

> By: Habeeb Salloum

The new mosque of Granada

revives memories of the moors

“There is no more beautiful city in the world than Granada. Not even Cairo, Baghdad or Damascus with their wealth and splendour can compare with Granada.”



General view of the mosque

منظر عام للجامع

These words inscribed on the emblem of one of the last Arab royal families in Granada well describes this Moorish city at the end of the 15th century, just before its occupation by the armies of the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella.

In July 2003, in that once magnificent city of the Moors, the first mosque opened since Granada fell to the Christian armies 512 years ago. This splendid new mosque, overlooking the reddish 14th century Alhambra and located in the Albaicín Quarter of Granada, has raised some

Spanish eyebrows, but pleased others who are proud of the Muslim civilization the Arabs established in Spain. For 22 years the mosque-building project was plagued by local controversy and opposition, but all ended well with its successful completion, heralding a new dawn for the Spanish Muslims.

Since the Catholic monarchs captured this last stronghold of the Moors in 1492, putting an end to 800 years of Arab/Muslim presence on the Iberian Peninsula, Muslims from all over the world have mourned the

loss of al-Andalus - the Arab name of their paradise in the Iberian Peninsula. It began when the last Moorish king, Boabdil (Abu Abd Allah), rode out of Granada, after his defeat. He turned to view his beloved city for the last time saying, “When did misfortune ever equal mine.”

Today, “Allahu Akbar”, the Muslim call to prayer, rings out across the Albaicín, the last Muslim Quarter in Granada, for the first time since the medieval ages, calling the nearby faithful - from the 15,000 Muslims in Granada- to prayer. Spain’s Muslims, ▶

number between 500,000 to a million- depending on who is counting- say that after keeping their faith hidden for many years, they are now recognized as a part of the Spanish nation.

In the words of the Spanish Muslim community spokesman, Abdul Haqq Salaberria, "Islam has gone from being something hidden or invisible in Spanish society to something visible." The mosque has brought into focus the relationship between the Spanish nation, its Islamic history and the Muslims that live in Spain today.

The striking new Grand Granada Mosque is a structure of subtle beauty, incorporating designs found in the Great Mosque of Cordoba and the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. A white brick building, built on 2,100 square metres of land, with a red tile roof and a thick, square minaret, it is set in the middle of a public garden full of pink and purple touch-me-nots, orange chrysanthemums and midget palms. The imam climbs the 59 steps of the minaret and directs his call towards the Alhambra, the largest still standing Arab palace ever built in Europe. The mosque's prayer room is large enough to hold several hundred people. There is also a library and a study centre for scholars, located in separate outbuildings. The mosque offers a series of courses to both Muslims and non-Muslims on the Arabic language and other subjects such as education, law and medicine, and is planning on awarding its own degree in science.

Its extensive gardens will be open to the public, drawing in, it is expected, thousands of tourists. Without doubt, the call to prayer, so normal in the Muslim world and once heard in the Iberian Peninsula, will draw the curious from the West and the faithful from Muslim lands.

This new addition to Granada's skyline will serve as a spiritual home to 500 Spanish Muslims, the majority of whom have been won over to the faith in the course of the last three decades. These converts, no doubt, share a dream of a re-creation of the splendor and the greatness of the Arab/Muslim civilization in Andalusia.

They are hoping to remind the world of the vast cultural and intellectual contribution made by the Arabs, to art, architecture, astronomy, medicine, music, science, as



Gathering in the mosque's garden

جَمْع في حديقة الجامع



Education classes

دروس تعليمية



Taking Shahada

النطق بالشهادة



Eating together

الأكل سوية



Conference

مؤتمر



The Islamic Centre

المركز الإسلامي

well as learning. It will act as a pivotal point of the era in Europe when Christians, Muslims and Jews lived side-by-side-according to a good number of historians, an era which epitomized religious tolerance in medieval Europe.

The Muslim period in Spanish history saw the city of Cordoba become a cultural centre for all faiths, while schools and universities sprang up in cities across al-Andalus and agriculture, trade and industry flourished. The culturally fruitful co-existence - a rare commodity in European history - of the three religions that was to symbolize Spain for 800 years brought one of the richest historical epochs in Spanish history.

After the Christian re-conquest, religious intolerance and the expulsion of Muslims and Jews replaced the previously peaceful

co-existence. Through the centuries much of this prejudice, especially at official levels, faded and the Arab/Muslim age began to be accepted as part and parcel of Spanish history. In the last few decades, the Spanish government has set up many cultural foundations to promote the country's Moorish heritage and serve as a link between Spain and Arab countries. According to Spanish law, Islam is recognized as 'a historic religion' and the second religion of Spanish nationals.

It is hoped that the Grand Granada Mosque, a symbol of a return to Islam among some Spanish people, will help in erasing the malicious concept of Islam as a foreign and immigrant religion in Spain. The builders of the Mosque, the Federación Española de Diócesis Islámicas, are striving for the

recognition of Spanish Muslims as part of the Spanish nation.

Spanish Muslims do not want their religion to be perceived as the first step in re-conquering or recreating the al-Andalus of the past. They are eager to promote a co-existence movement leading to inter-religious dialogue in the city and the whole country. Already the mosque's insistence on a harmonious relationship with other religions has gone some way towards calming the fears of the authorities and the population in general about the aim of the Spanish Muslims. Spain has an important Islamic heritage, which has been ignored for centuries and the Granadan Muslims and their mosque could be a spark in leading to recognition among the public of the glorious Arab/Muslim era in Spanish history. ■