitated by a series of factors, notably: widespread corruption; Islamist-friendly governments; the possibility of exploiting illicit trafficking, especially drugs; money laundering; and the lack of proper counter-terror laws.

The first Islamist organization that set foot in the Hemisphere is Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), finding a precisely where a lot of these issues intersect in the Tri-Border Area between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay.<sup>1</sup> Hezbollah continued operating from there with total impunity even after planning and executing large-scale terrorist attacks on the continent, such as the ones against Jewish and Israeli targets in Argentina in 1992 and 1994.

As if it wasn't enough, Hezbollah and Iran found a new and loyal ally when Hugo Chavez became president of Venezuela in 1999. His Bolivarian Revolution had some ideological and political common denominators with Khomeinism, the ruling doctrine of the Iranian government to which Hezbollah is loyal, such as anti-Americanism, the struggle against "imperialism", and support for the Palestinian cause. The two countries have common enemies, and strong mutual economic interests. Therefore, Venezuela soon became Iran's gateway to Latin America, with all the related consequences.

Other Islamist groups would follow. There has, for example, been a spread of Islamism in Mexico's poorest state, Chiapas, with six mosques currently active in a city of fewer than 216,000 people. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of international media outlets, including CNN, the BBC, and National Geographic. While there is so far no connection between those communities and Islamist terrorism, it is interesting to notice how the first group that brought Islam to San Cristobal de las Casas in 1995, the Spanish *Movimiento Mundial Murabitun* (Murabitun World Movement or MMM), was at the time specifically interested in an alliance with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), which, from its base in Selva Lacandona, had launched an insurgency in 1994 under the leadership of Rafael Vicente, better known as "Subcomandante Marcos", against the Mexican central government.

Since that time, Salafi and Tablighi Jamaat activities have been reported in at least three of the six Islamic centers currently active in Mexico, while local families of converts are sending their children abroad to study, something that these organizations fund, ostensibly to assist needy families with education for their children but perhaps for their indoctrination as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Giacalone, "Islamist Extremism and Jihadism in Latin America: A Longstanding and Underestimated Phenomenon", [European Eye on Radicalization Report](#), 14 April 2022.

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## The Longstanding Relations Between Iran and Venezuela

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At the beginning of May 2022, Iran's Petroleum Minister Javad Owji [visited](#) Venezuela to discuss ways to bypass the sanctions imposed by the United States against both countries and deepen the ties of brotherhood and cooperation in energy matters.

Owji also met Venezuela's authoritarian ruler Nicolas Maduro and his Venezuelan counterpart, Petroleum Minister Tareck El Aissami, who has been [designated](#) as a narco-kingpin by the United States and included on the most-wanted fugitives list. Venezuelan State television broadcast images of the meeting at the presidential palace in Miraflores.

Owji's visit to Venezuela is just another chapter in the longstanding and consolidated relationship between the two countries. Just six months before, in October 2021, Venezuelan foreign minister Felix Plasencia visited Teheran where he met with his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amirabdollahian; the two [announced](#) a twenty-year economic cooperation agreement and a forthcoming visit of Maduro to Iran. The news was further [confirmed](#) by Maduro at the end of December 2021.

The Venezuelan foreign minister also met with Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi, [who said](#) that Iran wished to expand its ties with Latin American countries: "In this administration, we are determined to set aside problems created by enemies and continue the country's path of progress".

Just a few weeks later, the National Iranian Oil Engineering and Construction Company [signed](#) a 110-million-Euro contract to repair and restart Venezuela's El Palito oil refinery.

Alongside these public displays of cooperation, three high-level IRGC representatives are covering key roles in the Venezuelan oil industry, as recently reported by the Argentine-based news site [Infobae](#) and by the [Investigative Project](#). Among them, Hojjatollah Ghoreishi, vice minister of defense and logistics for the Iranian Armed Forces and Azim Monzavi, commander of a secret IRGC unit, who is dedicated to trafficking Venezuelan oil in various black markets for the terrorist division of the IRGC, the Quds Force.

The two countries, both founding members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), began to establish closer relations soon after Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, which overthrew the modernizing monarchy in Iran and established an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Venezuela was among the first countries to recognize the new Islamist regime.

Until 1999, however, the cooperation between Iran and Venezuela was mainly limited to the oil sector. Chavez's arrival in power in Caracas in 1999 changed that: his revolutionary government intensified the relationship with Iran, connecting the two states over a number of issues—support for the Palestinian cause, as well as the hostility towards Israel and the United States—all in the name of "anti-imperialism". Between 2001 and 2013, there were frequent visits between the Chavez and the then-Iranian presidents, Mohammed Khatami and Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Hundreds of bilateral agreements were signed, covering different sectors such as oil, manufacturing, construction, transportation, banking, defense and nuclear.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the Iran-Venezuela agreements: Stephen Johnson, "Iran's Influence in the Americas", [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), March 2021.

As [explained](#) by Moses Rendon and Antonio de la Cruz, the relationship between Iran and Venezuela during the Chavez years could be defined as “symbiotic”:

“Iran’s development efforts inside Venezuela boosted Chavez’s image and advanced his anti-imperialist agenda throughout the region. For Iran, Venezuela became a beachhead for diplomatic and commercial expansion into Latin America. Chávez ushered the Iranians to his regional allies, opening up channels of communication that led to agreements between Ahmadinejad and the governments of Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. As Iran faced increasing financial isolation due to U.S. sanctions, Venezuela, through its Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), helped open up vital trade links”.

Through the years, Iran consolidated its presence in, and relations with, Venezuela. In the meantime, Tehran also expanded its intelligence networks throughout Latin America, especially by using its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, and exploiting the vast Lebanese and Syrian diasporas as a gateway, particularly in Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.

After Chavez’s death in 2013, as the Venezuelan regime quickly turned into a full-blown narco-state, the new president, Nicolas Maduro, as well as several high officials, ended up on the U.S. [Drug Enforcement Agency](#) (DEA) and the [U.S. State Department](#)’s most-wanted lists. Hezbollah took advantage of the Maduro regime’s illicit connections and expanded its crime-terror networks throughout Venezuela, as exposed by Joseph Humire in his report at the *Atlantic Council* on the Maduro-Hezbollah nexus:

“Often without the larger Lebanese community aware of this clandestine activity, an ‘army’ of logistical professionals—entrepreneurs, lawyers, accountants, and others—emerged within the diaspora as a support network in Venezuela who help to raise, conceal, move, and launder illicit funds for Hezbollah, some of which is used to advance its terror operations worldwide”.<sup>3</sup>

The “diaspora mechanism” is similar to the one implemented by Hezbollah in the early 1980s in the Triple Frontier or Tri-Border Area—the junction of the Iguazu and Parana rivers where the borders of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet—and works through the exploitation of citizens of Lebanese origin who often do not even know that they are interacting with Hezbollah or Iranian agents. In a very short time, the “Party of God” converted the area into a hub for all sorts of illicit activities that boosted the organization’s revenue and also served as a base to perpetrate attacks. The March 1992 Hezbollah attack against the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and the bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) building in the same city in July 1994 that between them killed 114 people were both planned in the Triple Frontier. This was only the most gruesome demonstration that Iran can count on an extensive and multifunctional Hezbollah network operating throughout Latin America, with strong roots in Venezuela and the Triple Frontier.

Additionally, it is important to point out how the criminal activities carried out by Hezbollah/IRGC often overlap with organized criminal activities, to which Tehran has turned to bypass financial constraints caused by the sanctions. As [reported](#) by the *Washington Institute*, the DEA has received information on Iranian Embassies being used in furtherance of Hezbollah criminal enterprises, such as diplomatic pouches being used to carry drugs.

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph M. Humire, “The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran Backed Networks Prop Up the Venezuelan Regime”, [Atlantic Council](#), October 2020, p. 5.

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## The Hezbollah Clans Between Colombia and Venezuela

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In 2008, the DEA, in coordination with Colombian authorities, dismantled an international cocaine smuggling and money laundering ring that used part of its profits to fund Hezbollah. The operation, dubbed “Titan”, arrested several individuals, including Cherky Harb, a Bogota-based Lebanese kingpin, who was [the connection](#) between Colombian drug dealers and Hezbollah.

In June 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department [banned](#) Americans from doing business with three Lebanese-Venezuelans and a Lebanese man, all accused of laundering drug money for Hezbollah. The men were: Abbas Hussein Harb, Ali Houssein Harb, Kassem Mohamad Saleh, and Ibrahim Chibli. All four were also accused of being connected to the Colombian-Lebanese drug lord Ayman Saied Joumaa, who was [indicted](#) the previous year by a U.S. court for trafficking cocaine with the brutal Mexican drug cartel Los Zetas.

Humire went deeper into “Operation Titan” and explained that Hezbollah facilitators Kassem Mohamad Saleh and his brother Ali Mohamed were the kingpins of the Saleh clan, which controlled the illicit markets of drugs, weapons, cash smuggling, and money laundering in the Maicao area of north-east Colombia, close to the border with Venezuela. Additionally, drug cartels come across the border, onto Venezuelan soil, which are controlled by members of the Maduro regime that benefit from this illicit trade.<sup>4</sup>

When the U.S. took action against them in 2012, the Saleh clan relocated to Maracaibo, working in coordination with a powerful drug cartel in Venezuela called Los Leales, and they are believed to be in control of the illegal immigration route of La Guajira in Colombia.

Another Lebanese clan documented by Humire is the Rada clan, considered the largest in Venezuela, with different strongholds across the country and its main base in Valencia, Venezuela’s industrial capital. Unlike the other two clans (Salah and Nasreddine), the Radas are not yet under U.S. sanctions and maintain a low profile.<sup>5</sup>

In 2017, Colombian authorities arrested and [deported](#) Venezuelan-Lebanese Hezbollah financier Abdala Ramel Rada, accused of drug trafficking, smuggling, and money laundering between Maicao and Cartagena, where he was based.

According to statements made by Abdala Ramel himself, his supervisor was Salman Raouf Salman (Samuel Salman El Reda), a senior member of Hezbollah’s External Security Organization (ESO) or Islamic Jihad Organization in Latin America, involved in several terrorist plots, including the Buenos Aires bombings in 1992 and 1994. In 2009, Argentine authorities issued an arrest warrant for Raouf Salman and a \$7 million reward for information on his whereabouts.<sup>6</sup>

The third clan covered by Humire is the Nasreddine clan, based on Margarita Island and led by the brothers Ghazi and Abdallah Nasreddine, originally from the village of Bint Jbeil in southern Lebanon and formally a part of the Venezuelan regime (unlike the previous two clans).<sup>7</sup>

In 2008, Ghazi Nasreddine was [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) for his ties to Hezbollah; he is involved with the Venezuelan foreign relations department and acts as an official diplomat. When Ghazi was stationed in

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

the Venezuelan Embassy in Damascus, he arranged meetings between Venezuelan officials and high-ranking Hezbollah members, and in 2009 a meeting between Hezbollah, Venezuela's then-Interior Minister Tareck El Aissami, and the Venezuelan military counterintelligence chief, Hugo Carvajal Barrios.<sup>8</sup>

Abdallah Nasreddine has been a prominent [member](#) of Venezuela's Chavista ruling party, the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela or PSUV), serving as regional coordinator for the state of Nueva Esparta.

Humire points out how all three clans are strategically positioned close to the three most important ports of Venezuela, where the National Iranian Oil Company is present, and also close to the two main airports, where the private Iranian airliner Mahan Air operates.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, one of their most prominent allies is former Venezuelan Vice-President and current Oil Minister, Tarek El Aisami, who controls all the sea trade in the country and who was also accused by U.S. authorities of [providing](#) Venezuelan passports and identity cards to Hezbollah members and IRGC officers from the Middle East, among them Suleiman Ghani Abdul Waked, a right-hand man of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.<sup>10</sup>

As explained by Maria Zuppello, a Latin America-based Italian investigative journalist who has extensively covered Islamist extremism in the area, Iran now has key agents infiltrated into all the key sectors of the Venezuelan economy and they are capable of conducting an asymmetric warfare against U.S. and Israeli targets.<sup>11</sup>

While Iran has desisted from terrorist attacks in South America since AMIA, this could be explained by the fact that the Iranian regime has shifted most of its effort to expanding their networks and influence throughout the continent and reinforcing relations with organized crime, rather than perpetrating terrorist attacks. This clearly does not mean that they do not have the capabilities for future attacks.

According to Zuppello, the new Left-wing political wave in Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, and very likely Colombia and Brazil, will facilitate Iran's presence in the region. Moreover, Iran has no interest in creating conflicts and trouble in those countries that are considered friendly. In short, terrorism can wait, because infiltration into the political and economic sectors is far more important.

Potential alliances between Iran and the new Left-wing governments could be a serious blow for the United States in its "backyard" and Latin America could become a launching site for Hezbollah terror operations in the U.S. and Europe. In the meantime, Latin America will be used by the Khomeinists as a hub for illegal activity, political-institutional infiltration, and proselytism.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Zuppello, "Il Jihad ai Tropici", (Paesi, 2019), p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

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## The Silent Salafi Infiltration in Mexico

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One Latin American country that seems to be left out of the story of Islamist infiltration in the Western Hemisphere is Mexico. Despite the alleged relations between drug cartels such as Los Zetas and Jalisco Nueva Generacion, and jihadists, occasionally pointed out by some media outlets, and the risk of terrorist infiltration into the United States from Mexico, very little evidence has emerged.

In 2011, the [United States accused Iran](#) of plotting to kill the Saudi ambassador in Washington D.C. and bomb the Israeli and Saudi embassies in Argentina, all with the help of Los Zetas. According to the U.S. Justice Department indictment, the cartel and IRGC had also discussed a side deal to transfer opium from the Middle East to Mexico. There was some evidence defined by the investigators as “strong”, such as payments amounting to nearly \$100,000 allegedly from Iran’s IRGC and a suspected Iranian officer caught on tape giving orders to a Texas operative working with a presumed representative of the Zetas cartel who turned out to be a DEA informant. Nevertheless, the whole scheme seemed “[bizarre](#)”.

Up to the present, no terrorist attacks have been perpetrated on U.S. soil by terrorists coming from across the border in Mexico, nor has Mexico been targeted. It is plausible that the drug cartels have no interest in helping potential jihadists with such operations, as it would provoke a reaction from the United States that would harm the drug lords’ business in both the narcotics and human trafficking sectors.

So far there has also not been a terrorist attack in the U.S. perpetrated by an individual entering from Mexico who acts without the direct support of any group (so-called “lone wolves”). In this sense, the [Canadian border](#) has proven more dangerous, and the last Islamist attack in the United States was [perpetrated](#) in January 2022 by a British citizen who legally entered the U.S. by plane from London.

However, there is a silent phenomenon that is taking place in Mexico that is of concern, concentrated in the southern state of Chiapas, where the Salafist and Islamist presence is constantly growing. While there are so far no connections to terrorism among the local communities, the Mexican intelligence service has been on alert due to the peculiarity of the situation.

The increasing interest in the area from international Islamic organizations is quite a strange phenomenon because it is a state where Christianity and traditional Mayan practices are deeply rooted, sometimes with a unique syncretism. Additionally, Chiapas is not exactly a preferred destination for immigrants looking for a better life or to invest, due to the area’s lack of economic opportunities.

Chiapas is the state in Mexico with the highest poverty rate ([76.4%](#), according to the latest data) and this is due to several reasons: Chiapas is inhabited by a vast number of indigenous people, who tend to be poorer than non-indigenous people, often socially and politically marginalized, and the victims of political measures that benefit wealthy land owners. Many of the natives only speak indigenous languages, not Spanish, which creates an obstacle to political and economic development. Additionally, geography does not help, as the arduous mountainous area makes economic and industrial development very difficult. In the early 1990s, Chiapas was the stronghold of the notorious EZLN.

In 2020, the population of San Cristobal de las Casas was [215,874](#), which is rather small by comparison to other metropolitan areas of Mexico. Despite this, six Islamic centers have so far been reported as active in the city: one Ahmadi center, three Islamic centers that are Salafi in orientation (one of which has also been hosting Tablighi Jamaat activity), one following the *Ahl-al-Sunna wa al-Jamaat* tradition, and a Sufi congregation in the outskirts of San Cristobal de las Casas.

The phenomenon has recently caught the attention of Palmira Perez, a well-known California-based Mexican reporter, currently working for *Noticiero Estrella TV*, who traveled to Chiapas in 2021 to further investigate the situation and produce a [television news report](#). Among other things, she discovered that many families who converted to Islam are sending their children to Turkey for religious studies so that they can come back and further spread the message. Many of these children already read and write in Arabic, even though it is not clear where they learned it from. It is also very common among worshippers to wear Afghan pakol and Pakistani kufi hats.

Among the Islamic centers currently active, there is “*Al-Kauthar*” mosque in the eastern barrio of Molino los Arcos, noted for its Tabligh activity and links to the Islamic Council of North America,<sup>12</sup> established as an offshoot of the Jamaat e-Islami, and holding to a Salafi-based doctrine, as exposed in the first part of this report.<sup>13</sup> The Tablighi Jamaat presence was further confirmed by an extensive report in 2016 by Mexican historian Gaspar Morquecho.<sup>14</sup> According to the reporter, on 17 June 2013, Al-Kauthar Mosque hosted a delegation of Tabligh that reached the site to help worshippers strengthen their faith.

Another Islamic center in the city is named “*Süleymaniye Madrasa*”: it’s located in barrio de San Diego, south of the city, and it is linked to the New York-based United American Muslim Association. The objective is “to provide an exceptional Islamic education in accordance with *Ahli-Sunnah Wa’l-Jamaah* for every Muslim with or without access to education”, as [indicated](#) on its website.

Another worship site, [Umar Mosque](#), is located in the Tlaxcala neighborhood and, according to Morquecho, it was founded in 2021 by a Syrian immigrant known as “Mudhar”, but very little information is available.

It is interesting to note: at least three of these Islamic centers originated from previous splits within the first Islamic organization that set foot in San Cristobal de las Casas, MMM, which was founded by a group of Spanish Muslims and led in Chiapas by Aureliano Perez Yruela, also known as “Muhammad Nafia”.

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<sup>12</sup> Zuppello, p. 98.

<sup>13</sup> Giacalone, “Islamist Extremism and Jihadism in Latin America: A Longstanding and Underestimated Phenomenon”.

<sup>14</sup> Gaspar Morquecho, “*A dos décadas: Indios Chamula Musulmanes en San Cristóbal de Las Casas*” (Two Decades Later: The Muslim Chamulas Indians in San Cristobal de las Casas), [Chiapas Paralelo](#), 19 May 2016.

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## The Curious Case of Muhammad Nafia: The Origins of Islamism in Mexico

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Like Roman Catholicism, Islam came to Mexico from Spain, brought by Muhammad Nafia (named Aureliano Perez Yruela before his conversion) and his companions in faith, who met in Chiapas with a group of Chamula people who were [expelled](#) from their communities in San Juan Chamula for turning from Catholicism to Evangelical Protestantism. They found in Islam the space to rebuild their community ties and a sense of belonging that had been disrupted by their forced displacement.

Initially things worked well for the new community, but frictions within the MMM soon led to consequent divisions and the formation of new groups. Most of the trouble was generated by Nafia's authoritarian leadership style. He wanted his followers to abandon their homes and move to the mosque where they could live according to the tradition of the *Salaf*, the first generations of the Muslim community. He expected children to stop going to public schools and rely on MMM education. He demanded his followers to avoid contact with non-Muslims, a doctrine known as *al-wala wal-bara*, including those family members who did not embrace Islam, and emphasized the Islamic beliefs about the Bible being corrupted, which was very offensive to the Christians and other natives and their way of living.<sup>15</sup>

This high-handed and extreme methods of Nafia's leadership, combined with other more minor issues mainly related to doctrinal and behavioral quarrels, led to the divisions mentioned above that created the multiple Islamic centers in San Cristobal. Today, the MMM is in charge of the Great Mosque, "Imam Malik", located in the northern Ojo de Agua neighborhood. Laura Revilla, in her research on Muslim architecture in Chiapas, explained how the MMM maintained strong links with Saudi Arabia and gained funding from within the Kingdom for the construction of the mosque, which began in 2013.<sup>16</sup>

Security analyst Oscar Perez Ventura, in profiling MMM, explained how the Movement has many commonalities with other Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Tablighi Jamaat, particularly the objective of creating a global Caliphate. Ventura noted that MMM was involved in an intense *dawa* (proselytizing) activity, proudly claiming to have been the first Islamist movement to have performed *dawa* in Europe.<sup>17</sup>

Gaspar Morquecho provided details on what happened next with MMM in Chiapas, and the developments in different communities in San Cristobal de las Casas. The most important element that emerged is the militant direction the Spanish Muslims took the Chiapas community in. In February 1995, Nafia, accompanied by a Mexican known as "Sidi Ahmed", tried to get in touch with EZLN leader "Subcomandante Marcos", a year after the EZLN began its insurgency, and deliver to Marcos a thirteen-page document, where the MMM delegation proposed an alliance in the name of "anti-imperialism":

"We, the Murabitun World Movement, invite you to sit down with the representatives of the great peoples of Chechnya, Kashmir, Euzkalaherria (Basque) who are today at the forefront of the fight against the tyrannical world banking order ..."

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Laura Revilla, "La adaptación de la arquitectura musulmana en nuevo espacio: San Cristóbal de las Casas" (The Adaptation of Muslim Architecture in a New Space: San Cristóbal de las Casas), *Centro de Cultura Casa Lamm*, 2017, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Oscar Perez Ventura, "Movimientos Islamistas en Espana: el Movimiento Mundial Murabitun, conversos al Islam en el Andalus" (Islamist Movements in Spain: The Murabitun World Movement, Converts to Islam in Al-Andalus), *Instituto Espanol de Estudios Estrategicos*, Octubre 2012, pp. 4-5.

The document went on:

“[T]he struggle for the liberation of peoples must be carried out under the banner of transforming Islam, following the revealed message brought to us by Mohammed, the last of the prophets, the liberator of humanity.”

The document ends with the motto: “Victory or Death!” And it is signed by the “Murabitun World Movement. Mexican Community.”

It seems Nafia went as far as offering weapons and money to EZLN.<sup>18</sup>

This initial attempt for an alliance with the EZLN was confirmed to Palmira Perez by other sources, such as former MMM member Ibrahim Chechev, but, as Morquecho notes, after the “mission of Spanish Muslims belonging to the MMM movement ... [had] come to San Cristobal de las Casas ... with the demand to get in touch with Subcomandante Marcos ... and they took it to the ‘Selva’, ... they did not receive any answer”.

It is unclear if “Subcomandante Marcos” did not reply to MMM because EZLN was not interested in an alliance with Islamism, or if he simply never received the invitation. At all events, the MMM delegation had to change its plans and decided to settle down in San Cristobal de las Casas and establish the first mosque of the city, which later became the Great Mosque.

However, it is interesting to notice how, in January 2009, Marcos made a speech on behalf of EZLN in which he supported the Palestinian resistance. He [accused](#) former U.S. President Barack Obama of approving the Israeli attacks in Gaza and [described](#) the actions of the Israeli government as a “classic military war of conquest”, adding: “The Palestinian people will also resist and survive and continue struggling and will continue to have sympathy for their cause”.

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Ruiz, “Comunidad Chamula-Musulmana creció en Chiapas en 2014” (The Chamula-Muslim Community Grew in Chiapas in 2014), [Chiapas Paralelo](#), 29 December 2014.

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## Defining the Problems—and Solutions—to Islamism in Mexico

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It is clear that, up to now, there has been no connection between the Islamic actors in Chiapas and terrorism. It is also evident that the situation within the Muslim population in Chiapas is very fluid, with different groups that derive from previous divisions within the community, and it is very possible that further splits will occur in the future, as it common to religions all around the world. Where these splinters will go, it is impossible to say.

It is important to keep in mind the difference between Islam as a religion and the political project of Islamism. Nafia's arrival to Chiapas in 1995 brought Islamism, and a militant version at that, intending to join forces with the violent EZLN group to wage war against the state. The birth of the Muslim community in San Cristobal de las Casas can be considered a byproduct of this, and a rather surprising one: few could have imagined such an impressive spread of the faith in the wake of Nafia's arrival. But Nafia had found a community, the Chamulas, at a moment when their world was in chaos and they were looking for a spiritual anchor; their encounter with Islam through MMM permitted them to find it.

The fact that the community split into different groups because many within MMM were not willing to accept Nafia's radical impositions is a healthy sign. His directives had the clear objective of creating segregated spaces that generated and reinforced divisions between Muslims and non-Muslims, whom he referred in an offensive and derogatory way. Many of those who had turned to Islam did not like this and moved away. There is a logic to this, given that several of the Islamic converts had previously been expelled by Catholic communities for changing their faith and knew at first hand what exclusion meant.

In general, the risks in Mexico come from abroad, as extremist ideology often goes hand-in-hand with a flow of financial aid and indoctrination materials. Local sources believe that at least three of the local Islamic communities have a Salafi imprint. Mexican authorities should keep a close eye on who is financing the various communities, where the youth from Chiapas are going to study abroad, and to the ideology and publications being disseminated in the various Islamic centers. It is very important to keep in mind that Islamist extremist ideology find fertile ground in those areas where state institutions are weak or absent.

Islamist groups worldwide know very well that proselytism works best in economically and socially distressed areas, where it is easier to conquer the hearts and minds of people who have been neglected and humiliated. This has already been experienced in Chechnya, the Balkans, and numerous other places in the world. Again, Chiapas is the poorest state in Mexico and while it is important not to see Islam itself as a problem, there is a risk that foreign organizations exploit the spiritual need of the local people to enforce their own militant agenda, therefore harming the Muslims of Chiapas.