Islam and the Latin American Diaspora:

Exploring Cultural Connections

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Exploring Cultural Connections

Jacqueline Bucaro

Abstract

This paper examines the Latino Muslim community in both Latin America and the United States to explain why Latino Americans are the fastest-growing demographic among converts to Islam. The first half of this paper outlines the history of Islam in Latin America from colonization until the present day, drawing on existing research and consultations with figures in local Muslim communities to understand why Islam's growth in Latin America is limited. The second half focuses on the Latino Muslim community in the United States, exploring the movement's history to draw out the historical, political, and cultural factors that connect Latinos to Islam in the United States. Ultimately, this paper argues that Islamic values and Latino culture are already close together, and it is the shared political struggle of Muslims and Latinos in the United States that breaks down Islamophobia and allows would-be Latino converts to approach Islam.

Keywords: *Latin America*, *Latino*, *Islam*, *Moors*, *Conversion*, *Identity.*

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1. Introduction

In the United States, Latino Americans are converting to Islam faster than any other demographic group. Data from Dr. Ihsan Bagby's *The American Mosque* studies from 2011 and 2020[1] shows that Latino converts to Islam in the United States increased from 6% of all converts to Islam in 2000 to 12% in 2011 to 15% in 2020.

These numbers are corroborated by data from PEW Research and ISPU, which spotlight Latinos as a demographic to watch as Islam grows in the United States. Importantly, this spike in conversion is not mirrored in most Latin American countries, despite historical connections to Islam and multiple waves of Muslim immigration. Although Latino American converts regularly cite cultural commonalities as a reason for conversion, Islam's surge in popularity is restrained to the United States.

Despite a wealth of research exploring the phenomenon of Latino Americans converting to Islam, limited studies exist about why these individuals choose Islam when leaving their previous religions. As such, the main focus of this study is to examine why Islam is so appealing to Latinos in the United States–and why it is not gaining traction in Latin America.

When examining Latin America, this paper will rely on a less inclusive definition of the region that omits countries that lack Iberian colonial histories–that is, countries that Spain or Portugal never colonized. This definition excludes Suriname, French Guyana, Guiana, Haiti, and Belize, as well as many Caribbean islands. Although this definition is limiting, Iberian history is vital in the context of this paper so that this research can examine the lasting influence of *Moorish* cultural heritage.

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[1] Ihsan Bagby, "The American Mosque 2020: Growing and Evolving." *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding* (2021), 13; Ihsan Bagby, "The American Mosque 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque, Attitudes of Mosque Leaders." *Council for American-Islamic Relations* (2012), 12.

Furthermore, this paper will utilize the term 'Latino' rather than 'Latinx' when referring to mixed-gender groups of Americans with Latin American heritage. In Spanish, 'Latino' refers to a mixed-gender group; some researchers argue that erasing the gender-inclusive properties of the word represents a form of imperialism in the Spanish language.[2] Indeed, the term 'Latinx' is not gaining traction in the Latino community, with only 3% of individuals using the word.[3] However, the term 'Latinx' will be utilized to refer to a gender-expansive or non-binary individual,[4] just as how 'Latina' will be used to refer to an individual woman.

With these definitions in mind, this paper will begin with a section on Islam in Latin America. Historical ties to *Moorish* Iberia and migration patterns to South and Central America will be traced. With historical trends in mind, the status of Islam in the region will be analyzed with the assistance of English- and Spanish-language academic resources. This section also requires an analysis of religious freedom and institutionalized Christianity, especially Catholicism, in Latin America.

"*...Iberian history* is vital in the context of this paper so that this research can examine the lasting influence of *Moorish cultural heritage.*"

Following this section, the bulk of this paper will focus on the Muslim community among Latinos in the United States with the assistance of preexisting research and interviews. The research will cover topics such as the establishment and outreach tactics of Latino Muslim organizations, the successes and failures of this outreach, the reasons that Latino Muslims are choosing Islam, and the demographic makeup of Latino Muslim converts.

This paper seeks to describe the reasons for the steady increase in Latino American conversions to Islam by crystallizing the historical, political, and cultural connections between Latino culture and Islamic values.

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[2] Ivis García, 2020. "Cultural Insights for Planners: Understanding the Terms Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx." *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 395.

[3] Luis Noe-Bustamante, "About One-in-Four U.S. Hispanics Have Heard of Latinx, but Just 3% Use It." *Pew Research Center*, 2020.

[4] Ana María Del Río-González, 2021. "To Latinx or Not to Latinx: A Question of Gender Inclusivity Versus Gender Neutrality." *American Journal of Public Health*, 1018.

2. Section I: Islam in Latin America

Latin America is an overwhelmingly Christian region, with about 88% of individuals identifying as Catholic (69%) or Protestant (19%).[5] The number of Muslims in Latin America is generally considered to be very small, although there are significant variations between official census figures and data from Muslim survey sources.[6] A 2010 survey placed the number of Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean at about 840,000;[7] however, this figure includes some countries outside this paper's analysis, such as Suriname. Muslim sources place the figure at a much higher 6 million.[8] Unfortunately, there is little way to tell exactly how many Muslims currently reside in Latin America. No matter which number is closer to the truth, the fact remains that Muslims make up no more than 1.2% of Latin America's overall population.[9]

This section will begin by examining the three primary waves of migration that brought Islam to Latin America: the *Moriscos*, the West Africans, and the Ottomans. Following these historical sections, it will explore the state of Islam in modern Latin America, from immigrant-descended enclaves to zones with high conversion rates. Factors such as the role of foreign governments and the threat of extremism in the region will also be elucidated, with a conclusion theorizing about the future of Islam in Latin America.

"Unfortunately, there is little way to tell exactly how many *Muslims* currently reside in *Latin America.*"

[5] Pew Research Center, "Religion in Latin America." *Pew Research Center*, 2014.

[6] Vitória Peres de Oliveira and Colonel Curtis C. Connell, "Islam and the Global War on Terrorism in Latin America." Symposium on Religion, Conflict and the Global War on Terrorism in Latin America, National Defense University School for National Security Executive Education and the Pew Research Center, 2006.

[7] Conrad Hackett and Brian J. Grim, "The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010." *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* (2012), 21.

[8] Peres de Oliveira and Connell, "Islam and the Global War on Terrorism in Latin America."

[9] Ibid.

2.1 The First Wave of Migration: *Moorish* Spain and The *Moriscos*

The history of Islam in Latin America begins with the Spanish and Portuguese conquests of the region, although some may claim it started long before that. A mostly-debunked theory posits that Muslim explorers discovered the New World long before European explorers, as early as the ninth century.[10] The evidence for this theory is slim and insufficient, so widely accepted scholarship agrees that the first wave of Muslim immigration to Latin America occurred with the *Moriscos*.

Until 1492, the Iberian Peninsula underwent a series of religious wars where Christian kings from Spain and Portugal fought to reconquer the peninsula from Muslim rulers.[11] This *Reconquista* formally ended less than a year before Christopher Columbus was sponsored by the Spanish crown to sail around the world. Once the Christians reclaimed the Iberian Peninsula, an effort to expunge Muslims and Jews from Spanish and Portuguese society began.[12] Most Jews were expelled from the nations entirely. Muslims, on the other hand, were gradually expelled or forcibly converted between 1492 and the early 1500s.[13] *Morisco* is a term used to refer to the Muslims of Spain who converted to Catholicism during this time.[14] Many of them publicly converted to Catholicism to avoid the wrath of the law but never truly gave up their religious practices.[15] In 1568, many of these religiously suppressed *Moriscos* revolted and were subsequently enslaved.[16] Some of these enslaved people were taken to the New World on Spanish ships.

> **“*Morisco* is a term used to refer to the *Muslims of Spain* who converted to *Catholicism* during this time [*1492-early 1500s*].”**

[10] Ken Chitwood, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, United States: Lynne Rienner Publishers (2021), Chapter 1.

[11] Chitwood, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean,* 49.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Karoline P. Cook, *Forbidden Passages: Muslims and Moriscos in Colonial Spanish America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2016), 14.

[14] David M. Sills and Kevin Baggett, “Islam in Latin America,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 15 no. 2 (2011), 41. Notably, some *Moriscos* truly converted to Catholicism; however, they were treated the same as those who falsely converted.

[15] Cook, *Forbidden Passages*, 15.

[16] Ibid, 24.

Arabic speakers, like many of the *Moriscos*, were considered to have a higher aptitude for language learning. Therefore, many of them were brought to the New World to act as translators, even though they did not know the indigenous languages of Latin America.[17] Travel as a translator or an enslaved person was the only legal method for *Moriscos* to reach the New World since Spanish law banned them from emigrating.[18] However, those with sufficient means or sponsorship could easily dodge the crown's patchy enforcement of the law and travel to the Americas.[19] The perceived threat of the *Moriscos* to the Christianization of the Americas was so significant that in 1570, Spanish colonies established inquisitions in the New World to locate and punish non-Catholics.[20] 'Morisco' practices were banned, such as praying five times daily or observing Ramadan.[21]

"The perceived threat of the *Moriscos* to the Christianization of the Americas was so significant that in 1570, Spanish colonies established inquisitions in the *New World* to locate and punish *non-Catholics*."

Despite Spanish efforts to persecute the *Moriscos* who managed to escape from Spain, it was nearly impossible to root out any *Moriscos* using forged papers. In Spain, an individual's genealogy was paramount; in the New World, there were insufficient resources to investigate genealogies and uncover falsified lineages.[22] Testimonies emerged of *Moriscos* praying in Arabic and referring to the Prophet Mohammed despite efforts to wipe out the *Moriscos* of the Americas.[23] Although the actual number of *Moriscos* in the New World is unknown and likely small, the Spanish crown was constantly making efforts to drive Islam out of its American colonies. The *Moriscos* may not have been the most significant force in bringing Islam to the Americas. However, they represent a centuries-old connection between Spain and Islam that has echoed through generations.

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[17] Cook, *Forbidden Passages,* 40.

[18] Ibid, 54.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid, 60.

[21] Ibid, 62.

[22] Ibid, 74-75.

[23] Ibid, 88.

"The *Moriscos* may not have been the most significant force in bringing *Islam* to the *Americas*. However, they represent a centuries-old connection between *Spain* and *Islam* that has echoed through generations."

Ancestral connections between today's Latinos and the *Moriscos* of the fifteenth century are not impossible. This link, though important, is not the only connection between Islam and Latin America.

2.2 The Second Wave of Migration: West Africans, Slavery, and Brazil

Brazil is home to the largest Muslim community in Latin America, with approximately 200,000 practitioners.[24] Although the *Moriscos* had a presence in Brazil, like the rest of Latin America, an even more powerful influence on the growth of Islam was the high population of enslaved West Africans. Communities in present-day Nigeria, Mali, and Senegal had Muslim minorities or majorities, although none of their societies were homogenously Muslim.[25] It was from communities such as these that Europeans captured the first enslaved people to send to the New World, beginning in 1501.[26] Of the enslaved people captured from this region and taken to the Americas, estimates claim that between 10 and 20% were Muslim.[27]

"Of the *enslaved people* captured from this region and taken to the *Americas*, estimates claim that between 10 and 20% were *Muslim.*"

[24] "Islam in Brazil," *Harvard Divinity School: Religion and Public Life*.

[25] Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved In the Americas*. New York: New York University Press (1998), 5.

[26] Diouf, *Servants of Allah,* 17.

[27] Chitwood, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 76.

Europeans had the blessing of the Pope to infiltrate West African communities and enslave people because these regions were considered 'pagan'–that is, non-Christian. Papal decrees from 1454 and 1456,[28] issued by Pope Nicholas V and Pope Calixtus III, respectively, treated the slave trade as a 'crusade' for Christianity. As such, a component of the Pope's blessing was the call to 'enlighten' West Africans by converting them to Christianity.[29] Because of this, all enslaved Africans were forcibly baptized at some point during their passage to the Americas. Some scholars accept these forced conversions as the early end of Islam in the Americas, with all former Muslims effectively absorbed into a Christian society.[30] However, forced conversions were more often than not hollow, and 'former' Muslims retained their faith in many ways.

Records of Muslim prayer in the Americas offer the most plentiful evidence for the continued influence of Islam in enslaved communities. Of course, many more prayers likely occurred in secret since Islam was illegal among enslaved communities.[31] In Bahia, Brazil, accounts exist of at least two daily prayers among enslaved Africans.[32] Moreover, Muslims in Bahia strictly observed the Ramadan fast despite the risks such a fast posed to their health under harsh working conditions.[33] They also followed Islamic laws of modest dress as well as they could, even though clothes were not in abundant supply for enslaved people.[34]

"Records of Muslim prayer in the Americas offer the most plentiful evidence for the continued influence of Islam in enslaved communities."

[28] Decrees (or 'bulls') like these are now outdated. The earliest papal condemnation of enslaving Africans was in 1435, and slavery in the New World was condemned in 1537. Unfortunately, these decrees were sometimes ignored. The Church today is opposed to slavery in all its forms. See Paul III, "Sublimus Dei: On the Enslavement and Evangelization of Indians," 1537.

[29] Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 16.

[30] Ibid, 2.

[31] Ibid, 60.

[32] Ibid, 62.

[33] Ibid, 67.

[34] Ibid, 75.

Perhaps due to their unique dedication to Islam, which was considered a danger to the Christian powers, enslaved Muslims were blamed for a variety of slave revolts going back as far as 1522. Whether or not Muslims led these revolts is uncertain; in some cases, they may have been wrongfully scapegoated.[35] However, some revolts were organized by and for Muslims, with the most prominent example being the *Malê Revolt* in Brazil in 1835.

The *Malê Revolt* of 1835 occurred in Bahia, a Brazilian state with a high population of enslaved West Africans. The Muslims among them were called 'Malês,' a term likely derived from the regional (now country) name of Mali.[36] Although the *Malês* were not the majority of the West African population, they were instrumental in organizing the revolt of 1835. Muslim leaders played a central role in organizing up to five hundred people to riot in downtown Salvador.[37] The rebellion began with an attack on a prison to free a Muslim leader; moreover, the rebellion took place during the holy month of Ramadan, on a night that might have been considered *Laylat al-Qadr*, the Night of Power.[38] Islam was deeply connected with the revolutionary sentiments of the *Malê*. The faith represented the fight for freedom; indeed, amulets containing Arabic prayers or Quranic verses were found on many of the rioters, alive or dead.[39] Islam was a source of strength and bravery for the revolutionaries.

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[35] Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 147.

[36] João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press (1993), 96.

[37] Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 91-93.

[38] Laylat al-Qadr is not a fixed date. Nowadays, the date is disseminated to Muslims worldwide just before it occurs; before international communications, Muslims in disparate regions celebrate the date on the 25th or 27th night of Ramadan. The night of the *Malê Revolts* was the 25th night of Ramadan. See Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil,* 81-119.

[39] Ibid, 99-102.

The *Malê Revolt* was ultimately unsuccessful. Just seventy rebels were killed, and many more were injured.[40] As paranoia about the African Muslim presence in Brazil grew, enslaved *Malês* were imprisoned or scrutinized, and free Africans, regardless of their religion, were often deported back to the West African coast.[41] Due to the increase in deportation, vast amounts of Brazil's Muslim population were sent away.

The remaining enslaved Muslims rarely passed their religion on to their children. By the end of the 19th century, African Muslims were all but extinct from the Americas.[42] Many of Brazil's modern Muslims come from the migration of Ottoman Muslims to the Americas in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries;[43] these communities will be discussed alongside other contemporary Muslim enclaves in Latin America.

2.3 The Third Wave of Migration: The Ottomans in the Americas

In the late nineteenth century, Ottoman immigrants from what was then Greater Syria were the fifth- or sixth-largest group entering Argentina and Brazil between about 1890 and 1920.[44] While the majority of these immigrants were Christians, a decent amount of Muslims joined them, spurred to leave by population changes, economic decline, and new laws for mandatory military service in the Ottoman Empire.[45] In some countries, such as Argentina, the amount of Muslims entering the country made up nearly half of the total amount of Ottomans.[46] Most of the Muslim immigrants settled in urban areas, and most of them were men. Few Muslim women or families traveled from the Ottoman Empire with their husbands or fathers; conversely, Christian women immigrated to unite their families in higher numbers.[47]

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[40] Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 91-92.

[41] Ibid, 207.

[42] Chitwood, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 77.

[43] Ibid, 135.

[44] Muhammet Kazim Baycar, "Ottoman-Arab Transatlantic Migrations in the Age of Mass Migrations (1870-1914)." PhD diss. Linacre College, University of Oxford (2015), 7.

[45] Kemal H. Karpat, "The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860-1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (1985), 179.

[46] Karpat, "The Ottoman Emigration to America," 199.

[47] Ibid, 180.

The scarcity of women and families is sometimes considered a hindrance to cultural transmission. In this case, some argue that the limited amount of Muslim women in the Americas helps account for the slow decline of Muslim communities. However, other reports contest this. Muslim immigrants in Latin America were unlikely to marry into local communities.[48] They tended to prefer spouses within their community, so integration was initially limited. Rather than hindering the formation of communities, the preferences of Muslim immigrants created tight-knit communities in Latin America.[49]

“Rather than hindering the formation of communities, the preferences of Muslim immigrants created tight-knit communities in Latin America.”

Notably, Muslim immigrants may have married Christian individuals from Ottoman communities, which may have caused a hindrance to the spread of Islam. In such multi-religious households, children often choose to ignore or deny any Muslim heritage. This tendency stems from the historical portrayal of Muslims as ‘cruel persecutors’ responsible for driving Christians out of the Ottoman Empire, leading them to seek refuge in the Americas.[50]

Despite narratives that pitted Christian and Muslim Ottomans against each other, they worked together as a community to develop Ottoman groups such as the *Sociedad Otomana*, which was established in Buenos Aires by Muslim leaders.[51] The two religious groups often intermarry, especially in the second-generation immigrants.[52] In Brazil, whether Muslim immigrants marry other immigrants, native Brazilians, other Muslims, or different religions, cultural preservation of Islamic and Arab culture is emphasized.[53]

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[48] Karpat, “The Ottoman Emigration to America,” 183.

[49] Baycar, “Ottoman-Arab Transatlantic Migrations,” 195.

[50] John Tofik Karam, *Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press (2007), 100.

[51] Baycar, 197.

[52] Karam, *Another Arabesque*, 108-109.

[53] Ibid, 112-113.

"This tendency [*children often choosing to ignore or denying any Muslim heritage*] from the historical portrayal of Muslims as 'cruel persecutors' responsible for driving Christians out of the Ottoman Empire, leading them to seek refuge in the Americas."

2.4 Islam Today: Examining Enclaves in Latin America

One of Brazil's largest fast-food chains, Habib's, is a Levantine-Brazilian chain with over 400 locations and plans to expand outside Brazil. In line with Muslim dietary restrictions, the restaurant is halal, with much of its meat sourced from Brazil, a massive exporter of halal meat.[54] Muslim communities in Brazil exist in most major cities, such as São Paulo, as well as in the Tri-Border Area.[55] The Brazilian National Census 2010 puts the official number of Muslims in the country at just over 35,000, although estimates vary.[56] City-level enclaves are active within their communities, especially when helping newcomers. One mosque in São Paulo offers language classes for new arrivals from the Middle East as well as assistance with the Brazilian legal system.[57]

Unfortunately, Muslim communities in Brazil feel that Islamophobia is on the rise due to the influence of former president Jair Bolsonaro and the events of October 7th. Muslim women, in particular, face harassment for their visible religion. The Muslim community remains committed to interreligious dialogue and understanding in order to combat misconceptions about Islam, a goal that also benefits other minority religions in Brazil.[58]

"The Muslim community remains committed to *interreligious dialogue* and *understanding* in order to combat misconceptions about *Islam...*"

[54] Chitwood, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 129.

[55] Ibid, 133.

[56] Ibid, 136.

[57] Lily Balloffet, "Syrian Refugees in Latin America: Diaspora Communities as Interlocutors." *Latin American Studies Association Forum* (2016), 12.

[58] Atilla Kuş, doctoral student at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, in conversation with the author, March 2024.

The Muslim community in Argentina has similar origins in Ottoman-era migration, with many of them coming from modern-day Lebanon. The community in Argentina feels that levels of Islamophobia are low in the country. Indeed, the largest mosque in Latin America, the King Fahd Islamic Cultural Center, is located in Argentina. A strong legacy of interreligious dialogue means that non-Muslims in Argentina often attend events at Muslim sites or centers to learn more about the religion. Members of the community reiterate the importance of deeper religious understanding; for example, many non-Muslim Argentines are pleasantly surprised to realize that Muslims consider Jesus to be a prophet—conversations like these foster understanding and, by extension, more acceptance for the community.[59]

One notable former Muslim in Argentina is former president Carlos Menem. Born a Syrian-Argentinian Muslim, he converted to Catholicism before he was elected to the presidency. Unfortunately, Menem faced Islamophobic backlash during his time in office, which was worsened by terrorist attacks on the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and the Jewish Community Center of Buenos Aires in 1994.[60] However, the previously mentioned King Fahd Islamic Cultural Center was constructed in Buenos Aires soon after in 1995, and recent laws support Muslim women's right to wear the hijab without harassment in Argentina.[61] Although the community's reputation was once stained by past events, tolerance and support are rising in Argentina.

An excellent example of a uniquely Latin American Muslim enclave comes from *Chiapas*, Mexico. Hundreds of indigenous *Tzotzil* Maya have converted to Islam in this southern state of Mexico. As of 2013, 400 of Mexico's 3,700 Muslims called *Chiapas* home.[62] Islam reached *Chiapas* through the *Movimiento Murabitun Mundial* (Murabitun World Movement, or MMM), a Sufi group that espouses anti-imperialist values.[63]

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[59] İsa Altekin, director of the *Centro de Diálogo Intercultural Alba*, in conversation with the author, February 2024.

[60] Chitwood, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 169.

[61] Ibid, 171.

[62] Avedis Hadjian, "The Gods of Chiapas: Mexican Muslims In The Shadow Of Zapatistas." *International Business Times* (2013).

[63] Chitwood, 191.

Some consider the MMM to be a cult; indeed, some of the MMM's practices can be described as isolationist. They have been known to encourage new converts to cut off non-Muslim family members, stop sending their children to public schools, and even abandon aspects of their indigenous cultures.[64] However, others claim that the MMM is simply an average Sufi organization that is overly scrutinized and demonized by more conservative groups.[65]

The MMM was drawn to *Chiapas* by the *Zapatista* insurgent movement of the 1990s, which held similar anti-imperialist values;[66] however, the *Zapatistas* and the MMM never actually formed a link, and the majority of *Tzotzil* Muslims have no affiliation with the *Zapatista* movement.[67] Many *Tzotzil* Muslims lack ties to the MMM in the modern day.[68] For them, it was not necessarily the MMM's doctrine that drew them to Islam but rather the cultural similarities between Islam and the *Tzotzil* way of life.[69]

The Muslims of *Chiapas* are by no means the only Muslims in Mexico. Vibrant communities exist in at least nineteen Mexican cities, all of which showcase their unique blend of Mexican culture and Islamic values.[70] Indeed, the Muslim enclaves across Latin America each have unique attributes owing to centuries of history, ethnic heritage, and culture.

"Many *Tzotzil Muslims* lack ties to the MMM [*Murabitun World Movement*] in the modern day. For them, it was not necessarily the MMM's doctrine that drew them to Islam but rather the *cultural similarities* between *Islam* and the *Tzotzil way of life*."

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[64] Natascha Garvin, "Conversion & Conflict Muslims in Mexico." *ISIM Review*, 15 no. 1, (2005), 19.

[65] Hadjian, "The Gods of Chiapas."

[66] Chitwood, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 193.

[67] Hadjian.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Chitwood, 194.

[70] Ibid, 184-185.

2.5 Support from Afar: The Role of Foreign Governments in Latin American Islam

The establishment of Islam in Latin America would have been far more difficult without the aid of foreign governments. International funds are responsible for many of the mosques in the region. The King Fahd Islamic Cultural Center in Buenos Aires is one example: the Saudi royal family funded the construction,[71] and a Saudi architect designed the building.[72] Saudi Arabia is not the only country to contribute financially to the growth of Islam in Latin America; along with Qatar and Kuwait, these three countries have invested about $20 million into the expansion of Islam in the region.[73]

Gulf countries represent the most successful investors in Latin American Islam, but they are hardly the only ones to attempt to send financial support. In Havana, Cuba, the first public mosque in the country was funded by Saudi Arabia after offers from Libya, Qatar, and, most notably, Turkey. The competition over who would fund the mosque in Havana represents a struggle over which country would have the power to influence the Muslim community in Cuba.[74] Ultimately, Saudi Arabia emerged victorious, cementing their 'hegemony' over the Muslim community of Latin America.

Saudi support for Islam in Latin America ranges beyond mere financial support. Soft power approaches like education and outreach programs connect the Middle Eastern powerhouse to the region. At least two Brazilian sheikhs studied in Saudi Arabia[75] and brought what they learned back home with them. Just last year, Saudi Arabia participated in the International Conference for Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean in Brazil, an event to which it has historically contributed massive support.[76]

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[71] Chitwood, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 168.

[72] "C.C.I.AR. The Islamic Cultural Center Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Fahd in Argentina: Creation."

[73] Peres de Oliveira and Connell, "Islam ad the Global War on Terrorism in Latin America."

[74] Chitwood, 209.

[75] This is not the only place they have studied, with many Brazilian sheikhs studying at Al-Azhar University in Egypt; Atilla Kuş, 2024.

[76] Arab News (1), "Saudi minister meets Latin American scholar." *Arab News*, 2018; Arab News (2), "Saudi ministry participates in Brazil conference." *Arab News*, 2023.

Although Saudi Arabia is not the only Muslim country that is supporting Latin American Muslims with money and soft power,[77] it is one of the most successful. In 2018, a Latin American Muslim scholar met the Saudi Islamic Affairs minister and vowed to support Saudi Arabia "against unjust campaigns targeting its security and sovereignty."[78] For better or for worse, Saudi Arabia enjoys a high level of influence over Muslim communities across Latin America; even so, these communities are relatively small within their respective countries.

"For better or for worse, *Saudi Arabia* enjoys a high level of influence over *Muslim* communities across *Latin America*..."

2.6 Stereotypes or Certainty?: Extremism and Terrorism in Latin America

Islam is often stereotyped as a religion of terrorism and extremism, and the story is no different in Latin America. Although Muslim communities like the one in Argentina do not necessarily feel like they experience extensive religious discrimination,[79] it certainly exists for many populations. In Chile, stereotypes of Islam as an 'evil religion' persist in society;[80] in Mexico, when the MMM successfully established a Muslim community in *Chiapas*, headlines claimed that the group was an example of 'radical Islam.'[81] Often, these are merely stereotypes. Interreligious dialogue groups seek to correct these stereotypes through increased understanding; their goal is aided by the teachings of Pope Francis, who calls on Catholics to love those of other faiths.[82]

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[77] Other countries hosting Latin American scholars for educational reasons include Sudan and Syria. See Peres de Oliveira and Connell, *Islam and the Global War on Terrorism in Latin America*.

[78] Arab News (2), "Saudi ministry participates in Brazil conference."

[79] İsa Altekin, 2024.

[80] Nicolás Panotto, director of *Otros Cruces*, in discussion with the author, February 2024.

[81] Harold Morales, "Islam in Chiapas: An Overview and Critical Engagement with the Sources." *Maydan* (2016).

[82] Nicolás Panotto, 2024.

There are examples of terrorism in Latin America, with the forefront example being the two bombings in Argentina in the 1990s (previously mentioned). Combined, these deadly attacks killed over 100 people and injured over 500. The attacks were perpetrated by a branch of *Hezbollah* in Argentina that Iran backed.[83] Most *Hezbollah* activity in Latin America is concentrated in the Tri-Border Area, including parts of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.[84] As of 2003, this zone contained groups with links to four different international terrorist groups, including *Hezbollah*.[85] Despite decades of surveillance of *Hezbollah* and other groups in the area, some of them are still attempting to attack targets in their countries. As recently as November 2023, Brazilian federal forces arrested individuals associated with *Hezbollah* who were planning to attack synagogues and the Israeli Embassy in the country.[86]

Notably, the extremists of the Tri-Border Area do not represent the majority of Muslims in Latin America. Experts on the topic consider extremist groups in the Tri-Border Area to be exceptions within an otherwise peaceful population. Unfortunately, concerns about extremism sometimes bring increased scrutiny to non-extremist groups. For example, some mosques in Brazil were scrutinized because of their connection with Saudi Arabia and, by extension, *Wahhabism*, which has occasionally been part of the doctrine of extremist groups. After investigation, it was clear that any influence *Wahhabism* had on Brazilian mosques did not translate to radicalism or even political action.[87]

“Notably, the extremists of the *Tri-Border Area* do not represent the majority of *Muslims* in *Latin America*. Experts on the topic consider *extremist groups* in the *Tri-Border Area* to be exceptions within an otherwise peaceful population.”

[83] Celina B. Realuyo, “Rising Concerns about Hezbollah in Latin America Amid Middle East Conflict.” The Wilson Center Weekly Asado, 2023.

[84] Realuyo, “Rising Concerns about Hezbollah.”

[85] Rex Hudson, “Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America.” Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress (2003), 12.

[86] Realuyo.

[87] Peres de Oliveira and Connell, “Islam and the Global War on Terrorism in Latin America.”

Very few Islamic terrorist attacks have been committed in Latin America. Barring the *Hezbollah* attacks from the 1990s, other, more recent attempts have been thwarted by security forces. Moreover, there have not been that many attempts; indeed, Latin American extremist groups are small groups of an already small population. They lack support systems or viable targets in their countries.[88] Beyond proven networks of terrorist groups in the Tri-Border Area, Islam in Latin America is mainly peaceful and well-integrated.

2.7 The Future of Islam in Latin America: Conversion, Christianity, and Culture

Muslim migration to Latin America has slowed in recent decades. Any hope to expand Islam in the region relies on family expansion and conversion of local populations.[89] Despite high interest in Islam in some countries, the growth of Islam in Latin America faces a variety of barriers in a historically Christian society. Conversion stories are not unheard of in Latin America. Indeed, communities of converts existed in Brazil in the 20th century,[90] and Mexico's *Tzotzil* Muslims are all indigenous Mexican converts. Today, increasing amounts of individuals in Argentina and Brazil are converting to Islam.[91]

"Any hope to expand *Islam* in the region relies on *family expansion* and *conversion of local populations*."

Muslim communities in Argentina and Brazil have observed a higher level of interest in Islam, especially since about 2015. Because of the evident interest in Islam, community members are confident that the number of Muslims will increase in the future, mainly due to conversion. They must be prepared for this possible influx of people by constructing new mosques and community centers.[92]

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[88] Peres de Oliveira and Connell, "Islam and the Global War on Terrorism in Latin America."

[89] Ibid.

[90] Chitwood, *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 132.

[91] Ibid, 171.

[92] İsa Altekin, 2024.

In Brazil, conversion is growing, especially among groups such as women, Black Brazilians, and poor Brazilians. Researcher Atilla Kuş explains that women, in particular, are drawn to Islam in a society where they are too often victims of domestic violence. For other groups, the exact motivating factors are unclear. However, Kuş believes that, as a general rule, people who convert to Islam find solace in the faith because it answers questions that other religions do not.[93] Moreover, although immigration from *Levantine* countries like Lebanon and Syria has slowed, immigrants from countries like Bangladesh and Afghanistan are moving to Brazil and bringing Islam with them.[94]

Although Islam is gaining some traction in Latin America, it is essential to recall that this is a tiny community. About 88% of the population is Christian–either Catholic or Protestant.[95] The centuries-old institutionalization of Christianity in Latin America created a sort of inertia that lasts until this day. Muslim identities are extremely politicized across Latin America, with Muslims caught in a space where they must fight for political recognition while navigating negative stereotypes related to the Middle East and Islam.[96]

"*Muslim* identities are extremely politicized across *Latin America*, with Muslims caught in a space where they must fight for political recognition while navigating negative stereotypes related to the *Middle East* and *Islam*."

Nicolás Panotto, the general director of Otros Cruces, an organization that studies and promotes the intersections between religion and politics, believes that lacking public policy frameworks sometimes hinders support for minority religions in Latin America. Many countries in the region have policies regarding how new faith organizations must register with the government, but the specificities stop there. In his opinion, a more robust apparatus on religious freedom requires constitutional, legal, and public policy protections for religious pluralism.[97]

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[93] Atilla Kuş, 2024.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Pew Research Center, "Religion in Latin America," 2014.

[96] İsa Altekin, 2024.

[97] Nicolás Panotto, 2024.

Many countries in Latin America lack a comprehensive legal framework for religious pluralism due to a long history with the Catholic Church. Historically, concordats between national governments and the Holy See have given the Catholic Church massive power in countries like Guatemala, Colombia, and Venezuela.[98] Now, most of the legal provisions in these concordats have been reversed. Still, the Catholic Church's legacy looms large over Latin America. Although interest in Islam is growing, it is essential to recall that the majority of the population is staunchly Christian.

People in Latin America still hold some negative attitudes towards Islam, although interest in the religion is growing. The region is also highly Christian, with the Church ingrained into many countries' history and culture. In a 2014 study, projections showed that by the year 2100, the amount of Muslims in South America would be just over 0.3% of the population, or about 1.4 million people.[99] Although Islam will likely grow in Latin America in the future, there are enough barriers to its expansion that it will probably remain a small minority.

"Although *Islam* will likely grow in *Latin America* in the future, there are enough barriers to its expansion that it will probably remain a small minority."

2.7 Conclusion: From *Moriscos* to Muslims

The history of Islam in Latin America stretches back for centuries. The *Moriscos* first brought Islam to the shores of the New World during the colonial period. However, strict laws on movement and the export of Inquisition-style courts to the colonies quickly eliminated the perceived threat of Islam. The next group to bring Islam to Latin America was a wave of enslaved West Africans, most of them in Brazil. These Muslims practiced their faith in secret; following a major uprising in Bahia, many of them were killed or sent back to Africa.

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[98] "Colombia." Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America; "Guatemala." Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America; "Venezuela." Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America.

[99] This low percentage includes countries that are outside of the scope of this paper–namely Suriname, with its large Muslim population. See Houssain Kettani, "History and Prospect of Muslims in South America." *Social Indicators Research* (2014), 839.

Although these groups did not last until the modern day, their legacy is carried on by the immigrants from the Levant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of the modern Muslim community in Latin America is related to these Levantine immigrants, although conversion is on the rise.

Of course, the future of Islam in Latin America is not as simple as growing conversion rates. Barriers to the growth of Islam, such as institutionalized Catholicism and Islamophobia, are present in many Latin American societies. Due to the role of international actors (most notably Saudi Arabia) and the historical presence of terrorist groups like *Hezbollah* in the Tri-Border Area, outside actors scrutinize Islam in Latin America as fundamentalist or extremist. While terrorist attacks in the past were linked to religious extremists in Argentina, Islamic terrorist activity in Latin America has been minimal, with only a handful of significant incidents occurring. In reality, most communities are anything but violent; indeed, they are often involved in interfaith dialogue and community efforts to improve their countries.

Despite its small size, the Muslim community in Latin America is vivid and dynamic, comprised of multiple groups across several countries, each with rich histories and traditions. Each group thrives in the culture of its home country, which is generally compatible with Islamic values. As interest in Islam grows, organizers build new facilities and establish new programs to support their present and future communities. Although barriers to conversion constrain the future of Islam in Latin America, the community was never trying to convert people en masse. Instead, the focus has always been on supporting the existing community and welcoming those who enter it by choice; to this end, Islam in Latin America is succeeding.

“Despite its small size, the *Muslim* community in *Latin America* is vivid and dynamic, comprised of multiple groups across several countries, each with rich histories and traditions.”

3. Section II: Islam and Latinos in the United States

Today, Latino Americans are converting to Islam faster than any demographic group, although they are still not the most significant percentage of converts.[100] Islam in the Latino American community is thriving despite the barriers to Islam in Latin America–namely Islamophobia and ingrained Christianity. In contrast with Latin American countries, Latino Americans are considered to be one of the least Islamophobic demographics in the United States.[101] Since the 1920s, Islam has had a place in Latino-American history. Existing research spotlights the historical, political, and cultural connections between Latino Americans and Islam to analyze why Latinos are turning to Islam at such high rates.

This section will begin by looking into the history of Latino conversion to Islam in Latin America, starting in the 1920s and continuing until now. Along this timeline, the establishment of Latino Muslim organizations, particularly online organizations, will be discussed. The methods of outreach that these organizations use are of particular importance to the movement, especially the use of the Internet and digital platforms. Then, analyzing the commonalities between Latinos and Islam–including historical, political, and cultural dimensions–will provide the framework to consider why these organizations' outreach has been so effective in its proselytization. This section will conclude with discussions of dual identities, fusion identities, and the future of a uniquely Latino Muslim community.

3.1 From Heterodoxy to Orthodoxy: The Beginning of Latino Islam

Initial Latino converts to Islam were often associated with African-American Islamic groups, whether mainstream or heterodox.[102] These demographic groups were united by the term 'Moor,' which referred to the Muslim inhabitants of Spain before the *Reconquista*.

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[100] Bagby, "The American Mosque 2020," 13; Bagby, "The American Mosque 2011," 12.

[101] Dalia Mogahed and Eram Ikramullah, "Latino Attitudes Toward American Muslims and Islam: Key Findings," *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding*, 2023, 3.

[102] Patrick D. Bowen, "U.S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920: From "Moors" to "Latino Muslims"." *Journal of Religious History* (2013), 166.

Since many Muslims from that time came from North Africa, *Moor* has also been used to refer to Black individuals.[103] Moreover, it is important to remember that there are many Black Latinos, whether they be Afro-Latino or simply dark-skinned. The use of 'black' as it is understood in the United States is not the only definition that people used in early twentieth-century Latino communities; indeed, people who may not be considered Black today would sometimes self-identify as Black.[104] Therefore, early Latino Muslims fit into Black-centric Islamic movements such as the *Moorish Science Temple* or the *Nation of Islam*.

"...it is important to remember that there are many *Black Latinos*, whether they be *Afro-Latino* or simply *dark-skinned*. The use of 'black' as it is understood in the United States is not the only definition that people used in early twentieth-century *Latino* communities; indeed, people who may not be considered *Black* today would sometimes self-identify as *Black*."

The *Moorish Science Temple* (MST), which lasted in its original form until the death of its founder in 1929,[105] was a relatively small African-American majority Muslim movement in the American Midwest. The short-lived movement had a national headquarters in Chicago that included a "Cuban-Americano Headquarters" since recruitment efforts in Cuba had brought Latino converts to the movement.[106] The fragmentation of the MST set the stage for a more prominent and influential African-American Muslim movement: the *Nation of Islam*. This movement, which many scholars consider heterodox or even heretical in Islam due to certain teachings about the creation story,[107] was established in the 1930s. The movement taught that all non-white individuals are the 'Original Man,' with white people being 'devils.'

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[103] Bowen, "U.S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920," 166.

[104] Ibid, 173-174.

[105] The MST exists to this day; however, the movement was fractured and changed after its founder's death. Important figures in the movement led factions in different directions.

[106] Bowen, 170.

[107] Jason Eric Fishman and Ana Belén Soage, "The Nation of Islam and the Muslim World: Theologically Divorced and Politically United," *Religion Compass* (2013), 1.

Although most of the Nation's followers were Black, the definition of 'Original Man' includes other groups, such as Asians, Native Americans, and Latinos.[108] The *Nation of Islam* drew a small following of Latinos starting in the 1950s, with the first Mexican-American minister joining the group in 1962.[109] In the 1980s, however, Latinos increasingly converted to Islam through other movements.

Throughout the twentieth century, Muslims and Latinos were drawn together in the fact of American racism. Male Muslim immigrants in Michigan, California, New York, and Illinois tended to marry Latina women due to societal racism that urged people to marry others of the same skin tone.[110] Many of these women remained Christian, but the community overlap is notable.

The first major Latino Muslim organization was established in New York's Spanish Harlem in 1975. Called the *Alianza Islamica* (Islamic Alliance), the majority Puerto Rican group had ties with Black Muslim leaders in Chicago and the Puerto Rican nationalism movement.[111] The movement's founders argue that the key to spreading the truth about Islam in the Spanish-speaking community was translating materials to Spanish; unfortunately, other Muslim organizations did not support *Alianza* in this endeavor.[112]

"...The power of *Alianza* led to large amounts of conversion to Islam."

The group supported the broader community with job training, drug recovery, and GED programs. The power of *Alianza* led to large amounts of conversion to Islam.[113] Unfortunately, *Alianza*'s building burned down in 2005, and the group did not have the means to rebuild and continue the project.[114]

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[108] Bowen, "U.S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920," 170-171.

[109] Bowen, 171.

[110] Ibid, 173.

[111] Ibid, 178.

[112] Maryam Jameel and Michael Simon Johnson, "Alianza Islámica: Islam in the Barrio" (interview with Ramon Ocasio), *Latino USA*, produced by NPR (2016), 4:54, 5:32, 5:50.

[113] Jameel and Johnson, 8:00.

[114] Ibid, 8:11.

Alianza Islamica was hardly the only Latino Muslim organization to be formed. A women's organization, *Propagacion Islamica para la Educacion e la Devocion a Alá el Divino* (PIEDAD), was founded in 1988 by Khadija Riviera, a female convert.[115] After its formation in 1997, an online organisation, *Latino American Dawah Organization* (LADO), grew in popularity.[116]

As of 2011, Latinos represented 6% of American Muslims and 10% of American-born Muslims.[117] In 2023, updated figures show that Latinos represent 9% of American Muslims. 62% of Latino Muslims were born in the United States, indicating that most conversions happen in first- or second-generation Latino Americans–or potentially even later generations.[118] The trend of Latinos turning to Islam is only a tiny part of a broader shift of Latinos leaving Catholicism. As of 2014, only 55% of Latinos consider themselves Catholic, a figure that has consistently declined since 2010.[119] Many of these ex-Catholics are turning to Protestant sects of Christianity, but a decent amount considers themselves to be 'other' or 'unaffiliated.'

The number of Latinos converting to Islam is high now, but this is not emerging from a vacuum. America has a rich history of Latino Muslims that dates back to the 1920s and culminates in the establishment of explicitly Latino Muslim organizations, many of which are thriving to this day.

"*America* has a rich history of *Latino Muslims* that dates back to the 1920s and culminates in the establishment of explicitly *Latino Muslim organizations*, many of which are thriving to this day."

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[115] Bowen, "U.S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920," 182.

[116] Bowen, 183.

[117] Mogahed and Ikramullah, "Latino Attitudes Toward American Muslims and Islam: Key Findings," 2.

[118] Harold D. Morales, *Latino and Muslim in America: Race, Religion, and the Making of a New Minority*, New York: AAR Religion, Culture, and History (2018), 6.

[119] Pew Research Center. "The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States," Pew Research Center, 2014, 5-6.

3.2 Translating Outreach: Latino Muslim Organizations, The Internet, and Español

Alianza Islamica was the first organization to notice the Spanish's lack of Islamic religious materials. In its absence, a handful of influential organizations have stepped in to fill this translation gap via the Internet. One such example is *IslamInSpanish*, which has evolved from an online translation and information source founded in 2001 to a physical presence in Houston and Dallas, Texas.

The mission of *IslamInSpanish* is to spread Islam to the Latino community through Spanish-language testimonies. Its founder, Jaime 'Mujahid' Fletcher, started the organization after converting to Islam. When he realized there were little to no Spanish-language resources to spread information about Islam, he found the group and produced them himself. *IslamInSpanish* focuses on multimedia resources, with audiobooks, TV shows, and speeches making up much of their produced content.[120] In 2016, the organization opened the *Centro Islamico* in Houston, Texas–the first and only Latino-led, Spanish-speaking Islamic center in the United States. The center features a museum of Andalusian Muslim heritage, a prayer area that hosts weekly Friday prayers, a production studio, and a lounge. Events hosted by the center are available in person and online, allowing *IslamInSpanish* to reach over one million people monthly.[121] Other Latino Muslim organizations have also taken steps to move beyond translating materials into other forms of community support. The *Latino American Dawah Organization* (LADO) was founded by three Latino Muslims who met in an online chatroom in 1997. The group has a significant focus on education, with one of its primary missions being the creation of scholarships and grants for young Latino Muslims who want to become Islamic scholars or imams.[122] Additionally, *LADO*'s website features a wealth of online resources, including the Qur'an in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.[123]

"In 2016, the organization [*IslamInSpanish*] opened the *Centro Islamico* in Houston, Texas–*the first and only Latino-led, Spanish-speaking Islamic center* in the US."

[120] IslamInSpanish, "The Story of IslamInSpanish."

[121] IslamInSpanish. "IslamInSpanish Centro Islamico."

[122] The LADO Group, "What We Do."

[123] The LADO Group, "The Holy Qur'an."

Another group, *La Asociación Latino Musulmana de America* (LALMA), focuses mainly on translated materials directed at immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries. Founded in 2000 by five Latino Muslims in Los Angeles, California, it focuses on distributing what they call 'traditional knowledge' of Islam in Spanish. It emphasizes the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as biographies of the Prophet Mohammed.[124] Although *LADO* and *LALMA* encourage physical meetings, and members can organize them at local mosques or community centers, *IslamInSpanish* has fully transcended the digital space to create its Islamic center.[125]

All modern online Latino Muslim organizations focus on combating misinformation and spreading educational materials about Islam to fulfill their mission of spreading Islam. Groups emphasize education and community events while often needing more physical space. Despite the inherent disconnectedness of an online organization, each group still manages to get website traffic and contribute to the growth of Islam in the Latino community.

"All modern online Latino Muslim organizations focus on combating misinformation and spreading educational materials about Islam to fulfill their mission of spreading Islam."

3.3 Inheriting Andalucía: Latino Muslims and the *Moorish* Connection

In their outreach to prospective converts, Latino Muslim organizations frequently reference the history of the Iberian Peninsula as a Muslim nation. One of *IslamInSpanish*'s missions is to "culturally attach" Latinos to "their common Islamic roots historically from Al-Andalus."[126]

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[124] La Asociación Latino Musulmana de América. "Quienes Somos: Breve Historia de la Fundación de LALMA."

[125] Madelina Nuñez and Harold D. Morales. "Latinx Muslim Digital Landscapes: Locating Networks and Cultural Practices." In *Cyber Muslims: Mapping Islamic Digital Media in the Internet Age*, edited by Robert Rozehnal, 84–99. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 91.

[126] IslamInSpanish, "The Story of IslamInSpanish."

Some of the organization's productions feature images of architecture from Granada, as well as lists of Spanish words with Arabic origins.[127] *LADO*'s website also makes several references to *Moorish* Spain across its pages.[128] The history of Islam in Spain is considered inseparable from Latino culture as it is known today.[129] Some consider the emphasis that Latino Muslim organizations place on *Moorish* cultural heritage to be slightly overstated, preferring to focus on the role of European cultural influence in forming Latino culture.[130] Specific cultural influences, such as the influx of Arabic words into Spanish, are undeniable; however, to claim that *Moorish* culture was the primary influence on Latino culture is questionable. Regardless of the impact *Moorish* culture had on modern Latino culture, surveys of Latino Muslim converts recognize that many of those who convert view their conversion as a means of returning to a pre-Christian Latino identity.[131] In the Muslim community, it is relatively common to use the words' conversion' and 'reversion' interchangeably. Widely accepted doctrine claims that all humans are born in perfect submission to God, but external influences may alter their path. Converting to Islam means returning to this original state of submission–or reverting to it.[132] Converts to Islam may refer to themselves as reverts, converts, or both. In the case of Latino converts, 40% prefer 'reversion,' whereas 34% prefer 'conversion' when referring to their religious change.[133]

"Regardless of the impact *Moorish* culture had on modern *Latino* culture, surveys of *Latino Muslim* converts recognize that many of those who convert view their conversion as a means of returning to a *pre-Christian Latino* identity."

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[127] Nuñez and Morales, "Latinx Muslim Digital Landscapes," 90-91.

[128] Harold Daniel Morales, "Latino Muslim by Design: A Study of Race, Religion and the Internet in American Minority Discourse." PhD diss. University of California Riverside (2012), 190.

[129] Nuñez and Morales, 86.

[130] Lisa Viscindi, "Latino Muslims a Growing Presence in America." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, 2003.

[131] Gaston Espinosa, Harold Morales, and Juan Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States: Reversion, Politics, and Islamidad." *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* (2017), 4.

[132] Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States," 23.

[133] Ibid.

The thought of reverting to a religion that is closely associated with Spanish and Latino history is essential to almost half of Latino Muslims. However, it is important to recall that the majority of *Moriscos* who made it to the New World–a small number to begin with–were persecuted, and those who survived rarely passed Islam on to their descendants secretly. It is highly unlikely that all Latino Muslims are reverting to the religion of their ancestors. Still, the cultural influence of the *Moors* on Latino culture is undeniably present, and it is crucial to individual reverts and Latino Muslim organizations alike.

3.4 Immigration and its Discontents: Political Connections between Latinos and Muslims in America

Latinos and Muslims in the United States each face a unique yet similar set of stereotypes that hinder their day-to-day life. The two groups are arguably the most stigmatized demographics in America, with Latinos portrayed as violent, illegal immigrants and Muslims as misogynistic religious extremists.[134] When surveyed about Islamophobia by the *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding* (ISPU), Latino respondents emphasized that they see similarities between the negative media portrayals of Latinos and Muslims in America. Many also noted that they feel connected to the Muslim community due to shared visions of the American Dream and a similar immigrant experience.[135] Latinos interviewed about their views of Muslims and Islam identified the common struggle against discrimination as a factor that connects the two groups.[136]

Indeed, the two groups face similar political issues, many related to immigration, which was especially salient when former president Donald Trump was in office. Two of his most controversial policy ideas were his plan to build a wall along the southern border of the United States and to ban immigrants and refugees from several Muslim-majority countries.

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[134] Morales, "Latino Muslim by Design," 4.

[135] Mogahed and Ikramullah, "Latino Attitudes Toward American Muslims and Islam: Key Findings," 3.

[136] Andrew Proctor, Alex Flores, and Dalia Mogahed, "Latino Attitudes Toward American Muslims and Islam," *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding* (2023), 7.

These decisions brought Muslims and Latinos together, with incidences of coalitions forming between Muslim leaders, Latino leaders, and civil rights leaders to speak out against the proposals.[137] The former president also made several statements, most of them on Twitter, disparaging Muslims and Latinos with hateful language. Research shows a possible correlation between these tweets and the incidents of hate crimes against both groups in areas with high levels of Twitter usage.[138]

"These decisions [*border wall and Muslim ban*] brought Muslims and Latinos together, with incidences of coalitions forming between Muslim leaders, Latino leaders, and civil rights leaders to speak out against the proposals."

Furthermore, both groups suffered when former President Trump rescinded the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2017. The media focused on how the end of DACA would harm Latinos, and understandably so: most of the individuals that it protected were Latinos. However, DACA also protected other groups, such as a decent amount of Muslims. Muslim DACA recipients tend to belong to ethnic groups such as South Asians or Black Americans, whose applications are denied at higher rates.[139]

With some Christian leaders, such as former president Trump, associating themselves with anti-Latino xenophobia, some converts may find Islam to be less discriminatory than their former Christian churches.[140] Indeed, 74% of converts surveyed in the *Latino Muslim Survey* (LMS) claimed that the call for racial equity in Islam was a significant reason for conversion.[141]

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[137] Russell Contreras and Jeff Karoub, "Muslims, Latinos unify over Trump's immigration, border plan," *Associated Press* (2017).

[138] Alejandro Beutel, "How Trump's Nativist Tweets Overlap with Anti-Muslim and Anti-Latino Hate Crimes," *Southern Poverty Law Center* (2018).

[139] Bridge Initiative Team, "On the Intersections of DACA and Islamophobia," *Bridge: A Georgetown University Initiative* (2017).

[140] Lee Adams, "Why Latinos are Converting to Islam," *VICE YouTube Channel* (2019), 1:44.

[141] Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States," 22.

However, it is important to note that 48% of the survey respondents also believe that Latino Muslims face discrimination as Latinos in Muslim communities despite ideological commitments to racial equity.[142] A flight from perceived or actual racism in Christian churches may be a reason for some converts to turn to Islam, but Muslim communities are not necessarily perfectly racially equitable.

Since Latinos and Muslims are drawn together by a similar form of xenophobic discrimination and reductive stereotypes, Latinos have a more favorable view of Islam when compared to other ethnic groups in America. The two groups have historically suffered under similar political decisions, and some converts may see Islam as a more equitable religion when compared to Christianity. Unfortunately, converts still face discrimination in Muslim communities. Political reasons connect the two demographic groups, but they do not necessarily explain why Latinos convert to Islam.

"Unfortunately, converts still face discrimination in Muslim communities. Political reasons connect the two demographic groups, but they do not necessarily explain why Latinos convert to Islam."

3.5 Religiosity, Family, and *Machismo*: The Cultural Ties Between Latinos and Islam

Despite the apparent differences in heritage for most Latinos and Muslims, the two groups share cultural similarities in both good and bad aspects of daily life. Religiosity–a solid religious sentiment for any religion–is one exciting connection between the groups. While not all ISPU survey respondents identify religiosity as a commonality between Latinos and Muslims, those who do emphasize how much they respect Muslims for their high levels of perceived religiosity.[143]

[142] Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States," 26.

[143] Proctor, Flores, and Mogahed, "Latino Attitudes Toward American Muslims and Islam," 9.

In 2014, 40% of Latino Americans (Catholic, Protestant, and unaffiliated) said they attended church weekly;[144] comparably, in 2017, 43% of American Muslims reported attending mosque services at least once weekly (a slight decline from 2011's 47%).[145] By this measure, both groups are slightly less religious than all American Christians (47% attendance in 2014)[146] but slightly more religious than the American general public (37% in 2014).[147] Neither demographic is significantly more religious than the American general public, yet non-Muslim Latinos continue to respect Muslims for their high levels of religiosity.

The family has historically been an essential value for Latinos in the United States. In 2009, 70% of Latinos wanted to have children, while 56% wanted to get married.[148] For some converts to Islam, family values drew them to the religion. A Muslim medical clinic in Los Angeles that mainly treats Latino patients reports that some patients who have taken an interest in Islam appreciate the religion's focus on family.[149]

"The family has historically been an essential value for *Latinos* in the United States."

Indeed, some converts mention that the family structures and gender roles of Islam mirror traditional Latino values.[150] However, this is not the case for all converts. The influence of Islamic family values on conversion was not considered as a reason for conversion in the major 2017 study of Latino conversion to Islam.[151] An emphasis on the family is a commonality between the two groups, but it is hardly exclusive to Latinos and Muslims, and it is not the sole reason for conversion.

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144 Pew Research Center, "The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States," 7.

145 Pew Research Center, "Religious Beliefs and Practices." In "U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream," *Pew Research Center* (2017), 108.

146 Pew Research Center, "Religious Beliefs and Practices," 108.

147 Pew Research Center, "The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States," 19.

148 Pew Research Center, "Life Satisfaction, Priorities, and Values." In "Between Two Worlds: How Young Latinos Come of Age in America," *Pew Research Center* (2009).

149 Amy Green, "More US Hispanics drawn to Islam," *The Christian Science Monitor* (2006).

150 Rachel Martin, "Latinas Choosing Islam over Catholicism," *NPR Weekend Edition Sunday* (2006).

151 Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States," 22.

When considering Islam, the most significant issue for many Latinos is that of perceived misogyny. ISPU survey respondents believe that Muslim men view Muslim women as inferior people, as possessions, or as heavily restricted.[152] The idea that Muslim women are heavily controlled by their husbands lends to the perception of Islam as a patriarchal religion as well and that Latinos would be concerned if their female friends or family members wanted to convert to Islam.[153] The conversation about misogyny in Islam is nuanced in light of the historical *machismo* culture in Latin America, an exaggerated form of masculinity that is often connected to patriarchal attitudes or strict gender roles. *Machismo* and related attitudes are perceived to be declining, especially in the United States. However, Latinas do not always feel mean and see them as equals in all cases; they do feel like they have more of a voice than Muslim women.[154]

Some women changed their views of Islam after a discussion with a Latina Muslim on why she chose to wear the hijab. With a greater understanding of the personal motivations for modesty, several women empathized more with women who veil.[155] However, this does not necessarily mean that they view Islam as an equal religion; perceived misogyny may remain a sticking point for these women.

However, cultural commonalities are undermined by the frequent familial rejection that Latino Muslims experience when they convert. One interview conducted by Vice followed the story of a man whose mother disowned him and expelled him from his home after she discovered that he was learning about Islam. She believed the religion to be an extremist group or a terrorist organization.[156] Another woman interviewed by NPR shared a similar experience where she was asked to choose between her family and her new faith.

“...cultural commonalities are undermined by the frequent familial rejection that *Latino Muslims* experience when they convert.”

[152] Proctor, Flores, and Mogahed, “Latino Attitudes Toward American Muslims and Islam,” 11.

[153] Proctor, Flores, and Mogahed, 11-12.

[154] Ibid, 13.

[155] Ibid, 16.

[156] Adams, “Why Latinos are Converting to Islam,” 11-19.

Unfortunately, this experience is widespread for Latino converts to Islam.[157] For some, this is because converting to Islam is perceived as a rejection of Latino culture and a way of 'becoming Arab,' so to speak.[158] Indeed, despite relatively low levels of Islamophobia, non-Muslim Latino communities still make 63% of Latino Muslims feel discrimination.[159]

Islam and Latinos share cultural similarities in good ways and bad. Although these similarities decrease Islamophobia among the Latino population and facilitate engagement with Islam, none of them are sufficient to cause conversion in isolation. Religiosity, family values, and perceived or actual misogyny are just three ways in which there is some level of convergence between Latinos and Muslims. These factors, compounded with outreach from Latino Muslim organizations, expose Latinos to Islam and may contribute to rising conversion rates.

3.6 Finding Sisterhood: Latina Women and Islam

Multiple surveys and reports of Latino Muslim conversions reveal that over half of all converts are women.[160] Contrary to popular belief, most Latinas do not convert because they are married to or want to marry a Muslim man. Instead, they are usually introduced to Islam through a friend, family member, or acquaintance; they tend to spend months to years learning about Islam before even attending a mosque.[161]

On top of religious considerations such as monotheism and personal relationships with God, Latina converts are drawn to Islam due to its handling of women's issues, such as gender roles. In Islam, women continue looking up to religious role models such as Mary/Maryam as guides for female piety.[162] They emphasize the role of religious role models like Mary/Maryam, Aisha, and Khadija as supportive wives and/or dedicated mothers.

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[157] Martin, "Latinas Choosing Islam over Catholicism."

[158] Morales, "Latino Muslim by Design," 5.

[159] Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States," 26.

[160] Stephanie Londono, "Immigrant Latinas and their Shahadah in Miami," *Florida International University Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center* (2014), 3.

[161] Londono, "Immigrant Latinas and their Shahadah in Miami," 15-16.

[162] Morales, "Latino Muslim by Design," 144-147.

Indeed, for many female converts, traditional gender roles are the goal; that is, many Latina Muslims would prefer to be in a marriage where they can be stay-at-home mothers who take care of the house and children while their husbands support the household by working.[163] Some of the Latina Muslims who took place in an ethnographic study openly criticized Western feminism, claiming that although it offers women freedom, it does not offer them respect in the same way Islam does.[164]

"...many *Latina Muslims* would prefer to be in a marriage where they can be *stay-at-home mothers* who take care of the house and children while their husbands support the household by working."

Interviewees for NPR responded similarly, with one claiming that once she converted to Islam, she felt more respected as a woman.[165] For many Latina converts, these traditional gender roles are a form of gender equality. 69% of respondents in the LMS survey (73% female) said that the gender equality of Islam was a significant factor that drew them to Islam.[166]

Multiple Latina Muslim converts agree that they feel less sexualized now that they are Muslims, with less of their value or self-worth attached to how they look.[167] Part of this new experience is related to Islamic laws of modesty, which require women to wear modest clothes, often including the hijab.[168] Latina Muslims criticize those who see the hijab as oppressive; for them, it is more oppressive to be sexualized by society–which is how they feel Western society treats women.[169]

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[163] Londono, "Immigrant Latinas," 15-16.

[164] Ibid, 16.

[165] Martin, "Latinas Choosing Islam over Catholicism."

[166] Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States," 16-22.

[167] Londono, 18.

[168] Legal opinions are divided on whether or not the hijab is mandatory, and there are many Muslim women who choose not to wear the hijab.

[169] Tim Padgett, "Why So Many Latinos Are Becoming Muslims," *WLRN* (2013).

Indeed, the hijab is not without its critics. Recall that many Latinos still consider misogyny in Islam to be a sticking point when considering the religion; for many, the hijab exemplifies the control over women because it represents policing women's bodies and attire. For three Latina Muslim converts in Miami, their choice to wear the hijab presented a problem for their families and communities. One was even attacked by a family member, who forcibly removed her hijab.[170] Another woman interviewed by NPR identified her choice to wear the hijab as the final straw that led to her family kicking her out of the house.[171]

Despite facing hardships, Latina Muslim converts continue to exert a strong influence within the community. One of the earliest Latino Muslim organizations, *PIEDAD*, was founded by a Latina Muslim woman as a support group for others like her. Khadija Riviera, the founder, noticed a sizeable amount of Latina Muslims who were new to Islam in her community. She founded *PIEDAD* to promote sisterhood and non-judgemental, non-hierarchical friendships between women.[172] The *PIEDAD* spirit of spreading information about Islam without being forceful or judgemental may help encourage conversion.[173] For 53% of Latino Muslims, a family member or friend sharing their religious beliefs was a significant factor that contributed to conversion. The connections between Latino Muslims, especially between Latinas, are critical for continued conversion and community. The wave of Latino conversion to Islam has been predominantly female, and women are undeniably a strong force in organizing, supporting, and growing the community. Unlike Islam's critics, who see religion as misogynistic or oppressive, female converts see traditional gender roles as a liberating form of equality that is simply different from Western feminism. These women embrace symbols like the hijab in the face of familial backlash, and they form associations to support each other and spread their faith with kindness.

"Unlike Islam's critics, who see religion as *misogynistic* or *oppressive*, female converts see traditional gender roles as a liberating form of equality that is simply different from *Western feminism*."

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[170] Londono, "Immigrant Latinas," 20-21.

[171] Martin, "Latinas Choosing Islam over Catholicism."

[172] Morales, "Latino and Muslim in America," 45-49.

[173] Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States," 22.

3.7 Islam Behind Bars: The Role and Relevance of Prison Conversions among Latino Muslims

Islam continuously gains converts in American prisons, with conversions to Islam at all levels of prison estimated to be between 30,000 and 40,000 per year. Most–but not all–of these converts are African-American.[174] Some of these conversions may indeed be false or half-hearted actions to gain certain benefits only available to practicing Muslims. However, many of these conversions are very real. Islam's emphasis on rebirth holds a certain appeal to incarcerated individuals, offering them the opportunity to atone for their past sins.[175] Indeed, many Muslim converts, former prisoners or not, like to change their names to represent their new lives in Islam. About 45% of Latino Muslims surveyed by LMS take a new name after conversion, with more women doing so than men.[176] One woman explained that after her conversion, her life was so profoundly changed that she felt like a new person; therefore, she took a new name.[177] This idea of a new life appeals to prisoners who may regret their actions or seek to atone for them.

There is circumstantial and anecdotal evidence that Latinos may be converting to Islam in prison, although the statistics are lackluster. The Latino population in prison was about 23% of federal prisoners in 2023;[178] it is already clear that Latinos outside of prisons are increasingly attracted to Islam. However, the LMS indicates that only 4% of Latino Muslims were introduced to Islam through prisons or prison-related programs, such as rehabilitation programs, prison ministries, or prisoner re-entry programs.[179]

"There is circumstantial and anecdotal evidence that Latinos may be converting to Islam in prison, although the statistics are lackluster."

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[174] SpearIt, "Raza Islamica: Prisons, Hip Hop & Converting Converts," *Berkeley La Raza Law Journal*, 22 no. 1 (2012), 184-185.

[175] SpearIt, 176.

[176] Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States," 24.

[177] Londono, "Immigrant Latinas," 18.

[178] E. Ann Carson, "Prisons Report Series: Preliminary Data Release," *Bureau of Justice Statistics* (2023).

[179] Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States," 21.

Experts on the subject have identified a variety of barriers to the growth of Islam among incarcerated Latinos, some of which have been corroborated by testimonies from imprisoned Latino Muslims. There is evidence of Latino (specifically Mexican) prison gangs attacking Latino Muslim converts for 'betraying' their race.[180] This same stereotype exists outside of prison as well: Latino Muslims are often accused of 'becoming Arab' when they choose to convert to Islam.[181] Some states also segregate prisons by race, which makes it more difficult for Islam to reach Latino communities. There is also a lack of qualified Muslim chaplains and educators, as well as resources about Islam in all languages.[182]

The story of Joe Segura, a Latino Muslim who exchanged letters with Juan Galvan, the president of the LADO group, confirms these barriers. Although Segura was introduced to Islam before his time in prison, he was unfamiliar with things like the exact method of prayer and the start date of Ramadan–despite the Islamic teacher he had in prison. He also requested study materials for himself and to disseminate to other prisoners.[183]

As stories like his circulate, people inevitably worry about the intersection of Islam, prisons, and terrorism. A series of Latino Muslim radicals, the most notable of which was Jose Padilla, sparked concerns about possible links between Latino Muslims, prisons, and terrorism.[184] A lack of qualified Muslim leaders in prisons means that the 'imam' is often a fellow prisoner; the lack of reliable information about Islam in prisons can give this 'imam' the power to influence prison converts towards radicalism.[185] While there is a possible link between prison conversions and radicalism, some have gone so far as to claim that there is some inherent 'Latino nature' that contributes to Latino Muslim radicalism.[186]

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[180] Juan Galvan, "Muslim Latino Prisoners: An Interview with Professor SpearIt," *Blog of Juan Galvan* (2020); Juan Galvan, "Dialogue With a Latino Muslim Prisoner," *The LADO Group* (2007).

[181] Morales, "Latino Muslim by Design," 160; Morales, "Latino and Muslim in America," 100.

[182] Galvan, "Muslim Latino Prisoners: An Interview with Professor SpearIt."

[183] Galvan, "Dialogue With a Latino Muslim Prisoner."

[184] Morales, "Latino and Muslim in America," 156.

[185] SpearIt, "Islam in American Barrios & Prisons: Converts Reclaim Moorish Spain, Reject Church." *Jadaliyya* (2011).

[186] Morales, "Latino and Muslim in America," 156-157.

The number from the LMS survey notes that only 0.5% of respondents believe that radical groups such as Al-Qaeda are making any positive changes for Muslims, which is less than the general U.S. Muslim population, where 1% have a very favorable view of radical groups.[187] Radical Latino Muslims certainly exist, but they are not representative of the broader American Latino Muslim population by any means.

"The number from the LMS survey notes that only 0.5% of respondents believe that *radical groups* such as *Al-Qaeda* are making any positive changes for *Muslims*, which is less than the general U.S. Muslim population..."

Prisons are a source of converts to Islam, and the anecdotal evidence suggests that some Latinos convert to Islam in prison. However, the statistics on this phenomenon are relatively lacking, and those that do exist suggest that prison conversions among Latinos are low due to a variety of barriers. When Latinos do convert in prison, there is a concern that they will turn to radicalism and terror like past examples. Although there may be a link between prison conversions and radicalism, there is far from enough data to make a concrete statement on the topic. Moreover, it is crucial to recall that the majority of Latino Muslims in America are peaceful, non-radical practitioners of Islam.

3.8 Three in One?: The Highlights of Islam for Latino Converts

Latinos who convert to Islam are drawn to the religion by historical and cultural ties, and they may have a favorable view of Muslims due to political similarities. However, conversion requires a genuine resonance with the religion and a sincere belief in its teachings. Testimonies of Latino Muslims who converted tend to emphasize certain aspects of Islamic doctrine as the things that solidified their decisions to convert. For 95% of LMS survey respondents, the Islamic doctrine of monotheism (*tawhid*) was a critical factor in their conversions; for 94%, the desire for a more personal experience with God drew them to Islam; for 76%, the practice of five daily prayers was a determining factor.[188]

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[187] Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, "Latino Muslims in the United States," 25.

[188] Espinosa, Morales, and Galvan, 22.

These converts had a unique experience with their former faiths, predominantly Christianity. Their critiques of Christianity are based on their personal experiences and do not necessarily speak to the experience of every Christian. Discussing these experiences explains why these and other Latinos felt called to Islam; however, it does not speak to any universal truths about Christianity or Christian doctrine.

Latino Muslims repeatedly assert that *tawhid*, or strict monotheism, was a crucial factor in their conversions to Islam. One Latina in Miami referred to *tawhid* as "uncorrupted monotheism," in contrast to the Christian concept of the Trinity, which she considered ambiguous and incorrect.[189] Joe Segura, the incarcerated Latino Muslim who spoke with Juan Galvan, was similarly confused by the Christian Trinity, as well as by the importance of saints. He preferred to believe in the Islamic conception of one God, not the Trinity's conception of God as three-in-one.[190] For Khadijah Riviera, the founder of *PIEDAD*, the idea of the Trinity was similarly confusing. She conceptualized the Christian Trinity as three equally significant gods, not three persons in one God.[191] Islam's denial of the Trinity cleared up any personal confusion or religious struggle that these converts faced in Christian churches.

"*Latino Muslims* repeatedly assert that *tawhid*, or strict monotheism, was a crucial factor in their conversions to *Islam*."

Segura's experience disliking saints also speaks to the desire for a more personal relationship with God. As a child, a pastor explained to him that people must interpret the Bible because not everyone fully understands the word of God. This experience annoyed him, and it is similar to that of other Latino Muslims. One Latina Muslim in Miami's experience with Catholicism was that no one around here was a "real Catholic" because they did not know enough about the religion and its teachings.[192] Islam's encouragement to read and understand the Qur'an as individuals resonated with their dissatisfaction with their personal experiences with Christianity, ultimately leading them to seek solace and guidance in a different faith tradition.

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189 Londono, "Immigrant Latinas," 17.

190 Galvan, "Dialogue With a Latino Muslim Prisoner."

191 Morales, "Latino and Muslim in America," 44.

192 Londono, 17.

Other Latino Muslim converts had different qualms with Christianity. Khadijah Riviera was especially critical of the belief in original sin, which claims that all people are born with inherent sinfulness since the fall of man (the story of Adam and Eve). For Riviera, the birth of her first child cemented her dislike of this doctrine. Another Latina Muslim from Miami believes that Christianity in America is too accepting of secular values, whereas Islam is not.[193]

A variety of factors cause Latinos' openness to Islam in the United States, but the only thing that can drive conversion is a genuine belief in the religion's teachings. Latino Muslims identified *tawhid* and a personal relationship with God as the main motivating factors for conversion. Other factors, such as the five daily prayers, the lack of a belief in original sin, and a perceived rejection of secular values, also helped some converts along their paths.

3.9 Latino and Muslim, Latino or Muslim: Dual Identity, Fusion Identity, and Latino Muslims

The frequent familial rejection that Latino Muslims face and the sense of 'otherness' that they feel in both non-Muslim Latino communities and non-Latino Muslim communities are related to the perception that 'Latino' and 'Muslim' are two incompatible identities. Testimonies from individual Latino Muslims about their sense of identity differ drastically. Some prioritize their faith, others prefer their ethnic heritage, while others embrace a unique fusion identity. There is no single correct way to be Latino and Muslim in America, but rather a myriad of unique expressions of identity in the community.

"Testimonies from individual *Latino Muslims* about their sense of identity differ drastically. Some prioritize their *faith*, others prefer their *ethnic heritage*, while others embrace a unique *fusion identity*. There is no single correct way to be *Latino* and *Muslim* in America, but rather a myriad of unique expressions of identity in the community."

[193] Londono, "Immigrant Latinas," 17.

For the Latina Muslims in Miami, their Muslim identities are of the utmost importance. These women fully recognize that they may have become 'Arabized' by their communities and husbands' families, but they do not see this as a problem.[194] *Arabization* was also prevalent in early Latino Muslim communities in the mid-1900s when some Latino Muslims would entirely refrain from speaking Spanish or adopt Arab or Pakistani styles of dress.[195] A certain familiarity with Arab culture is required in Islam since all Muslims must know the Arabic language in order to read and recite the original form of the Qur'an and pray. Arabic classes are a fixture in the weekly meetings of the *La Asociación Latino Musulmana de America* (LALMA).[196] While converts do not need to erase their Latino identities and adopt Arabized ones, some level of familiarity with the Arabic language and Arab culture is expected and not inherently negative.

Unlike the early Latino Muslims who would refuse to speak Spanish, modern Latino Muslims proudly socialize in Spanish. In Miami, where they talk in Spanish, the Latina Muslims congregate in a specific corner of their mosque. The *IslamInSpanish* Islamic Center in Houston houses a Spanish-speaking mosque; when Latino converts take their shahada (profession of faith), they recite it in Arabic, English, and Spanish.[197] Some converts reject the idea that religion is equivalent to culture. Although they are changing their faith, they are not altering their heritage or cultural practices; for example, they eat the same foods and enjoy the same activities.[198]

"Some converts reject the idea that religion is equivalent to culture. Although they are changing their faith, they are not altering their heritage or cultural practices..."

The key takeaway from each testimony is that there is no monolithic idea of what a "Latino Muslim" is. Some integrate into other cultures to fit into their new communities, whereas others hold onto their Latino heritage; most seem to adopt a combination of both identities.

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194 Londono, "Immigrant Latinas," 28.

195 Morales, "Latino Muslim by Design," 60-61.

196 Morales, "Latino and Muslim in America," 66.

197 Ibid, 44.

198 Ibid, 200-208.

The teachings of Islam may limit former cultural practices, so Latino Muslims adapt them to fit into their religion. Pork is eliminated from traditional recipes, and certain dances are abandoned. However, religion does not erase heritage. Many Latino Muslims enjoy a unique fusion identity where they carve out their subculture and space while still integrating themselves into their religion and their ethnic heritage.[199]

3.10 Conclusion: A Portrait of Latino Muslims in America?

By tracing the origins of Latino Muslims in Black Muslim movements, from the establishment of Latino Muslim groups to the modern-day waves of conversion, this section attempted to pinpoint the reason for the growing Latino conversion to Islam in the United States. Unsurprisingly, there is no single factor that can explain why Latinos are increasingly attracted to Islam. Instead, a combination of factors creates an environment where Latinos are more likely to learn about Islam. Those who enjoy its religious teachings convert; those who do not remain in their religion.

"...there is no single factor that can explain why *Latinos* are increasingly attracted to *Islam*. Instead, a combination of factors creates an environment where Latinos are more likely to learn about Islam. Those who enjoy its religious teachings convert; those who do not remain in their religion."

Arguably, the most important factor that connects Latinos and Muslims in the United States is their shared political struggle. The two groups face such similar discrimination that Latinos have developed a level of respect for Muslims that contributes to relatively low levels of Islamophobia in the community, which is compounded by a degree of cultural similarity and religiosity that mitigates the 'otherness' of Muslims. The statistics on prison conversions are unreliable, but some Latinos may be introduced to Islam in prison. Of course, no matter how Latinos encounter Islam, there is no guarantee that they will convert or even like the religion. Many Latinos still have concerns with the perceived misogyny of Islam.

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[199] Morales, "Latino and Muslim in America," 208-211.

What matters for conversion are Latinos' concerns with Christianity and whether Islam can fill in the gaps. Plenty of Latinos are pleased in their faith; for those that are not, a subset cannot fully accept essential teachings, most notably the Trinity. At this point, Islam becomes an appealing religion for these people. There are no cultural, historical, or political factors that guarantee that Latinos will approach Islam; instead, in the United States today, there is a combination of factors that increase the likelihood that people who would theoretically appreciate Islam encounter the religion in a favorable, less stereotyped context.

Once they encounter Islam, Latino Muslims (particularly Latina Muslim women) build strong communities to support the influx of converts. Online groups and physical sites support the growth and advancement of the community. Some, like *Alianza Islamica* and *PIEDAD*, have faded away into the rich history of Latino Muslims. Others, like *IslamInSpanish*, have maintained their influence and even established vast physical centers to serve their communities. Latino Muslims represent a unique group with a variety of distinct identities; it is impossible to sort the new converts into a single, homogenous group.

In Summary: *Moors*, Muslims, and Latin America

Although the study of Latino Muslims is relatively new, the historical connections between Latinos and Muslims span centuries. Latino Muslim organizations in the United States frequently reference the *Moorish* history of the Iberian Peninsula to explain the age-old connections between Islam and Latin American history. Although the *Moors* and later the *Moriscos* did not flood the colonized Latin America en masse, there is definite evidence that there were some *Moriscos*, practicing and non-practicing, in Latin America during the colonial period. These Muslims circumvented travel restrictions to enter the New World, but very few of them passed Islam on to their descendants.

"Although the study of *Latino Muslims* is relatively new, the historical connections between *Latinos* and *Muslims* span centuries."

The influx of West African Muslims, especially the *Mâle*, also occurred during the colonial period. Enslaved African Muslims practiced their faith covertly and mostly without issue until the *Mâle Revolt*, which was almost certainly organized around religious values. Following the revolt, the population of African Muslims also disappeared due to death or deportation. The third wave that brought Islam as we know it today to Latin America was the influx of Ottoman immigrants from Greater Syria in the early twentieth century. In this wave of immigrants, the Muslims established thriving communities that survive today, providing outreach and assistance to those who need it.

To continue serving their communities, Muslim groups in Latin America often receive help from international actors, especially Saudi Arabia. The involvement of foreign governments raises concerns about terrorism and extremism in Latin American Muslim communities, especially after the 1990s attacks in Argentina perpetrated by groups linked to *Hezbollah*. However, except for the tumultuous Tri-Border Area, terrorism and extremism in Latin America appear to remain relatively low.

In contrast to the United States, Islam in Latin America is slow-growing. The stereotypes against Islam are strong, and in a culturally Christian society, there is little incentive or interest in changing one's religion. However, community leaders have noticed more people taking an interest in Islam, whether academic or personal. While this does not necessarily indicate a future boom of conversion in Latin America, it likely means that Islam will grow in the region, albeit slowly.

"...community leaders have noticed more people taking an interest in *Islam*, whether academic or personal. While this does not necessarily indicate a future boom of conversion in *Latin America*, it likely means that *Islam* will grow in the region, albeit slowly."

In the United States, Latinos are converting to Islam faster than any other demographic group. Following a long history of Latino Islam that was closely intertwined with Black Muslim movements, Latino Muslims established several organizations aimed at advancing and supporting Islam in the Latino community. These organizations initially focused on translating religious materials to Spanish but eventually expanded into

support groups, educational programs, media outreach, and even physical spaces, to name a few. Their outreach was primarily online but practical nonetheless.

Latino Muslim organizations, recent converts, and non-Muslim Latinos tend to emphasize the historical, political, and cultural connections between Latinos and Islam. Historically, Latinos are connected to Islam due to the *Moorish* history of the Iberian Peninsula; politically, the two groups are united by the similar form of xenophobic discrimination they face in the United States; culturally, the groups share positive and negative aspects, such as a focus on family and a history of misogyny. For each convert, these factors may be relatively more or less critical; ultimately, each one plays a role in facilitating conversion to Islam. One major demographic among Latino Muslims is Latina Muslim converts, who form their subcultures at their local mosques. These women have unique interpretations of Islamic teachings about women and modesty, and they find empowerment in traditional gender roles. Another demographic is the potentially significant amount of people who convert to Islam in prison, although the statistics on these people are lacking.

For all Latino converts to Islam, the most important thing is a genuine belief in Islamic religious teachings. Generally, many Latino Muslims particularly enjoy Islam's conception of monotheism or *tawhid*, and they desire a more personal experience with God. Individual conversion testimonies also note personal issues with some Christian doctrines, such as the belief in original sin or the veneration of saints. These people find that Islam answers their religious questions; if it did not, there would be no reason to convert. Latino Muslims in the United States are creating new identities that combine their new religion with their heritage. Some prioritize their faith, others their ethnicity; for all of them, both factors are somehow important as new communities form.

This paper does not provide an exhaustive overview of all topics related to Latino Muslims. Further research is required to truly understand conversion in Latin America, the role of foreign governments in Latin American Muslim communities, and prison conversions among Latinos in the United States. This paper crystallizes the history of Latino Muslims, from *Moorish* Spain to Houston, and envisions the unique historical, political, and social context of the United States as a place for Latino Muslim communities to thrive.

"This paper crystallizes the history of *Latino Muslims*, from *Moorish Spain* to *Houston*, and envisions the unique historical, political, and social context of the *United States* as a place for *Latino Muslim* communities to thrive."

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About CFIG

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFIG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFIG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating academically-informed analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFIG's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

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