

The Arab-Islamic Community in Spain

History, institutions, cultural and religious personalities

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It is useful to speak of the Arab-Islamic community in Spain in order to acquaint the reader about its significance and activities. The community continues to grow, but is smaller and less influential than similar communities in France, Germany or England. This is due to numerous reasons. The political situation during Franco's time was characterized by a dictatorial and repressive regime. The economic situation was fragile. The church also plays a significant role in the political system and society. This situation prevailed until Franco's death in 1975 and the establishment of a democratic regime, the opening to the world and the big change that Spanish society underwent in the acquisition of knowledge, progress, liberty of thought and belief. At the time of the Spanish civil war (1936-1939), Franco leaned on the Moroccans to fight the Republicans nick named "Los Rojos" (the reds), that means the Communists. After his victory, the state ensured the Moroccans benefited, notably within the army - the General's personal guards were composed of Moroccan riders wearing their traditional uniform. Thus began the emigration of the Moroccan community towards Spain. It is the first Arab-Islamic community to return to Andalusia after centuries of the exclusion of Arabs. After Franco's death, a new democratic secular regime emerged, with a new constitution, stipulating the liberty of thought and belief, and more especially the freedom of religious belief. It helped towards the constitution of centers and of Islamic cultural associations throughout Spain, where Arabs and Moslems are concentrated. In 1992, the



The Egyptian Arab Institute-Madrid

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dialogue between the representatives of the Arab-Islamic community and the government, then ruled by the Socialist Party of M. Felipe Gonzalez, started. The government allowed the teaching of Islam in schools with large numbers of Moslems. But, unfortunately, it had remained dead letter. The situation became more complex with the rise to the power of the conservative party of M. José Aznar in 1996. However, with the return of the Socialists to the government in 2004, the Arab-Islamic community returned this question to the centre stage and dialogue with the socialists is continuing. According to official statistics, the

Arab-Islamic community is composed of about 600,000 people. This number doesn't take into account non registered persons. They are scattered in several cities - notably in the villages and small cities, where they work in agriculture, construction and other trades. There is a daily emigration from Morocco to Spain. It is often illegal emigration, using small boats, nick named the "death boats". They are crowded with many young adventurers whose desperate situation pushes them to search for another life and liberty. Often, these small boats capsize and their passengers drown, leaving a feeling of desolation and ➤



Arab shop in Madrid أحد المحلات التجارية لأحد أفراد الجالية العربية الإسلامية في مدريد



Dr. Kadhim Shamhood in one of his exhibitions

د. كاظم شمهود في أحد نشاطاته الفنية في مدريد

sadness. There is a characteristic phenomenon among the Moroccans: wherever they get settled, they construct associations and Islamic centers even if the community is small. Currently, there are hundreds of these associations and centers. Madrid has 42 Islamic associations. The most important is the Islamic Cultural Center, considered one of the biggest cultural centers of Europe, which is sponsored by Saudi Arabia. It is constructed according to the Islamic style, with components of modern architecture and includes an Andalusian-style mosque, a school for primary and secondary education, an immense library, showrooms and conference facilities and a restaurant. The second Cultural Center, is the Abou Baker Mosque, situated in Ana Stracio Hireo street, in Madrid. It was a modest association, created at the beginning of the 70s, by students from the Middle East. It is presided over by the thinker and Islamic researcher Rijaj Attatari, who is considered the representative of the Muslim community in Spain. Attatari studied medicine, then assumed the presidency of the Islamic association of Madrid. He undertook several studies on Islamic and western thought, as well as dialogue between civilizations. He continues to write and to give many valuable lectures.

institution. It is concerned with cooperation and cultural exchange between the Arab world and Spain and organises conferences and festivities. It also hosts other activities aimed at strengthening friendship and cooperation between nations. Similarly, the library of the Escorial, is one of the historic cultural centers that attracts scholars. It gathered thousands of Islamic manuscripts during the reign of King Philippe II (1556-1598) that escaped the fire of the Crusaders. But in 1761, fire destroyed three quarters of these manuscripts, that contain the best works of Arab-Islamic science in this country. Currently, there are 2000 manuscripts which illustrate the high level of scientists of Muslim Spain in different disciplines. The monastery of the Escorial is situated 60 km northwest of Madrid. Personalities and cultural activities As the Arab-Islamic community in Spain has grown and its younger members acquired competence in different fields of knowledge, some became active in transmitting Arab-Islamic culture and literature to Spanish society translating Spanish literature into Arabic. Among them is Mohammed Sobh, a poet, writer and professor at the University of Madrid who translated several Spanish works into Arabic. Said Alami, a journalist and novelist, is the author of the "Convention" and

There is also another cultural centre in Madrid, the Egyptian Arabian institute which has a rich library with thousands of works and welcomes cultural, political and artistic activities. It is considered one of the biggest Arab institutes in Europe. Also based in Madrid is the the Arabian Spanish institute - a cultural and scientific

"Meriame. He is currently working as a correspondent for the Kuwaiti Press Agency. Abdelhadi Saadoun and Mohsin Ar-Ramli, are among the most famous young Iraqi intellectuals: they run a publishing house and the Arabic magazine "Alwah".

Kamal Halawa, physician, writer and journalist, edits the magazine "Al Fajr", published in Spanish, in which I published my caricatures for several years. There is another magazine "Andalousse", published in Arabic, edited by two famous journalists: Nail Al Kahlout and Nadhmi Youssif. Their monthly magazine is dedicated to the issues concerning the Arab-Islamic community in Spain.

The Iraqi community in Spain is small but has many qualified members. Most of them are active in trade. A few years ago, they formed the "Ahl Al Bayte cultural Association" which organizes cultural and religious activities during Ramadan and Ashoura.

Another Iraqi grouping the "Iraqi Forum" organized various cultural activities: Iraqi Cultural Week, the Iraqi book fair and The Exhibition of Children's Drawings. They publish a periodical magazine "Al Mountada" (the forum). This grouping is presided over by the artist Rida Mohsin.

In the same way, many Arab-Moslem artists distinguished themselves in Spain: Ahmed Anouars of Egypt, Abdelaziz Abou Nali of Morocco, Faiq Hussein of Iraq, Mounir Salaam of Bangladesh. They all studied art at the Madrid University at the beginning of the 70s. There are other Arab artists, notably around 20 Iraqi painters. They formed artistic associations such as the "Baghdad Group for Contemporary Art".

They also published a number of magazines such as "Tajrib" (Experimentation), organized some exhibitions and participated with other Spanish artistic associations in numerous artistic activities.

Currently, many Arab painters meet in the "Big Square" to sell their canvases, notably caricatures. It is a historic place, founded by the Arabs outside the wall of Madrid. It was called "The Sitting down Square" where livestock and agricultural products were sold. Nowadays, it is one of Madrid's most beautiful tourist attractions surrounded by cafes and souvenir shops. It is also a place where national and religious festivities are held. ■