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Omri Elmaleh

Tel Aviv University

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Frontier and Its Origins



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Together Yet Apart The Institutional Rift Among Lebanese-Muslims in a South American Triple Frontier and Its Origins

Omri Elmaleh

Abstract. - On October 1988, the first mosque in the Triple Frontier between Argentina-Brazil-Paraguay was inaugurated. The name given to the mosque rekindled old and modern disputes amongst local Lebanese-Muslims in the region and led to the creation of parallel religious and cultural institutions. Based on oral history and local press,¹ the article illustrates how the inauguration of the mosque and its aftermath reflected an Islamic dissension and Lebanese inter-religious and ethnic tensions that were "exported" to the Triple Frontier during the 1980s. The article also argues that the sectarian split among the leadership of the organized community, was not shared by the rank and file and did not reflect their daily practices.

Keywords: Organized Community, Lebanese Civil War, Sunni-Shiite Schism, Transnationalism, Diaspora.

Resumen. - En octubre de 1988 se inauguró la primera mezquita en la Triple Frontera entre Argentina, Brasil y Paraguay, cuyo nombre despertó disputas antiguas entre los distintos miembros de la comunidad libanesa musulmana de la región, lo que finalmente derivó en la creación de instituciones culturales y religiosas paralelas. Este artículo se basa tanto en historia oral como en la prensa local para ilustrar cómo es que la inauguración de la mezquita y sus consecuencias reflejaban en realidad un profundo desacuerdo entre dos escuelas del Islam, así como tensiones intra religiosas y étnicas del Líbano que fueron "importadas" a la Triple Frontera durante los años 80. Este artículo también argumenta que la brecha ocurrió entre

¹ The prominent newspaper throughout the 1980's, which was published on the Brazilian side of the T.F, was *Nosso Tempo*. The popular *A Gazeta do Iguaçu* newspaper was founded only in November 1988. On the Paraguayan side, people relied on the national press (*La Nación*, *Hoy*, *Última Hora*), in the absence of local press at the time.

los dirigentes comunitarios, pero no llegó a los miembros de la comunidad ni se vio reflejada en sus vidas diarias.

Palabras clave: Comunidad organizada, guerra civil Libanesa, división sunita-chiíta, transnacionalismo, diáspora.

On March 20, 1983, the cornerstone of the first mosque in the Brazilian city of Foz do Iguaçu, at the tri-border meeting point between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina was laid.² The mosque, a first of its kind in the region, was constructed as a collective effort of several Lebanese immigrants who wanted to establish a religious and educational compound featuring a house of prayer and a school for the service of local Shiites and Sunnis mostly Lebanese.³ The name chosen for the mosque led to a fierce sectarian debate among its leadership and eventually to a split that led to the establishment of a rival Shiite mosque.

The analytic framework of this article involves several concepts. One is diaspora. Although many scholars attempted to offer a comprehensive definition of diaspora, it remains a controversial term with a wide range of interpretations. Roza Tsagarousianou's understanding of diaspora, which emphasizes continuity of transnational migration rather than the attempt to create a sense of an uprooted or exiled group,⁴ corresponds to the case study of the Lebanese diaspora at the Triple Frontier.

As with diaspora, the meaning of transnationalism is also inconsistent and appears in many contexts. Thomas Faist's definition of the transnational situation called attention to the degree of overlap between the two categories, and the inflation in meaning it generates, making it difficult to understand social realities.⁵ Transnationalism through the eyes of Glick-Shiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton is "a process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement",⁶ and it is how

² "A Casa de Alá e Maomé": Revista Oeste, 32: 4 (n.d.), p. 29.

³ The Triple Frontier is also home to other Middle Easterners such as Palestinians, Syrians and Egyptians, but the estimates show that more than 90% of the Muslims in the region are Lebanese.

⁴ Roza Tsagarousianou, "Rethinking the Concept of Diaspora. Mobility, Connectivity and Communication in a Globalized World": Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, 1:1 (2004), pp. 52-65.

⁵ Thomas Faist, "Diaspora and Transnationalism. What Kind of Dance Partners?": Rainer Bauböck / Thomas Faist (eds.); Diaspora and Transnationalism Concepts, Theories and Methods, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010, p. 9.

⁶ Nina Glick Shiller \ Linda Basch \ Cristina Szanton-Blanc, "Transnationalism. A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration": Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences (1992), pp. 1-24. To a broader discussion on Transnationalism, see: Steven Vertovec, "Transnationalism and Identity": Journal of Ethnic and Migration

the project of the first religious and educational compound at the Triple Frontier should be conceived. An additional key term developed by the same authors is "Trans-migrants", who "are immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state".⁷ This definition fits well with the leaders of the organized community at the Triple Frontier, both Sunnis and Shiites, and their attempts to determine the character of their community according to their visions. In this aspect the institutional partition within the Muslim community in the Triple Frontier could fall under the "Ideological Option" suggested by Jacques Waardenburg which is "Identifying with or opposing the 'official Islam' of a particular home country" as Sunni and Shiite community leaders had their own religious and ideological vision.⁸ This process took shape in a profound way in the Triple Frontier during the 1980's when many Lebanese Shi'ite were enthusiastic about the Iranian Revolution and impressed with its leader, some of their Sunni countrymen admired the Libyan Revolution and praised its leader Muammar Gaddafi.

The Muslim trajectory to the Americas and the Caribbean goes back decades, some would say centuries, yet it is not properly addressed in the historiography of Latin American Mahjar (the Arabic-speaking diaspora)⁹ studies.¹⁰ Most related publications refer to the migration of Levantine Arabs at the turn of the nineteenth century under the Ottoman Empire, and the first half of the twentieth century during the French and British Mandates.¹¹ Several studies were published in the past three decades foregrounding the field of study of Muslim migration to Northern and Latin America. In the 2016 edited

Studies, 27:4 (2001), pp. 573-582; William Robinson, "Beyond Nation-State Paradigms. Globalization, Sociology, and the Challenge of Transnational Studies": *Sociological Forum*, 13:4 (1998), pp. 561-594.

⁷ Nina Glick Shiller \ Linda Basch \ Cristina Szanton-Blanc, "From Immigrant To Transmigrant. Theorizing Transnational Migration": *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68: 1 (1995), pp. 48-63.

⁸ Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism (Key Ideas)*, London & New York: Routledge, 2009, (1st edition), pp. 154-155.

⁹ See definition in: Hans Wehr \ J. Milton Cowan (ed.), *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. Arabic-English, Spoken Language Services Inc., U.S.*; 2001 (4th edition), p. 1195.

¹⁰ Velvet Rosemberg Fuentes, "El estudio del Islam en América Latina. Trabajos académicos (1980-2010)": *Península*, 11: 2 (2016), pp. 123-141.

¹¹ Camila Pastor, *The Mexican Mahjar. Transnational Maronites, Jews, and Arabs Under the French Mandate*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017; Stacy D. Fahrenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente. The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019; Steven Hyland, *More Argentine Than You. Arabic-Speaking Immigrants in Argentina*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017.

volume “Crescent over another Horizon[...]” the writers overturn the conventional perception of Muslim communities in the New World, arguing that their characterization as “minorities” obscures the interplay of ethnicity and religion that continues to foster transnational ties.¹² In Brazil and Argentina, where the largest Muslim Latin-American diasporas are currently located, we see a more prominent body of scholarship.¹³

In order to understand the origins of the local leaders’ separatist discourse and the institutional breakdown within the Lebanese diaspora at the Triple Frontier we must address two important contexts. First, Islam’s politico-theological schism between the Sunnis and Shiites, and, second, the geopolitical contexts of the Middle East and the Triple Frontier, which were the backdrop of the transnational identity of many Lebanese immigrants residing at the frontier.

From the Beqaa Valley to the Paraná River

During the second half of the twentieth century, the Triple Frontier became a desirable destination for many immigrants. It is located at the confluence of the Paraná and Iguazu rivers, which connect Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. With a cosmopolitan population of around 800,000 people from more than seventy different nationalities, the Triple Frontier is made of three cities linked by bridges. Foz do Iguazu, which dates back to the 19th Century and sits on the Brazilian side of the border, on the eastern bank of the Paraná River; Ciudad Presidente Stroessner¹⁴, founded in 1957 across the Paraná River in

¹² Maria del Mar Logroño Narbona \ Paulo G. Pinto \ John Tofik Karam (eds.), *Crescent over Another Horizon. Islam in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015.

¹³ In Brazil: Hilu da Rocha Pinto \ Paulo Gabriel, “El islam en Brasil. Elementos para una antropología histórica”: *Revista de Historia Internacional* 12:45 (2011), pp. 3-21; Silvia Montenegro, “Identidades muçulmanas no Brasil. Entre o arabismo e islamização”: *Revue Lusotopie*, 2 (2002), pp. 59-79; Silvia Montenegro \ Fatiha Benlabbah (eds.), *Musulmanes en Brasil. Comunidades, instituciones e identidades*, Buenos Aires: UNR Editora, 2013. In Argentina: Velvet Rosemberg Fuentes, “La sociogeografía latinoamericana del Islam en el presente siglo”: *Revista de Estudios de Asia y África* 47:147-1 (2012), pp. 133-151; Silvia Montenegro, “El Islam en la Argentina contemporánea. Estrategias institucionales y modos de estar en el espacio nacional”: *Estudios Sociológicos*, 32:96 (2014), pp. 539-617; Gladys Jozami, “The Manifestation of Islam in Argentina”: *The Americas*, 53: 1 (1996), pp. 67-85.

¹⁴ In 1973, renamed Ciudad Presidente Stroessner and was appointed as the capital of the province of Alto Paraná. Only in 1989, with the fall of Stroessner's military dictatorship, the modern name was changed to Ciudad del Este.

Paraguay; and Puerto Iguazú on the Argentine side, south of the border and the Iguazú River.

Since 1965, Ciudad Presidente Stroessner and Foz do Iguacu have been linked by the "Puente de la Amistad" (Friendship Bridge), however, no significant integration has ever been developed with Puerto Iguazú. This, paired with Paraguay's tendency to distance itself from Argentina's economic patronage, and its proximity to Brazil's sphere of influence,¹⁵ positioned the Amistad Bridge as the axis of the economic engine of the Triple Frontier and drew most immigrants away from the southern city. Such was the case of the Lebanese Muslim newcomers, who formed one of the largest and most dominant communities in the area. By 2018 it comprised between 15,000 to 20,000 members.¹⁶ There is hardly any historical research on the interplay between ethnicity and transnationalism among Muslims in the Triple Frontier. There are a very few publications, most of which apply the social science perspective, and are either too general¹⁷ confined to a certain topic or one side

¹⁵ See: Werner Baer / Melissa Birch, "The International Economic Relations of a Small Country. The Case Study of Paraguay": *Economic Development and Cultural Change* (1987), pp. 601-627; Zulma Espínola González, *Historia económica del Paraguay*, Asunción: El Lector, 2010, pp. 35-56; Werner Baer / Melissa H. Birch, "Expansion of the Economic Frontier. Paraguayan Growth in the 1970s": *World Development*, 12: 8 (1984), pp. 183-198; Werner Baer \ Luis Breuer, "From Inward- to Outward-Oriented Growth. Paraguay in the 1980s": *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 28: 3 (1986), pp. 125-140.

¹⁶ Due to the free passage of borders without entry and exit registration in the absence of official data, accurate numbers cannot be determined, see: Jackson Lima, "O Blog de Foz": A Mesquita Omar Ibn-Al-Khattab e a comunidade árabe (sexta-feira, 8 de abril de 2016) <http://blogdefoz.blogspot.com/2016/04/mesquita.html> [09-11-2019], John T. Karam, "Crossing the Americas. The U.S. War on Terror and Arab Cross-Border Mobilizations in A South American Frontier Region": *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 31: 2 (2011), p. 255, n. 23; Silvia Montenegro / Verónica Giménez Béliveau, *La Triple Frontera. Globalización y Construcción del Espacio*, Madrid: Miño y Dávila, 2006, p. 24, n.9; Interview with Ali Al-Haider, Ciudad del Este, 01.12.2016.

¹⁷ Fernando Rabossi, "Terrorist Frontier Cell or Cosmopolitan Commercial Hub? The Arab and Muslim Presence at the Border of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina": Paul Amar (ed.), *The Middle East and Brazil. Perspectives on the New Global South*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 92-118; Fernando Rabossi, "Árabes e muçulmanos em Foz do Iguacu e Ciudad del Este. Notas para uma re-interpretação": Giralda Seyferth et al. (eds.), *Mundos em movimento. Ensaios sobre migrações*, Santa Maria: Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, 2007, pp. 287-312; Aline Arruda, "Direitos humanos e exercício de religião. Muçulmanos na trílice fronteira. Brasil – Argentina – Paraguai": *REMHU – Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana*, 16:31 (2008), pp. 277-284; Aline Arruda, "Diferenciação e estereotipização. Libaneses na fronteira Brasil-Paraguai": *Univ. Rel. Int., Brasília*, 5 (2007), pp. 43-65.

of the border.¹⁸ Nonetheless it is impossible to discuss the topic without mentioning John T. Karam¹⁹ and Silvia Montenegro's²⁰ pioneering studies regarding various aspects of the Muslim diaspora in the border crossing.

Prosperity in in the Paraná River, Chaos in Land of the Cedars²¹

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s and the 1970s, no more than several hundred Lebanese immigrated to the region. The overwhelming majority were Sunni, most of them from the Beqaa valley or, more precisely, from three neighboring villages: Baalul, Qaraoun, and Lala. Members of the Sunni Barakat clan were among the first to arrive and immediately integrated into the peddling, clothes, and haberdashery businesses. Within a year, representatives of other Sunni-Lebanese clans, including Rahal, Omairi, Sleiman, Osman and Juma'a arrived as well. It was not long before these settlers set up permanent residence and shops on the main avenue of Foz do Iguaçu. These and other families would later become the founding generation of the Lebanese community at the Triple Frontier.²²

¹⁸ For example, see: Aretusa Barakat, "A reconstrução de identidade libanesa em Foz do Iguaçu": Blasius Debaldo \ Solange Portz, *História na fronteira. Pesquisas temáticas locais e regionais*, Foz do Iguaçu: Editora Uniamérica, 2008, pp. 143-162; Regina Coelimachado e Silva, "Reordenação de identidades de imigrantes árabes em Foz do Iguaçu": *Campinas*, 47: 2 (2008), pp. 357-373.

¹⁹ John T. Karam, "The Lebanese Diaspora at the Tri-Border and the Redrawing of South American Geopolitics, 1950-1992": *Mashriq & Mahjar*, 1: 1 (2013), pp. 55-84; "Crossing the Americas. The U.S. War on Terror and Arab Cross-Border Mobilizations in a South American Frontier Region": *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 31: 2 (2011), pp. 251-266; *idem*, "Anti-Semitism From the Standpoint of its Arab Victims in a South American Border Zone": *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 6: 2 (2011), pp. 143-167.

²⁰ Silvia Montenegro, "Imigrantes árabes na fronteira sul-americana: narrativas de trabalho, religião e futuros imaginados": *Rever*, 13: 1 (2013), pp. 9-30; *idem*, "Sense of Community Among Muslims in the Brazil-Paraguay Border. Narratives of Belonging and Generational Differences": *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 33: 3 (2018), pp. 509-526; Diana Araujo Pereira, "Definiendo fronteras culturales. Narrativas de experiencias entre inmigrantes árabes en la Triple Frontera": *idem*, (ed.), *Cartografía imaginária da Tríplice Fronteira*, São Paulo: Dobra Editorial, 2014, pp. 31-48; Silvia Montenegro, "Écoles arabo-musulmanes à la frontière du Brésil et du Paraguay. Reproduction culturelle et différences générationnelles": *Présence musulmane au Brésil, Dossier Présence musulmane au Brésil*, 14 (2018).

²¹ The national symbol of Lebanon is green cedar (Lebanon Cedar) decorating its flag and coat of arms.

²² Interviews with Mohammad Ibrahim Barakat, Foz do Iguaçu, 04.12.2016 and 16.09.2019; A documentary on *Árabes no Paraná* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFEnXwHT3ns>, min. 1:28-2:00 [09-11-2019].

They first settled in Foz do Iguacu, but soon found themselves among the founders of the new Paraguayan city. Some Lebanese who saw the potential of the new Paraguayan border town crossed the river and established their shops along the main and only street.²³ Thus, while some Lebanese in Foz do Iguacu exported Brazilian merchandise to Paraguay, others in Ciudad Presidente Stroessner imported consumer products and goods, which they later sold to Brazilian consumers who crossed the Friendship Bridge on a daily basis. At the end of the 1960s, the unidirectional movement towards Ciudad Presidente Stroessner increased with the encouragement of the Paraguayan government, which established a mechanism to ease the trade of imported goods, improve housing conditions and ensure freedom of movement for Brazilian citizens in the city.

The following decade witnessed a demographic boom and intense urbanization of the Triple Frontier with the construction of the Itaipu International Hydroelectric Dam on the Paraná River between Brazil and Paraguay.²⁴ These conditions propelled the arrival of more Lebanese immigrants, amongst them were some of today's wealthiest merchants, owners of large commercial galleries and corporations throughout the region.²⁵ For example, the Jebai family, who established the Jebai Center, the first Shopping Mall in the area; the Mannah brothers, who built the Petisquera Shopping Center; and the Hammoud family who would come to own one of the monumental symbols of the Paraguayan city, the Monalisa Shopping Center.

While in the Triple Frontier the relatively small number of emigrants from Lebanon throughout the 1950s to the 1970s enjoyed economic mobility, the situation in Land of the Cedars was much more complex. Despite the fact that these decades were marked by a relative economic prosperity and religious coexistence, they foreshadowed the early stages of a long-lasting collapse of the Lebanese state.²⁶ When the country deteriorated into civil war in 1975, emigration from Lebanon grew, including to the Triple Frontier. The Muslim population grew from no more than 200 in the early 1970s to about a thousand

²³ Omri Elmaleh, “¡Bienvenidos a la Triple Frontera! La generación fundacional de la colectividad libanesa-musulmana entre Argentina, Brasil y Paraguay, 1950-1975”: *Contra Relatos desde el Sur*, 13:15 (2017), pp. 5-16.

²⁴ See: Andrew Nickson, “The Itaipu Hydro-Electric Project. The Paraguayan Perspective”: *Bulletin of the Society for Latin American Studies*, 2: 1 (1982), pp. 1-20.

²⁵ Alejandro Hamed-Franco, *Los árabes y sus descendientes en el Paraguay. Un largo recorrido histórico*, Asunción: ARANDURÁ Editorial, 2002, pp. 207-218; José Daniel Nasta, *Árabes en el Paraguay*, Asunción: s/e, 2015, p. 51.

²⁶ See: Farid El Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon, 1967-1976*, Boston, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2000, chaps. 5-16; Kamal S. Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War. Lebanon 1958-1976*, Delmar, N.Y.: Caravan Books, 1976.

families or four thousand people by the late 1980s.²⁷ Whereas by the 1970s the vast majority of emigrants from Lebanon were Sunnis, the majority of the newcomers to the Triple Frontier during the late 1970s and the 1980s were Shiites from the Beqaa Valley, South Lebanon and the slums of Beirut. In the mid-1990s, there was an equal number of Sunnis and Shiites of Lebanese origin.²⁸

“Those who build mosques, love God”:²⁹ Creating an Institutional Infrastructure

A common phenomenon among diasporic communities is the development of social networks of support that help members of the group maintain and strengthen the connection with the homeland, and even with a particular region. Most of these networks develop during the early stages of the settlement process until ethnic and religious institutions representing the newly established populations emerge.

In the case of the Lebanese at the Triple Frontier, the first such institution was the Arab Union Club (Clube União Árabe), a non-religious culturally oriented organization founded in 1962. It was the first official organization to represent the few dozen Lebanese immigrants living in the tri-border area. In 1981, a group of Lebanese Sunnis founded the Centre for Islamic Culture and Charity of Foz do Iguacu (Centro Cultural Beneficiente Islâmico do Foz do Iguacu, hereinafter CICCFC).³⁰ The CICCFC would later play an essential role in the cultural and social life of the Lebanese community in the region, both in educational efforts as well as in attempts to preserve cultural and social ties with Lebanon. Even though it was the first organization established within the Lebanese community in the Triple Frontier to use the religious element as a common denominator, it didn't manifest religious practices and the services it offered (such as courses in Arabic and food distribution for the poor) were given on a non-religious basis.³¹

²⁷ “Em nome de Alá e Maome”: *Nosso Tempo* (14/10/1988), p. 1.

²⁸ Karam, “Anti-semitism”, p. 152; Rabossi, “Árabes”, p. 302.

²⁹ Title of Greetings on behalf of the secretary of the Islamic Center for Culture and Charity at the inauguration ceremony of the mosque, see: “Em nome de Alá e Maome”, p. 2.

³⁰ “Colônia árabe. 60 anos de Foz do Iguacu”: *100fronteiras*, 44 (2009), p. 61; Rabossi, “Árabes”, p. 300.

³¹ See for example: “Aprenda a língua Árabe”: *Nosso Tempo* (17/04/1982), p. 10; “Mais de mil pessoas foram buscar comida”: *Nosso Tempo* (14/07/1983), p. 7; “Sociedade islâmica distribui alimentos”: *A Gazeta do Iguacu* (06/06/1990).

By 1981, thirty-one years after the arrival of the first Lebanese-Muslims in the Triple Frontier, the community numbered more than a thousand members, but a mosque was yet to be built.³² For many years, Lebanese-Muslims would pray in large halls or rooms inside the commercial hub of Ciudad Presidente Stroessner or on the Central Avenue of Foz do Iguacu, which had been allocated for this purpose. As reflected by the words of Muhammad Juma'a, former spokesman of the CICCFC:

"In 1981, an Egyptian sheik arrived in Foz do Iguacu. He established an improvised mosque on the second floor of a building next today's Nissei pharmacy, right across from Fouad Center (Av. Juscelino Kubitschek and Rua Bartolomeu de Gusmão) [...] Al-Azhar³³ paid him a salary..."³⁴

According to the testimonies of several interviewees, Sunnis and Shiites used to pray together in these improvised mosques during weekdays and on Friday's Congregational Prayer in particular.³⁵

Two years later, these religious practices were no longer confined to private initiatives, but rather gained publicity with the announcement the construction of the first Mosque and Muslim school compound in the area. The CICCFC, which had been conceived to strengthen the Lebanese-Muslim identity of the community, led the initiative and made it its top priority. In the school, it was stated, Arabic culture and language would be taught alongside Portuguese. The CICCFC managed to raise generous donations both from members of the community, Sunnis and Shiites alike, and from Sunni Muslim countries,³⁶ and the municipality of Foz do Iguacu provided them a development site at the heart of the Jardim Central neighborhood.

A ceremony laying the cornerstone of the project took place on March 20, 1983. About 300 members of the community gathered to celebrate the occasion. Among the participants were prominent figures in the community, Sheik Ahmed Muhairi from the Rio de Janeiro Mosque, who spoke on behalf of the religious attendees, and the President of the City Council, Arialba Freire,

³² "A comunidade Arabe de Foz do Iguacu": *Nosso Tempo* (28/04/1981), pp. 1, 6.

³³ A Muslim academy in Cairo (Egypt), considered today the most important institution of Sunni Islam.

³⁴ Interview with Mohammad Juma'a, Foz do Iguacu, 15/09/2017.

³⁵ Interview with Mohammad Juma'a, Foz do Iguacu, 15/09/2017; Interview with Ali Mohammad Osman, Foz do Iguacu, 16/09/2017; Interview with Kamal Osman, former Secretary of CICCFC, Foz do Iguacu, 17/02/2019; Interview with Asem Dabage, Director of Colégio Árabe Brasileiro in Foz do Iguacu, Foz do Iguacu, 18/02/2019.

³⁶ Hikmat Nasser, one of the first Shiites to arrive in the Triple Frontier was among the funders as well as Sunni Ali Said Rahal, the first Lebanese to cross the Friendship Bridge to Paraguay, who donated one of the minarets. "A Casa de Alá e Maomé": *Revista Oeste*, 4:32 (n.d.), p. 30; "A comunidade Arabe de Foz do Iguacu", pp. 1, 6; Interview with Roberto Apelbaum, Foz do Iguacu, 27/1/2016.

who saluted the community in the name of the city, and emphasized the "honorable role" that the Arab community played in its development. The most exciting moment of the ceremony was when the religious representatives were invited to lay the cornerstone, among them Sheik Ahmed Ismail Atie of Curitiba, who, in a gesture of love and faith, kissed the stone.³⁷ Sunni Muslim clerics from various Brazilian cities³⁸ and ambassadors of several Sunni Arab countries in Brazil, attended. Equally important, as we will see below, is that most, if not all of the Muslim attendants, were affiliated with the Sunni school of Islam, including the entire leadership of the CICCFF.³⁹



Greeting on behalf of Kamal Osman, Secretary of the CICCFF (Jackson Lima, A Mesquita Omar Ibn-Al-Khattab, Note 16).

³⁷ "Com embaixadores e sheiks é iniciada construção": *Nosso Tempo* (30/03/1983 - 06/04/1983), p. 4.

³⁸ Ali Rifai - São Paulo; Ahmed Mohairi - Rio de Janeiro; Ahmed Ismail Atie - Curitiba; Abd al-Nasser al-Khatib - Paranaguá; Hussein al-Zokdi - President of the Confederation of Islamic Associations in Brazil.

³⁹ Among the members of the Board of Directors of the Islamic Center for Culture and Charity: Ali Said Rahal - President; Mohammad Ali Omairi - Vice President; Kamal Osman - Second Secretary; Muhammad Barakat - Second Treasurer; and Muhammad Juma'a - Spokesman.



Sheik Atie kissing the stone (Personal archive of Menzer Osman).

The building of the mosque garnered the curiosity not only of the Muslims living in the area, as a newspaper article published in Foz do Iguçu stated:

"The day will soon be upon us when tourists visiting the Iguçu Waterfalls and other points of interest at the Triple Frontier will have a new sight to enjoy: a Muslim Mosque in Foz do Iguçu. The building will look like the famous Al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem, with an eighteen meters high golden dome, the minarets will reach a height of thirty-three meters, and when they are completed, they will resemble those of the Great Mosque of Mecca, in Saudi Arabia".⁴⁰

Another article read:

"The mosque will be more than just a place of worship. It will also host a research center, a school, and means of expression and preservation of Muslim and Lebanese culture [...] a universal symbol of Foz do Iguçu, a city inhabited by communities of all kinds and beliefs".⁴¹

As is often the case, the construction took longer than expected. According to the original plans, the inauguration of the mosque was to take place a year after laying the foundation stone,⁴² but it took more than half a decade to see the building completed. That did not keep a group of believers from hosting Friday prayers at the construction site throughout the years.⁴³

⁴⁰ "Mesquita árabe em Foz": *Nosso Tempo* (17/08/1984-23/08/1984), p. 14.

⁴¹ "Mesquita poderá ser inaugurada em abril": *Nosso Tempo* (03/01/1986), p. 2.

⁴² "Com embaixadores e sheiks", p. 4.

⁴³ "Mesquita árabe em Foz", p. 14.



The Inauguration Ceremony (Note 37).



Poster of the Mosque (Note 37).

When the complex was finally inaugurated, “Nosso Tempo” published an eight-page article entitled “In the name of Allah and Muhammed”, which revealed the name of the new mosque and school:

“The work went on for almost six years until the great celebration was finally held last Friday, October 7th, 1988. Once the symbolic ribbon was cut, the inaugural ceremony followed with a prayer and ended with a celebratory lunch [...] the mosque is named after (‘Umar) al-Khattab because of its importance to Islam, because Muslims regard him as ‘Leader of the Faithful’, and the school is named after ‘Ali ibn abi Talib as he is the Gate of Knowledge’.”⁴⁴

There was no indication in the report that the names chosen stirred any controversy.

On the long-awaited day of the inauguration of the mosque, Kamal Osman, Secretary of the CICCFF, gave the opening speech:

⁴⁴ “Em nome de Alá e Maome”, p. 1.

“Here, in this place, before God and the noble dignitaries present, in March 1983, we laid the cornerstone of this mosque. It was then that the Muslim community of Foz do Iguaçu set a new goal for itself, a goal we accomplish today. It is probably one of the happiest moments of our lives, a moment to remember, a memory to share with our children with pride, for what we have built here, in this wonderful land of Brazil, is a worthy legacy that we can leave behind us. We built a mosque so that we may find within it spiritual peace, and next to it a school, which will definitely bring light to thousands of people (...)”.⁴⁵

From Osman's speech, we get the impression that the cultural-religious grounds were intended to become the core of the institutionalized community, as well as a source of unity for all Muslims at the Triple Frontier. However, this is not what happened.

Similar to the 1983 ceremony of the laying of the cornerstone, a long line of dignitaries attended the inaugural ceremony. All of them, without exception, were Sunnis. Among the participants were ambassadors, consuls and other representatives of Sunni Muslim countries in Brazil, merchants and well-known figures of the Muslim community in Brazil, respected government officials and religious figures.

Lebanese Shiites living at the Triple Frontier and their dignitaries were noticeably absent. Clearly, the Shiites did not express any identification with the new mosque or with the nearby school, and their absence seemed to express a public manifestation of disavowing the project. In 1988, a few months after the Sunni mosque inauguration, the Shiite Islamic Beneficent Society (Sociedade Beneficiente Islâmica) was established. Several years later, it built the first Shiite mosque at the Triple Frontier, and named it after the Imam Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian Islamic Revolution.⁴⁶

From various testimonies by members of the community, we learn that the vision of the organized community as expressed by Kamal Osman had failed – and is not to revive any time soon. According to Ali Muhammad Osman, a member of the founding generation of the Lebanese community, there were attempts to pray together, but the Shiites always preferred not to.⁴⁷ Likewise, Aasem Dabage the Director of the of Colégio Árabe Brasileiro in Foz do Iguaçu, mentioned: “According to what I heard the Shiites kept insisting conducting the Ashura rituals in the construction site although it was agreed that the Mosque will be used only for praying”.⁴⁸ The rift was so deep that the

⁴⁵ “Em nome de Alá e Maome”, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Both the Islamic Beneficent Society and the Mosque are located in Av. José Maria de Brito 929, in adjacent to the Sunni Mosque. See Society's website: <http://www.islamfoz.com.br> [09-11-2019].

⁴⁷ Interview with Ali Mohammad Osman, Foz do Iguaçu, 16/09/2017.

⁴⁸ Interview with Aasem Dabage, Director of Colégio Árabe Brasileiro in Foz do Iguaçu, Foz do Iguaçu, 18/02/2019.

current vice president of the CICCF, Faisal Ismail's, answer to the potential feasibility of a common prayer compound in the 1980's was very clear: "No way! We mind our own businesses as well as they do. These are two different religions".⁴⁹

This is where we must ask why the project to build a communal space of religious worship and education around which members of the Lebanese diaspora would gather, led to the opposite outcome. The institutional breakdown within the Lebanese diaspora at the Triple Frontier was a distant reflection of an ancient Islamic theological dispute and of the complicated and exacerbating sectarianism of modern Lebanese society.

"Civil War" in the Islamic world – and in Lebanon

The dispute over the succession of the Prophet is the most profound disagreement in the Islamic world, as it spawned two parallel religious cultures. The word Shi'a means "adherents" or "collective," and it refers to those first Muslims who became followers of 'Ali Ibn abi Talib, and who held the conviction that he and his descendants were the only rightful authorities to rule the Ummah (Muslim community).⁵⁰ Indeed, at the heart of the Shiite doctrine is a principle of loyalty and devotion to the Imam, a religious leader who is a descendent of 'Ali's marriage to Fatimah, Prophet Muhammad's daughter.⁵¹

The other side of this conviction is the utter denial of the antagonists who deposed 'Ali and his descendants, the most notorious of whom is 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Khalifah after the death of the Prophet, and the instigator behind the attempts to disinherit 'Ali. Shiite literature and poetry are rich in plenty of disdainful nicknames and lines of contempt accusing him, amongst many things, of hitting Fatimah in the belly, causing her to abort 'Ali's unborn child, Muhammad's grandson. Hostility towards 'Umar exacerbated with every Shiite generation, to the point of refusing to name their children after him, but naming their animals after him instead, and even celebrating the anniversary of his murder by burning a doll in his image.⁵²

Thus, the Shiite etiological myth is one of Sunni aggression, led by the bearer of the name chosen for the very first mosque at the Triple Frontier. In

⁴⁹ Interview with Faisal Ismail, Foz do Iguacu, 12/09/2017.

⁵⁰ See: Barnaby Rogerson, *The Heirs of The Prophet Muhammad. And the Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism*, London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2010; Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁵¹ Etan Kolberg, "The Shia. Ali's party": *Zmanim* 8 (1982), p. 18.

⁵² Kolberg, "The Shia", pp. 18-19.

so choosing, the Sunni elite in Foz do Iguaçú was looking to exclude Shiites from the mosque.⁵³ Not only does the choice of the name of the mosque raise questions, but also the name given to the school alongside it after Imam 'Ali. On the one hand, it is possible that the choice was an attempt to appease the Shiite and create an inclusive religious space for all the members of the community. On the other, it can be interpreted as the expression of an implicit hierarchy imposed by the Sunnis, whereby they appropriated the mosque and relegated the Shiites to the school, a building of secondary importance in comparison to the mosque.

The insurmountable theological schism between Shiites and Sunnis is but one reason for the ultimate split among the Lebanese organized community of the Triple Frontier. While the theological disagreements were indeed unbridgeable, it was still hoped that the "Lebaneseness" could act as a common denominator that allows communal cohesion. This hope was frustrated as well in the face of the civil war in Lebanon. The existence of modern Lebanon relied greatly on the ability of the different religious groups to live side by side in full recognition of each other's strength, which placed a glass ceiling above the territorial ambitions of each group. This glass ceiling shattered on April of 1975, together with the Lebanese model of coexistence.

The history of modern Lebanon tells the tale of a small Arab country in the Middle East, composed of four main religious groups: Christians (headed by the Maronites), Druze, and Shiite and Sunni Muslims. It took its current shape after the First World War as the State of "Greater Lebanon", commanded by the French Mandate, and commissioned to become the national home to its largest ethnos, the Maronites.⁵⁴ Ethnicity, or more particularly, a person's religious background, became a pivotal element to the political system of modern Lebanon. As can be seen in their 1926 Constitution, parliamentary representation was regulated by an ethnical cap with a 5:6 ratio that tilted the scales in favor of the Christians at the expense of Muslims and Druze alike.⁵⁵

Before the Civil War, Lebanon's existence and prosperity depended on the ability of the two majorities, Maronites and Sunnis, to compromise. This approach was defined in what is known as the "National Pact of 1943", the year Lebanon freed itself from French reigns and declared its independence.

⁵³ Karam. "Anti-semitism", p. 152; and four interviews with members of the community that asked fully anonymous.

⁵⁴ The demographic balance in 1920 stood on 54% Christians and 46% Muslims (22% Sunni and 18% Shiite, Druze were the rest), see: Yosef Olmert, *Middle East Minorities: Minority - Majority Relations in a Changing Society*, Ra'anana: Ministry of Defence, 1986, p. 26, (Hebrew).

⁵⁵ Meir Zamir, *Lebanon's Quest. The Road to Statehood, 1926-1939*, London & New York: I.B. Tauris; Reprint edition, 2000, pp. 28-83.

The Pact was an oral contract detailing agreements and compromises between Maronites and Sunni Muslims. The Pact arrogated the data gathered by the 1932 census to give the most important roles in the country for the majorities. The Presidency and Prime Ministry were given to the Maronite and the Sunnis respectively, while the Shiites were given the politically insignificant position of Speaker of the Parliament.⁵⁶

The first quarter of a century after its independence, particularly under the leadership of President Chehab (1958-1964), was seen as Lebanon's Golden Age. So much so, that the country and its capital came to be regarded as "Switzerland and Paris of the Middle East".⁵⁷ Unfortunately, Lebanon's model of co-existence was merely a scaffold with little to nothing keeping the many parts aligned, and missing a crucial element - a mechanism for conflict resolution.⁵⁸

As time went by, the changing ambitions of the parties in power aggravated the tension between the different factions. The Maronites wanted to preserve Christian hegemony, which conflicted with the strengthening ties of the Sunnis to the Arab world. To top it all, thirty plus years of demographic, geopolitical, social and ideological-paradigmatic changes had rendered Lebanon's face unrecognizable and by the mid-70s, the "National Pact" reached its breaking point. In the simplest of terms, the Lebanese Civil War was a bloody struggle between the Christian faction, representing the status quo and fighting to preserve the reality introduced by the "National Pact", and a coalition of heterogeneous opponents, who carried the banner of change, and promised reform to every provocateur and dissatisfied soul that joined their ranks, from the Sunni, the Druze, and even the Palestinian militias, to spiritual leaders, Pan-Arabist and leftists. Meanwhile, every single camp got support from a different local or international power, which added a global dimension to the struggle.⁵⁹ 1982 to 1989 witnessed the retreat of foreign forces from the country that paved the way to a full-blown all in all conflicts.

Beyond the death toll and the overwhelming destruction that befell the country, various estimates indicate that some 800,000-990,000 people fled Lebanon during the Civil War, that is about 40% of a population.⁶⁰ Most of

⁵⁶ Eyal Zisser, *Lebanon. The Challenge of Independence*, London & New York: I.B.Tauris, 2000, pp. 57-67 (Hebrew).

⁵⁷ See for example: http://www.lgic.org/en/history_lebanon1943.php [09-11-2019]; <https://www.quora.com/Which-country-is-known-as-the-Switzerland-of-Middle-East> [09-11-2019].

⁵⁸ Eyal Zisser, *Lebanon. Blood in the Cedars*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2009, p. 44 (Hebrew).

⁵⁹ Zisser, *Lebanon*, p. 67.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49; Paul Tabar, "Immigration and Human Development. Evidence from Lebanon": Human Development Research Paper (2009), p. 7.

them left during the fourth period of the Lebanese Civil War, between 1982 and 1988. Throughout the 80s, a growing number of Muslims, in comparison to Christians, left the Land of the Cedars.⁶¹ A small number of this wave of migrants and refugees, mostly Shiite, found itself at the Triple Frontier, and it is precisely during the war that the small Lebanese population there grew beyond recognition. There is a striking overlap between the disputes over mosque and the demographic boom of 1981-1988 and the fourth stage of the Civil War (1982-1988). This stage of the war witnessed the retreat of foreign forces from the country that paved the way to a full-blown all in all conflicts. Sunnis and Shiites found themselves in frequent paths of confrontation over two main issues: Sunni concern over the demographic, political and military growth of the Shiites, and the Palestinian struggle.

To understand the Sunni concern over the Shiites in Lebanon, we must return to a socio-political awakening that took place in Lebanon in the 1960s. The Shiite took part in the winds of change, but they held a rather passive role due to the glass ceiling that the Maronite-Sunni hegemony had placed above them. This phenomenon diametrically changed with the project of a devout man called Musa al-Sadr, who took to the task of reuniting the Shiite around their faith, the core element of their communal identity. Al-Sadr's activities and his wise use of religious motifs translated into a political force that saw the rise of the Shia as the "Movement of the Deprived", and its armed force, "Amal".⁶²

The 1932 census indicated that out of a population of 785,729 people, 22.4% were Sunni, while only 18-19% were Shiite;⁶³ data published in 1956 suggest that Christians were still the majority of the population, but by the 1960s, this was no longer the case.⁶⁴ Christian tendency to emigrate in mass, paired with the rate of Muslim population growth, explain why the former were afraid to conduct additional population census, which would have revealed that by the early 70s, Muslims were setting the tone for demographic growth, and within them, the Shiite were beating the drums.⁶⁵ A similar process occurred

⁶¹ Jihad Nasri Akl, *Alhijra alhaditha min Lubnan wa ta'ati almuoussasat alrasmiya walbahliya ma'aha 1860-2000*, Beirut: Dar wamaktabat altourath aladabi, 2002, (Arabic).

⁶² See: Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam. Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1987.

⁶³ Rania Maktabi, "The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited. Who Are the Lebanese?": *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 26: 2 (1999), pp. 222-223, 235. The 1932 census was the first and last to be conducted in Lebanon. The rest of the data presented is based on estimates only.

⁶⁴ Thomas Collelo (ed.), *Lebanon. A Country Study*, Washington, DC.: Federal Research Division Library of Congress, 1987, p. 48.

⁶⁵ According to the estimates, they would have counted some 900,000 souls or about 40% of the total population at the time, see: Ajami, *The Vanished*, p. 189; Yitzhak

in the Triple Frontier when the Shiites challenged the Sunni demographic hegemony.

Between Sunnis and Shiites: "Here" and "There"

The long Civil War witnessed the constant political and demographic growth of Shiites in Lebanon. This preeminence was also reflected in the patterns of emigration. As was stated earlier, the several hundred Lebanese that arrived at the Triple Frontier during the 50s and 60s were almost all Sunnis.⁶⁶ This is not surprising because, while the Sunnis started leaving Lebanon in growing numbers throughout these two decades, the Shiites were still migrating from the villages and towns to the cities within Lebanon. The Civil War shuffled the deck and eventually exposed the Shiite masses to the Lebanese diaspora – including the migration of hundreds of them, mainly from South Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley, to the Triple Frontier. In a few years, the Muslim population grew from around 1000 souls in 1981⁶⁷ to about a thousand families or four thousand people, tilting the pendulum towards the Shiites. The decision of the Sunni elite in Foz do Iguaçú to name the mosque as they did can be interpreted (at least in part) as a preventive measure against a potential challenge to the Sunni domination of the Muslim community in the area. After all, the years between the construction and the inauguration of the mosque in 1988 were a period the height of a seemingly unstoppable bloodshed between Sunnis, mainly Palestinians, and Shiites.⁶⁸

Both Paraguayan and Brazilian national press covered the war extensively, but there are hardly any records of the war at the Triple Frontier. Several interviews confirmed that there was a tacit agreement not to bring up the subject since Shiites and Sunnis shared the same commercial spaces in Ciudad

Nakash, *Reaching for Power. The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 112. According to a study by the American CIA, the population distribution for 1986 stands at 41% Shiites versus 27% Sunnis, see Collelo, *Lebanon*, p. 48.

⁶⁶ Elmaleh, “¡Bienvenidos”, pp. 5-10; Interview with Mohammad Juma'a, Foz do Iguaçú, 15/09/2017; WhatsApp correspondence with Alejandro Mannah, 06/12/2018; WhatsApp correspondence with Alex Hammoud, 06/15/2018.

⁶⁷ “A comunidade Arabe de Foz do Iguaçú”, pp. 1, 6; “Surpresa do embaixador Libanês”: *Nosso Tempo* (6/12/1981), p. 6; “Protesto dos arabes ao terrorista begunim”: *Nosso Tempo* (15/06/1982), p. 28.

⁶⁸ Omri Nir, “The Lebanese Shi'a as a Political Community”: Barry Rubin (ed.), *Lebanon. Liberation, Conflict, and Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 177-194.

Presidente Stroessner, and the same neighborhoods in Foz do Iguaçu.⁶⁹ Likewise, they would not engage in criticism of Brazilian or Paraguayan politics, and this too got picked up by the press: “They are very excitable when it comes to the political problems of the Middle East, but they refuse to speak of Brazilian politics”.⁷⁰ On the other hand the geopolitical situation of the Middle East throughout the 1980s was a matter of great interest and debate among Lebanese emigrants at the Triple Frontier, and in particular was the criticism of Israel and the policies it effected in South Lebanon.⁷¹ In the words of a Lebanese emigrant:

“Even though we are yet to achieve the desired unity amongst Arab countries, at least when it comes to Zionism there is near absolute consensus. Zionism is the reason for all morbidity in the world [...]”.⁷²

Another article read:

“If there is one thing that consolidates the entire Arab world in one united block, it is the abysmal hatred for the Jews. They are the disease of mankind, murderous snakes at the service of imperialism, sucking out the Middle East with their boundless rage for destruction”.⁷³

More than anything it seemed that Palestinian struggle was a unifying theme among Sunnis and Shiites at the Triple Frontier. Lebanese immigrants took to the streets to protest and show their solidarity with the Palestinian people and their suffering.⁷⁴ We must not forget, however, that while the Lebanese Shiite praised the Palestinian cause at the main avenue of Foz do Iguaçu, their brothers in Lebanon were fighting a bloody war against them. The Shiites were

⁶⁹ Interview with Armando Nasser, Ciudad del Este, 29/11/2016; Interview with Alejandro Mannah, Ciudad del Este, 28/11/2016; Interview with Mohammad Juma'a, Foz do Iguaçu, 15/09/2017.

⁷⁰ “A comunidade Árabe de Foz do Iguaçu”, pp. 1, 6.

⁷¹ See for example: “Protesto dos árabes”, p. 28; “Árabes farão protesto em Foz. Uma passeata na avenida para repudiar o ataque de Israel ao Sul do Líbano”: A Gazeta do Iguaçu, (30/07/1993), p. 4.

⁷² “Protesto dos árabes”, p. 28.

⁷³ “Adeptos de Khomeini”, p. 3.

⁷⁴ See for example: “Protesto árabe”: Nosso Tempo (07/10/1982), p. 18; “Centro Cultural condena acordo Libanes-Israeli”: Nosso Tempo (26/05/1983), p. 19; “Os árabes querem um estado palestino democrático e livre”: Nosso Tempo (09/09/1983-15/09/1983), p. 17; “O sionismo é uma ideologia racista”: Nosso Tempo (25/11/1983), p. 6; “Hipocrisia de Israel está solta”: Nosso Tempo (28/06/1985), p. 8; “Dia internacional de solidariedade ao povo palestino”: Nosso Tempo, Edição 242 (28/11/1986), p. 3; “Libertação da Palestina é uma questão de tempo”: Nosso Tempo (03/03/1989-06/03/1989), p. 9; “Dia de solidariedade ao povo palestino”: A Gazeta do Iguaçu (29/11/1990), p. 11; “Árabes protestam contra massacre”: A Gazeta do Iguaçu (23/05/1990), p. 9; “Proclamação do Estado Palestino”: A Gazeta do Iguaçu (15/11/1991), p. 5; “8 de dezembro. O significado histórico da intifada”: A Gazeta do Iguaçu (8/12/1991).

concerned about the substantial price they were forced to bear, because the headquarters and operational basis of the Palestinian militias neighbored Shiite villages, towns and cities in South Lebanon, and they were the ones to take the blows of the Israeli counterattacks. The Shiite would soon act on their discontent as the “War of the Camps” broke out 1985 and 1986 when the Shiite militia “Hezbollah” fought against the Palestinian and the Sunni guerilla that supported them.

This conflict was an additional "good reason" to leave Lebanon in search of a better life. Some Shiites who fled the battlefields found themselves at the Triple Frontier bringing about a local demographic boom during these years. This explains why the community grew from about 2,000 people in 1986⁷⁵ to 4,000 in 1988.⁷⁶ Underneath and on the ground, the hostility and the violence between the camps in Lebanon remained at an all-time high, and quite possibly denoted another level of the institutional split of the Muslim community at the Triple Frontier.

Transnational Patrons: Middle Eastern Geopolitics at the Triple Frontier

In order to understand why such a controversial name was chosen for the mosque, we must ask who chose it — or rather, who sponsored those who did. The answer is back in Lebanon. The failure of the "Lebaneseness" pushed many into the domain of influence of international patron states involved in the Lebanese turmoil. The Christians, for example, were seen as an extension of western Christianity and culture, while the Sunnis relied on several Muslim countries in the region, headed by Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq, and Kuwait.⁷⁷ Respectively the Sunnis in the Triple Frontier relied on the aforementioned countries, which could explain the growing presence of foreign diplomatic representatives of these countries at both the laying of the cornerstone and the inaugural ceremony of the mosque,⁷⁸ as in formal visits throughout the decade.

⁷⁵ “Mesquita poderá ser”, p. 2.

⁷⁶ “Em nome de Alá e Maome”, p. 1.

⁷⁷ Syria was directly involved in the war and allied with the rival camps throughout the war years in accordance with its changing policy, therefore, it is difficult identify Syria as a patron state of only one camp throughout the war, see: Raymond Hinnebusch, “Pax

Mediterranean Politics, 3:1 (1998), pp. 137-160.

⁷⁸ 1983 Ceremony: Ali Al-Ansari - Kuwait; Faik Macki Ahmed (Iraq); Abdullah Saleh Habadi - Saudi Arabia; Muhammad Matari and Mukhtar Dukaira - Libya; Michel Katra and Fouad Aoun - Lebanon; Salah al-Ali and Muhammad Kalud - the Arab League. 1988 Ceremony: Samir Hobaica - Ambassador of Lebanon in Brazil; Saleh Hababy - Saudi

-Syriana? Theorigins,

These personalities were not invited to the celebrations only because of their notable status as representatives of some of the most important countries in the Arab-Sunni world, but also and mainly because of their part in financing the construction of the mosque.

Adding to the tension between Shiites and Sunnis in the Triple Frontier was that some of the latter were fond of the Socialist Arab Republic of Libya and its leader Mu'ammār Gaddafi. Throughout the 80s, it got extensive media coverage such as visits of Libyan diplomats to Foz do Iguaçu,⁷⁹ news about the Libyan revolution and its principles,⁸⁰ reviewing "The Green Book" (al-Kitāb al-Aḥḍar) in which Gaddafi spread his political doctrine,⁸¹ demonstrations of solidarity with Libya,⁸² as well as the visit of a Brazilian delegation to Libya for the anniversary of the Revolution, led by the Muhammad Barkat, the son of the first Lebanese to arrive at the Triple Frontier.⁸³ One the article read

"The Libyan Revolution and its leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, awake the most interest and harmony in most of the Arabs living Foz do Iguaçu. Gaddafi is the man who liberated Libya from Imperialism and established a winning Socialist model in the country. He is one of the champion fighters of the united Arab world battling against Zionism".⁸⁴

While many Lebanese Sunnis at the Triple Frontier were fond of Libya and praised its leader greatly, this alliance made their Shiite neighbors cringe, especially after the August 1978 mysterious disappearance of Imam Musa al-Sadr, the mythological leader of the Shiites in Lebanon, after his meeting with no less than Colonel Gaddafi himself. In his follower's minds, there was no doubt that the Libyan Colonel had murdered their beloved leader.⁸⁵ Fouad

Ambassador to Brazil; Muhammad bin Nasser al-Aboudy - Deputy Secretary General of the World Islamic League; Abdul Karim El-Harrama, representative of the Libyan Embassy in Brazil; Khaled Kylani - Consul General of Lebanon in Sao Paulo; Kays el-Mukhtar - Iraqi ambassador to Brazil.

⁷⁹ *Nosso Tempo* (18/02/1983), p. 19; "Corpo diplomático líbio em Foz do Iguaçu": *Nosso Tempo*, (18/01/1985-24/01/1985), p.16; "Colônia árabe recebeu missão diplomática de Líbia": *Nosso Tempo* (23/12/1987), p. 41.

⁸⁰ "A Revolução Vitoriosa de Kadhafi": *Nosso Tempo* (12/03/1982), pp. 8-10.

⁸¹ "Livro Verde" de Kadhafi será distribuído em todo o Paraná": *Nosso Tempo*, (09/12/1983-15/12/1983), p. 17.

⁸² "Árabes realizaram passeata de protesto contra agressão americana a Líbia": *Nosso Tempo* (18/04/1986), p.16.

⁸³ "Brasileiros vão à Líbia festejar aniversário da Revolução de Kadhafi": *Nosso Tempo* (24/08/1984-30/08/1984), p. 8.

⁸⁴ "Protesto dos árabes", p. 2.

⁸⁵ "Imam Musa al-Sadr: His Life and Disappearance": *ShiiteNews* (07/2014) <http://www.shiiteneews.org/index.php/articles/item/9930-imam-musa-al-sadr-his-life-and-disappearance> [09-11-2019], "Gadhafi and the Vanished Imam": *Wall Street Journal*, (17/05/2011) - <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB100014240527487034212>

Ajami documented the consequences of the mythological leader's disappearance:

“The Imam's followers wanted him back. His posters were everywhere in the Shia ghettos of Greater Beirut and in the south of Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley. His followers read into his disappearance in that forbidding, faraway Libyan setting their own bitterness, their own sense of exclusion from the wider Arab society around them”.⁸⁶

The description of the vanished Imam was definitely on the minds of the many Lebanese Shiites who established their new home at the Triple Frontier in the 80s. Some of them even eternalize his character. As among other expressions can be seen at the entrance of the Lebanese School (El Colegio Libanés) set on the Paraguayan side of the border, which features a triumphant picture of the Imam. This “disappearance” placed Gaddafi alongside Umar al-Khattab in the pantheon of the most hated figures among the Lebanese Shia. It stands to reason, then, that the extensive coverage received by the "Libyan Revolution" in general, and by Gaddafi in particular, together with the disappearance affair, drove a deeper wedge within the community, and contributed to the Shiite decision to part ways and establish their own communal institutions.

And so it happened, as noted earlier, with the establishment of the first Shiite mosque at the Triple Frontier, named after the Imam Ruhollah Khomeini. Why would this South American Shiite-Lebanese mosque be named after an Iranian religious leader and not after Musa al-Sadr, the admirable leader of the Lebanese Shiites. The answer lies in the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution.

When al-Sadr went missing without a rightful heir, a leadership vacuum was left in his place. Al-Sadr's camp tied its fate to that of the Islamic Revolution conceived in Iran, and secured an international patron of their own, just as all their rivaling groups in Lebanon had done. The Islamic Republic of Iran sent its long revolutionary arm directly to Shiite strongholds in Lebanon during the Civil War, and its religious and diplomatic emissaries labored to conserve and nurture this alliance in other places around the world, the Triple Frontier included.

During the 1980s, hand in hand with the demographic growth of the Lebanese Shiite at the expense of their Sunni co-nationals, Iranian presence consolidated at the frontier. This can be seen in the Iranian ambassador's several visits to Foz do Iguaçu,⁸⁷ critiques of Khomeini's works,⁸⁸ the

04576327043387056276; [09-11-2019], Middle Eastern Analysis, <https://middleeasternanalysis.wordpress.com/tag/musa-sadr/> [09-11-2019].

⁸⁶ Ajami, *The Vanished*, p. 184.

⁸⁷ “Entrevista com o Embaixador do Irã. A República Islâmica do Irã é um exemplo para o mundo”: *Nosso Tempo* (20/07/1984-26/07/1984), p. 10; *A Gazeta do Iguaçu*, (02/06/1990), p. 10.

⁸⁸ *Nosso Tempo*, Edição 360 (16/06/1989), p. 9.

gathering over Khomeini's death at the Shiite Community Center in Foz do Iguaçu,⁸⁹ an extended article on Iran,⁹⁰ the distribution of food to the poor on the anniversary of Khomeini's death,⁹¹ and even within a part of the population that didn't answer to the communal leadership.⁹²

An 1984 article in the local press demonstrates the "imported" rift between the local Shiites and Sunnis: "[...]there is an ideological disagreement in the Arabic community, some were excited and praised Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's revolution, while others who are disgusted by the trend [...]". The article further states that while for the Shiites, the religious inclination is to the tyranny of Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, the Sunnis are much more liberal and flexible, and even confront a frontal dispute with the "stupid and meaningless theocracy of the Iranian revolution".⁹³

Even on the supposedly unanimous topic of the Palestinian struggle and the fight against Western imperialism, disagreements surfaced. The same report describes a parade of Muslims in Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad Presidente Stroessner, intended to commemorate Jerusalem Day and condemn Israeli and American imperialism. Even though the cause could have mobilized the entire community, few people attended or even showed interest. The problem was not in the motivations of the protest, but its character. Male and female attendees, the report mentions, wore turbans like that of Khomeini's and held his picture up while they shouted slogans in Arabic and Portuguese. According to the report, Sunni institutions in Foz do Iguaçu refused to attend the demonstration, opposed it, and even blamed the organizers of separatism, stating that they did not represent the majority. According to the Sunni leadership, the demonstration was the result of the missionary efforts of Muhammad Tabatabai, an Iranian religious leader who, they argued, was nothing but a charlatan interested in provocation rather than in advancing the Palestinian struggle.⁹⁴ According to some members of the community the incitement actions of the Iranian missionary contributes to the decision to name the new mosque as chosen.⁹⁵ It seems that Middle Eastern geopolitics also became a divisive factor and was another expression of the polemic discourse among the community's leaders.

⁸⁹ "Sociedade Beneficente Islâmica de Foz do Iguaçu": *Nosso Tempo*, (09/06/1989) p. 30.

⁹⁰ "Sete dias na terra dos Aiatolás": *Nosso Tempo* (20/10/1984-25/10/1984), pp. 8-9.

⁹¹ "Sociedade islâmica distribui alimentos": *A Gazeta do Iguaçu* (06/06/1990), p. 10.

⁹² As in the case of Ali al-Yussef, owner of butcher shop serving permissible (Halal), see interview with Ali al-Yussef, Ciudad del Este, 01/12/2016.

⁹³ "Adeptos de Khomeini", p. 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹⁵ Interview with Aasem Dabage, Director of Colégio Árabe Brasileiro in Foz do Iguacu, Foz do Iguaçu, 18/02/2019.

Final Remarks

This article analyzed why the Sunni and Shiite Lebanese at the Triple Frontier divided into two mosque-communities shortly after the inauguration of the region's first Sunni-dominated mosque. It suggested that old theological rifts, as well as contemporary political ones, first and foremost the situation in Lebanon, contributed to the decision of local Shiites to go their own way and establish a mosque whose name glorifies their modern religio-political hero.

A final question is the extent to which the split actually matters to the lives of the majority of Sunnis and Shiites in the region. We get a different picture if we take into account not only the discourse produced by the leaders of the community and their reciprocal but dichotomic relationship with their homeland, but also the premise that ethnicity is constructed in a continuous dialogue with the ethnic-social space in which it exists.⁹⁶ The historiography of the last few years regarding ethnicity in Latin America exemplify the substantial weight of national local identity alongside transnational identity.⁹⁷ This essay assumes this premise by emphasizing the role that the leaders of the community and its institution took upon themselves, to strengthen the transnational identity, while in practice, reality was different.

An ethnic study should acknowledge not only the national context of the community in question, but also the presence of people who do not identify with it or belong to its institutions.⁹⁸ As noted above, the cornerstone-laying ceremony of the mosque saw the arrival of merely 300 people out of a community of about 1000 members.⁹⁹ The same happened five years later when the mosque was finally inaugurated, while the community had grown to about 4,000, the number of participants in the ceremony stood at a few hundred.¹⁰⁰ These numbers raise one question: Where was everybody, or, at least the Sunnis?! One answer was provided by Alex Hammoud, a well-known figure in the community: “Where were they? At work! The community is not

⁹⁶ Raanan Rein / Stefan Rinke / Nadia Zysman, *The New Ethnic Studies in Latin America*, Boston & Leiden: Brill, 2017, Intro.

⁹⁷ See for example: Benjamin Bryce, *To Belong in Buenos Aires. Germans, Argentines, and the Rise of a Pluralist Society*, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2018, pp. 1-10; Raanan Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines? Essays on Ethnicity, Identity, and Diaspora*, Leiden & Boston: Brill 2010, p. 11.

⁹⁸ Raanan Rein \ Jeffrey Lesser, “Challenging Particularity: Jews as a Lens for Ethnicity in Latin America”: *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 1: 2 (2006), pp. 249-263.

⁹⁹ “A comunidade Árabe”, pp. 1,6; “Surpresa do embaixador”, p. 6; “Protesto dos árabes”, p. 28; According to Muhammad Juma'a in the early 1980s, the ratio was 90% Sunni compared with 10% Shiite.

¹⁰⁰ “Em nome de Alá e Maome”, p. 1.

united. I'm guessing that those who weren't there aren't religious or just didn't care"¹⁰¹

The construction of the mosque was subject from an early stage to criticism because of its high costs. Some migrants and their descendants opposed the project because they feared it would lead to religious segmentation – a concern that proved justified. For some, who are not religious, anything that can bring to Latin America conflicts from the home-front should be avoided.¹⁰² Businessman Armando Nasser said: “most of the Lebanese here aren't religious... In Lebanon I went to a Catholic school [...] I only discovered here that I'm actually a Shiite”.¹⁰³ Another businessman, Alejandro Mannah, pointed out that before the Iranian revolution, he hardly knew the differences between Shia and Sunna.¹⁰⁴ In a conversation with Mati Rahal, son of the first Lebanese to set foot on the Paraguayan side of the border, he said that he does not even know if his father was Sunni or Shiite.¹⁰⁵ When Ali al-Yussef, owner of butcher shop serving permissible (Halal), was asked why was the mosque named after 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, he responded “90% of the Muslims here do not even know who is 'Umar!”¹⁰⁶

For a majority of Lebanese in the Triple Frontier, the controversy and split revolving the institutionalization of Islam in the region were a matter of little significance. This may still be very much the case today. Only about 5% of the Muslim children attend the three educational institutions currently operating in the Triple Frontier.¹⁰⁷ The Sunni mosque hosts no more than 80-90 worshipers in morning and evening prayers. On Friday congregational prayer, a testimony to the strength of any Muslim community, no more than 500 attendees were observed.¹⁰⁸ These data reinforce the claim that the discourse around the construction of the mosque and the communal rift that followed have preoccupied only a small stratum of the Muslim population. At the Triple Frontier, so it appears, there are more than two ways to be Muslim Lebanese.

¹⁰¹ WhatsApp correspondence with Alex Hammoud, 06/11/2018.

¹⁰² “Em nome de Alá e Maome”, p. 1.

¹⁰³ Interview with Armando Nasser, Ciudad del Este, 29/11/2016.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Alejandro Mannah, Ciudad del Este, 28/11/2016.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Mati Rahal, Ciudad del Este, 06/09/2017.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Ali al-Yussef, Ciudad del Este, 01/12/2016.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Faisal Ismail (Vice president of CICCFF), Foz do Iguacu, 12/09/2017; Interview with Mona Sharaf Al-Din (Colegio Libanes), Ciudad del Este, 02/12/2016.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Faisal Ismail (Vice president of CICCFF), Foz do Iguacu, 12/09/2017.