



Latin America: the next frontier in Muslim-Jewish relations

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Washington, DC - Until recently, the Muslim and Jewish communities of Latin America had been largely untouched by the burgeoning movement of the past five years to strengthen communication and cooperation between Jewish and Muslim leaders and grassroots activists in North America and Europe. That isolation is now coming to an end.

Jews and Muslims have a long history in Latin America. There is evidence that Jews and Muslims escaping the Inquisition accompanied Spanish and Portuguese explorers on their voyages of discovery to the Americas in the 15th and 16th centuries. Both communities grew in the late 19th and early 20th centuries due to the large-scale immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe and Muslims from Arab countries.

Jewish and Muslim businesspeople have long been sparkplugs of the economies of Brazil and Argentina and to a lesser extent, Uruguay, Chile and other Latin American countries, and have often maintained cooperative business and personal relationships with each other.

However, until recently there was relatively little effort by leaders of the two communities to build inter-communal ties. One reason may be that the Muslim communities in Latin America are primarily comprised of immigrants from Arab countries, including Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians who tend to be more reluctant to engage with the Jewish community outside of the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, than Muslims from non-Arab countries.

That reluctance, however, began to wane in the wake of 9/11. Arab and Muslim communal leaders became increasingly concerned about the danger of rising Islamophobia, while Latin American Jewish leaders felt vulnerable after a number of high profile anti-Semitic incidents. Both groups tentatively began to reach out to the other, realising it was in their mutual interest to cultivate the relationship.

It was that awareness that led 14 Jewish and Muslim leaders from five Latin American countries and two Caribbean islands to accept an invitation to take part in a mission of Latin American Muslim and Jewish leaders to Washington, DC, hosted by The Foundation for Ethnic Understanding (FFEU) and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). The two organisations initiated the mission with the intent of introducing Latin American Muslim and Jewish leaders to the pioneering efforts to strengthen Muslim-Jewish relations in North America and Europe, in which FFEU and ISNA have been engaged since 2007.

After two days of meetings in late March with high-level US officials and top Muslim and Jewish American leaders, members of the Latin American delegation returned home to Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, Uruguay, Barbados and St. Croix vowing to jumpstart the process of dialogue and cooperation between Muslim and Jewish communities throughout Latin America.

These leaders also agreed to participate for the first time this November in the Weekend of Twinning, a global Muslim-Jewish event sponsored by FFEU and ISNA and held each November since 2008. In November 2011, more than 250 mosques, synagogues and other Muslim and

Jewish organisations partnered with each other for one-on-one events in cities across North America, Europe and other parts of the world.

While there was an acknowledgement by both Jewish and Muslim Latin American participants in the mission that they would face obstacles from members of their respective communities who are suspicious of cooperation with the “other”, there was consensus that it is in the interest of both sides to open up on-going communication. This was reflected in a joint statement issued at the end of the mission affirming a commitment to building “solid Muslim-Jewish relations in our countries and communities and showing our two peoples and the world that Muslims and Jews can work together fruitfully for the betterment of all, while building ties of friendship and trust.”

According to Sheikh Muhammad Yusuf Hallar of Argentina, Secretary General of the Islamic Organization for Latin America and the Caribbean, “This mission is very important for the future, because it will start a process of strengthening ties not only between participants in the mission, but between Muslim and Jewish communities throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.”

Rabbi Daniel Goldman of Buenos Aires, Argentina similarly commented that the two groups must have a “common cause” of “[standing] together to fight Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry.”

Overall, there was a palpable feeling among participants that building fruitful Muslim-Jewish relations in Latin America is hardly the “mission impossible” that some had assumed it would be. Indeed, they evinced cautious optimism that many in their respective communities can be inspired with an awareness that strengthening Muslim-Jewish relations is a win-win situation for both communities, and for the diverse Latin American societies in which Jews and Muslims live side by side.

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