

Catalonia and the Mosque that Was Never Built

By Malia Politzer

SANT MARTÍN, BARCELONA, Spain — Despite the imam’s best efforts, the Catalan Islamic Cultural Centre, an NGO that also serves as a mosque for the local Muslim community, looks from the outside more like a travel agency firm than a place to commune with God. Square and squat, the carved wooden door is framed by uneven concrete, just another storefront on an industrial block dotted with corner-store bodegas, pawnshops and a solitary car repair garage. Inside, the ceiling is low, and the cavernous interior dimly lit with flickering fluorescent lights.

Sincere, if futile attempts have been made to improve its appearance, an effort involving the manual labor of more than a hundred volunteers, who toiled on the building for over a year before the center was finally opened to the public four years back. In the entrance, an elaborate fountain in the shape of an eight-pointed star gurgles welcome, illuminated from above by a multi-colored bronze-and-stained-glass Moroccan chandelier. Green and gold wallpaper meant to evoke the tiled-splendor of Granada’s Alhambra plaster the dimly lit walls of the entryway, above which panels of ornate gold Arabic calligraphy (also translated into Catalan), quote verses of the Quran asserting equal rights for women and men.

The actual mosque — or, rather, the basement of the building, which has been designated for prayer — is adorned with false decorative pillars, a drab carpet that might be more appropriate in an airport lobby, a digital clock and a small speaker set that broadcasts (softly, so as not to disturb the neighbors) to believers the proper times to pray. But no amount of decoration, large or small, can transform the squat, uninspiring bones of the building, which still look very much like what it was before the center acquired it — a commercial



The basement of the Catalan Islamic Cultural center, a former branch of LaCaixa bank, which has been turned into a mosque.

branch of LaCaixa, a Spanish bank.

On the whole, this is one of Catalonia’s more elegant “mosques.” Other, simpler prayer rooms can be found in the back quarters of former bakeries, or in dilapidated old shoe factories, or the gutted pantries of former restaurants and grocery stores that dot the outskirts of towns and cities across the semi-autonomous region — a sad contrast to the elaborate palaces and marble wonders of Al Andalus, Spain’s former Moorish kingdom. Almost all of them are remote, forcing Muslims living in Catalonia to travel long distances to the peripheries of their respective towns and cities to pray, or to gather for religious holidays. Such cramped and makeshift “prayer rooms” underlie a quiet but

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growing problem in Catalonia, a region that hosts roughly one-quarter of Spain's Muslim population, but lacks even one purpose-built, official mosque.

When I asked the Imam, a congenial, middle-aged Algerian immigrant with a round face and rosy cheeks about tensions surrounding mosque building in Catalonia, his sunny, otherwise expressive face went carefully blank, and he lied. "We are happy with this. If we had wanted to build a mosque, we would already have one," he told me shortly, quickly changing the subject to the new Arabic school that would soon be opening upstairs. Nor did my further attempts to cajole a more revealing response from him have much effect. Surely, I pressed, Muslims in the area would want a larger, more centrally located place to pray? What of the rumors that Barcelona's former bull-fighting arena might soon be transformed into a mega-mosque? Finally, arms outstretched beseechingly from his seat behind his dark wooden desk, he said simply, "Just like a Catholic priest, I am a man of God. I do not — I cannot — involve myself in politics. There is a crisis here, and it affects Muslims as much as anyone living in Spain. People are out of work. We have many other things to worry about than having a mosque."

* * *

In fact, Muslim immigrants of various nationalities and religious branches have been trying to build mosques in Catalonia for more than 20 years without success. According to research by Aitana Guia, an assistant professor of Modern European History at York University in Canada, between 1990 and 2008, Catholic Spaniards successfully blocked proposals to build mosques in 60 Spanish cities. Forty of these incidents — roughly 70 percent — took place in Catalonia. In recent years, the numbers of incidents in other parts of Spain have also risen sharply.¹

Rising anti-mosque sentiment is not unique to Catalonia, or to Spain. Opposition to mosque building appears to be a growing phenomenon across Europe, perhaps a consequence of rising Islamophobia as terrorist attacks and the "War on Terror" gains a more permanent foothold in the global media. In Austria, a far right party called the Freedom Party attempted an all-out ban on mosque building in 2007, and in 2010 released a video game called "Bye Bye Mosque" that allows players to shoot down minarets and muezzins calling for prayer.² In Switzerland, a referendum prohibiting the erection of minarets passed by a margin of 57.5 percent in 2009, and has been in effect ever since.³ Similar campaigns to block the building of mosques and minarets have taken place in Italy, France, and Germa-

ny, with varying degrees of success.

Vandalism targeting mosques is also on the rise: In France, the anti-Islamophobic organization the *Collectif contre L'islamophobie* (CCIF) counted 28 cases of vandalism, such as criminal damage, graffiti, and attempted arson targeting mosques in a one-year period between October 2003 and August 2004, and an additional 21 against mosques and burial sites in 2008.⁴ In the Netherlands, between 2005-2010, roughly two-thirds of the buildings used as mosques suffered vandalism and attacks — including arson, broken windows, and discriminatory graffiti.

Mowafak Kanfach, a Syrian refugee, headed one of the early efforts at mosque building in the Catalan capitol. A towering man with intelligent eyes and a giant belly, I met Kanfach in *The Arabic Book House*, his small shop, located in a back ally in *La Rambla*, one of the most diverse and crime-ridden neighborhoods in Barcelona. "It's the only one of its kind in Barcelona!" he boasted, gesturing at the walls full of richly illustrated books in lilted Arabic script, stacked heavily on dark wooden bookshelves. He sat down heavily in a cane chair, behind a wooden desk piled with large dusty tomes — some detailing the history of Islam in Spain, others the artistic merits of Arabic calligraphy — and gestured for me to take a seat in a small plastic chair across from him. "So you have come to hear about the mosque that never was," he intoned in his deep baritone. Before I could respond, he cut me short with a sharp gesture of his hand. "Listen first. Then you can ask me questions."

Kanfach then told me his story. He came to Barcelona with the first large wave of Syrian immigrants in the 1980's, fleeing political persecution in his home country. He found a local Moroccan Muslim organization, which helped to set him up with a job washing dishes at a local restaurant, and a place to stay — a rented room in a house owned by a Spanish Catholic family. Despite the relatively few numbers Muslims in Barcelona, Kanfach said that he rarely felt discrimination from Catalans or Spaniards. Quite the contrary — people were very interested in his past, and his religion. "One of the members of the family was an older woman who was very sick with cancer," he recalled. "She was always very curious about Islam, after watching me pray. I came to visit her on her deathbed, and she asked to convert to Islam before she died — it was my first Christian convert."

By the early 1990's, Kanfach had learned Catalan and Spanish, was married to a German woman who had converted to Islam, and had started the Arabic bookshop. He

1 Guia, Aitana. "The Muslim Struggle for Civil Rights In Spain: Promoting Democracy Through Migrant Engagement, 1989 — 2010." Sussex Academy e-Library, 2014.

2 "Fury in Austria at anti-mosque game: Far-right party launches online video game that allows players to shoot down minarets and muezzins." *Al Jazeera Europe*. September 2, 2010. Accessed at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2010/09/201092112448282972.html> on Friday, October 31, 2014. 10:37am.

3 van der Valk, Ineke. *Islamofobia in the Netherlands*. Amsterdam University Press, 2012, Pg 60

4 *ibid*



Mowfak Kanfach tells me about his unsuccessful attempts at getting a custom-built Mosque approved in Barcelona.

had also just founded an organization, called the Islamic Federation of Catalonia, and wanted to get more involved in the Muslim community. “We had no dignified place to pray. I thought that was something that we could change,” he said, adding, “having a mosque would also be a sign of *convivencia*.” So Kanfach gathered allies, and approached the Catalan authorities about buying land for a custom-built mosque in the heart of Barcelona.

The timing of their request appeared to be good. Just a few years earlier, amidst much celebration and fanfare, a grand mosque had opened in Madrid, a giant building with towering minarets in Tetuan district — the inauguration of which was attended by King Juan Carlos I. *El Pais*, a prominent Spanish newspaper, welcomed the opening as a step “in the recuperation of tolerant traditions of past centuries.”

Spain’s first modern mosque had been built directly following the Spanish Civil War, by the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco as a gift to the Muslim soldiers who had helped him win. In 1981, a second mosque was built in a wealthy neighborhood Marbella, Malaga, followed by a second mosque in Cordoba.⁵ The opening of the Grand Mosque in Madrid seemed to signal an acceptance of the Muslim community — and was soon followed by another grand mosque in Valencia. By the late 1990’s, nearly every major region in Spain with a large Muslim population had a custom-built mosque except Catalonia.

Initially, Kanfach’s request was well received. Catalan authorities agreed upon a likely lot, and began to solicit donations. But the process was delayed — partially by infighting between various Muslim groups who could not agree on a funding structure, and partially due to a wave of anti-Muslim backlash in towns across Catalonia that made the move politically infeasible: During the summer

of 1999, ethnic Spanish residents of Tarrasa, a small town 35 kilometers north of Barcelona, demonstrated, attacking Muslim immigrant homes.⁶ Eventually, the combination of Muslim disunity and Catalan opposition led the city of Barcelona to abandon attempts to build a so-called “Mega Mosque,” instead offering to support prayer-rooms throughout the city.

But the largest anti-mosque backlash took place shortly in two cities close to Barcelona — in Premià de Mar and Badalonia, shortly after the terrorist attacks on September 11, in 2001, and again after the terrorist attacks on the Madrid train bombings on the March 11, three years later. Aitana Guia notes in her book, *The Muslim Struggle for Civil Rights in Spain*, “In each of the forty conflicts over proposed mosques and prayer room constructions in Calonia between 1990 and 2008, natives were pitted against Muslim immigrants. A mosque, if not a grand mosque, was needed in Barcelona to send a message that Islam was welcome in Catalonia.” I can’t help but agree. The failure to build a central mosque in Barcelona when authorities had the opportunity to do so in 1999 sent an implicit message supporting natives’ moral right to oppose mosque building, and of Muslim’s second-class status. Today, Barcelona remains one of the few major cities in Europe with a significant Muslim population — along with Athens, Greece, and Ljubljana, Slovenia, without a grand mosque.

Kanfach blames the rising tide of Islamophobia in Europe squarely on the United States and the Western media, which he says, always represents Muslims in a negative light. “They call it the ‘War on Terror,’ but it is always connected to Islam. Just look at the language that is used — radical Islam, terrorism, these are the phrases that are always used together, and after a while, people think they are the same. They hear “terrorism” and they think ‘Islam.’”

* * *

There are many different explanations for why Catalonia as seen so much organized opposition to mosque building, as compared to the rest of Spain, though none of them completely satisfy me. The scholarly consensus seems to be that organized anti-mosque opposition in Catalonia stems from a combination of factors, including the perceived “ghettoization” of Catalonia’s urban areas and nativist fears of being “overrun” by a growing, increasingly visible immigrant Muslim population. Others, like Kanfach, blames rising Islamophobia. Though the Catalan activists I spoke to vehemently denied that the Catalan national movement was anti-immigrant, I couldn’t help but wonder if part of Catalonia’s mosque-building challenge was related to the Catalan independence movement — it seemed logical that if Catalonians were opposed to being a part of Spain, they might also want to keep Catalan for

5 “The Muslim Struggle for Civil Rights,”

6 Guia, Aitana. “The Muslim Struggle for Civil Rights In Spain: Promoting Democracy Through Migrant Engagement, 1989 — 2010.” Sussex Academy e-Library, 2014.

Catalonians, not immigrants. This theory was vehemently denied by both Catalan and Muslim leaders, though other less high-profile members of the Muslim community admitted that they had had similar thoughts.

Though the global War on Terror undoubtedly bears some of the responsibility for the rising tide of Islamophobia in Europe, modern anti-mosque sentiment in Spain is much more nuanced, rooted in historical perceptions of the Islamic “other” that continue to live on in Spanish culture today.

Spain has had a long, unique and rather polarized relationship with Islam, which can be roughly divided into two periods — Medieval and modern. Between 711 AD and 1492, nearly 800 years (far longer than Spain’s history as either a Catholic country or a secular Western democracy) much of the Iberian Peninsula was part of a vast Islamic civilization, with its caliphate in Córdoba. Known as “Al Andalus,” historians remember it as a place of relative tolerance, where Christians and Jews enjoyed status as protected minorities. Medieval Al Andalus is still depicted romantically in Spanish mass culture as a time of great *convivencia* (“live and let live”) between the world’s three major religions.

Granada’s defeat in 1492 by the armies of the Catholic monarchs King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella marked a swift end to both *Al Andalus* and *convivencia*. The year following the *Reconquista* ushered in one of the ugliest eras for religious tolerance in Spain. The Catholic monarchs ordered the expulsion of Spain’s Jews and Muslims, an order that was followed closely followed by the infamous Spanish Inquisition, an era of torture and forced conversion of anyone suspected to “secretly” harbor un-Catholic beliefs. Almost all mosques were destroyed, or converted into Catholic churches — one notable exception being the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba, where a Catholic cathedral was built inside of an otherwise untouched mosque.

Though the fall of *Al Andalus* took place more than 600 years ago, the conquest is relived every year throughout Spain during the controversial festival of *Moros y Cristianos* — literally Moors and Christians — a national holiday during which Spanish men and women dress up in medieval costumes and reenact the Spanish and Muslim wars during the *Reconquista*, which inevitably depict Muslims and the enemy, and subservient to the victorious Spanish. Tensions between ethnic Spanish and Spanish Muslims run understandably high during the festival. A few years ago, for example, a Valencian woman dressed up as a “general” during one of the reenactments stomped victoriously on a carpet upon which Quranic verses were written — provoking complaints of disrespect and insensitivity from Muslims across Spain.

(To her credit, the “General” later apologized.)

This historical cultural animosity between the “Muslim versus Christian” can also be seen in a more subtle way in Spain’s immigration policies: In 1986, during the last stages of Spain’s entry into the European Community, the country passed an asylum act aimed at getting the hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants illegally working in the country legal work and residency permits. Citing the country’s “colonial past”, Latin Americans, Portuguese, Filipino, Andorrans, Equatorial Guineans, Sephardi Jews, and Gibraltarians who “identified with or had a cultural affinity to” Spain were given preferential status.⁷

Even though Spain retained the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla, had maintained large colonial territories in Western Sahara until 1975, and parts of northern Morocco until 1956, immigrants from these territories were excluded from this preferential category. Furthermore, Muslims who were born in or were long-term residents of Ceuta and Melilla — both legal Spanish territories — were also treated as immigrants, not Spanish citizens.

Though Muslims from Ceuta and Melilla eventually fought their way to Spanish citizenship, incidents of Muslim exclusion are still present in contemporary Spanish politics. Just earlier this year, for example, Spain passed a policy offering naturalized citizenship to the descendants of the Sephardic Jews, whom the country’s rulers expelled back in 1492.⁸ However, no identical or even similar offer was made to the descendants of the Spanish Muslims who were expelled at virtually the same time, under the same historic circumstances.

Now, a new far right party in Catalonia called the *Plataforma per Catalunya* — Platform for Catalaonia, also known as PxC, has taken implicit discrimination against Spain’s Muslim immigrants one step further, following in the footsteps of a growing number of European far-right parties by making its opposition to Muslim immigrants central to its platform. Its leader Josep Anglada, is a town counselor in the Catalan town of Vic, who began the party after a series of campaigns protesting the building of mosques, with signs printed with slogans such as “We don’t want Muslims, neither in Catalonia nor in Spain,” and “No Mosques.” Formerly a Catalan-only party, PxC is now spreading slowly to the rest of Spain — with chapters in Madrid and Valencia — though it has not yet gained wide popularity.

In response, Spain’s Muslim leaders have steadily lowered their profile and demands, more often asking for prayer rooms rather than custom-built mosques — and

7 Guia, Aitana. “The Muslim Struggle for Civil Rights In Spain: Promoting Democracy Through Migrant Engagement, 1989 – 2010.” Sussex Academy e-Library, 2014.

8 Gallegos, Raul. “After 500 Years, Spain Wants Its Jews Back.” *Bloomberg*. March 31, 2014. Accessed at: <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2014-03-31/after-500-years-spain-wants-its-jews-back>, October 31, 2014

even then only when needed, in the hopes of deflecting hostility.

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Almost directly across the street from Chawfak's *Arabic Book House* is a small door in a building with a peeling white facade. Behind the door, in a bright yellow room that smells vaguely of sweat, is the prayer room where many of the Pakistani Muslim residents of Raval district come to pray. Called *Camí de la Pau* — Pathway of Peace — the small organization has been operating as a liaison between Raval's native Spanish and Pakistani Muslim communities since the early 1990's, and has had their own struggle with pursuing the right to pray in Barcelona.

Iqbal Mohammed Chaudary, the current organization's president, says he never planned to immigrate to Spain, "it just sort of happened." A native of Pakistan, he was inspired to visit the city of Barcelona by his uncle — a man not much older than himself — who had been living in the city for many years, and sent frequent hand-written letters to Chaudary extoling the beauty of the city, the friendliness of the people, and the excellent weather. Young and thirsty for adventure, Chaudary decided to pay his uncle visit.

It was the early 1990's, the height of Spain's economic boom, and while Chaudary was unable to get a visa, he had no trouble getting into the country. Along with his cousin, he took a flight to Istanbul from Karachi, traveling across Europe primarily by train. His lack of proper paperwork only became a problem in France, where he was accosted by unfriendly immigration inspectors at the station, strip-searched, and slapped across the face "for impertinence" when he protested. Finding nothing incriminating, the officials released his cousin and him with a firm warning, taking away their train tickets for good measure. Unable to board the train, they made the last leg of the journey on foot, sleeping on the sides of the road and at rest stops until they finally arrived in Barcelona, some two months after they'd initially left their village in Pakistan.

Chaudary quickly became active in Barcelona's growing Pakistani community. He easily picked up Spanish and Catalan, and due to his linguistic aptitude, found himself acting as a liaison for his countrymen. "New migrants have a lot of trouble in Spain. They don't understand the culture, or their rights. I found myself in an position to help."

Within five years, Chaudary had become the president of Pathway Towards Peace. Initially, he and others had prayed in small former insurance brokerage firm, on a graffiti-ridden street in a crime-ridden area of Las Rambla. But as the numbers of Pakistani immigrants continue to grow, they quickly outgrew the small prayer room they had been using as a mosque, and decided that it was time to look for another center. As the president of the or-

ganization, the task of finding a new prayer room fell on Chaudary.

The timing was unfortunate: A group of Muslims headed by Syrian refugees had recently failed to build a mega-mosque in downtown Barcelona — though they'd secured both the funding, donated by Saudi Arabian diplomats, and a plot of land in central Barcelona. With that defeat fresh in mind, Chaudary set his ambitions slightly lower. "We decided not to aim for a custom-built mosque — we just wanted a second prayer room."

He went to Barcelona's city hall, asking them to help Pathway to Peace find a larger venue in Raval, where most of the members lived and worked. The city took four months to respond — and refused, saying that the organization would have to find a facility on the outskirts of the city, because Raval was "gentrifying." Undiscouraged, Chaudary tried again, explaining to the city that they did not want to build a mosque — just find a larger building in the *barrio* that would allow them to gather for Friday prayer.

Finally, after many more months of negotiating with the city, Pathway to Peace was offered a multi-use sports center. They agreed immediately, and Pakistani immigrants flocked to the new center to pray. Their success, however, was short-lived. Within weeks of acquiring the prayer center, the neighbors became unnerved by the large number of Pakistani immigrants, and began to complain that the city was giving Muslims special treatment. One intrepid woman mounted a petition in opposition of using the space as a Muslim prayer center, accumulating nearly 3000 signatures that she presented to the city, according to Iqbal. So it was, that just two months of prayer in the complex, the district manager informed Path Towards Peace that they would no longer be able to pray in the center. Rather than making a fuss, the Chaudary acquiesced, unwilling to stoke further conflict. Eventually, they quietly acquired another center "without telling the authorities it would be a mosque."

That was in the year 2000. Today, nearly 14 years later, though a mosque would "certainly be appreciated," Iqbal's efforts are primarily geared towards helping new Pakistani immigrants adapt to life in Barcelona, and on building relationships with neighbors and "reducing the stigmatization of Muslims," he said — a job that has become more difficult in recent years, as news coverage increasingly highlights the radicalization of Muslims. In 2008, *Camino de Paz* suffered a significant public relations setback, when two Pakistani immigrants — Mohammed Ayud and Maroof Ahmed — were arrested and later convicted for their part in an unsuccessful plot to blow up the Barcelona subways. Iqbal knew both men personally, who he said were "normal people," and at first supported their innocence, though he was also vocal in his condemnation of terrorist acts. Although the two men attended a different prayer center, their arrests caused significant damage to the Pakistani community's image in Barcelona. Iqbal declined to comment on the Barcelona attacks, or

on his relationship with Ayud and Ahmed, though he acknowledged that their arrests did “considerable damage” to the community. “*Camino de Paz* condemns all terrorist activity, regardless of whether the terrorists are Christians or Muslims,” later adding, “any true Muslim would not intentionally harm another person.”

I can understand why the two men’s actions and arrests might be a sensitive subject within Barcelona’s Pakistani community — particularly if many people in the community are still in doubt about their guilt — but Chaudary’s refusal to discuss the issue, despite my repeated attempts to broach the topic, was puzzling. Given his community’s troubles with mosque building, due in part to fears and prejudice by native Catalans, a discussion about Ayud and Ahmed, the two potential Pakistani ter-

rorists, would seem to be a good way to build trust.

Chaudary had repeatedly emphasized the importance of community outreach to Catalans and the responsibility he felt to promote greater understanding and respect for Islam. How can greater understanding be achieved if one of its leaders refuse to speak candidly such an important issue — that while sensitive — underlies the anxiety that many Catalans have about the Islamic community? As Chaudary himself put it, “People are afraid of what they don’t understand. And lack of understanding quickly turns to hate. Muslims are not popular in the world today — but I believe it is due more to lack of understanding than any inherent incompatibility. People don’t understand who we are. They don’t know how to relate to us — and that is partially our fault.” □

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