

Article

# From the Mosque to the Town Square: Some Reflections on Islam, Youth, Social Movements, and Citizenship

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**Abstract:** An observation of the dynamics of the citizen participation of young people defined as Muslims who frequent Madrid's mosques and squares raises the possibility that these young Spanish Muslims are developing their own civic/political participation as citizens and natives. This indicates a particular religious/cultural identification disassociated from the predefined religious view that characterizes them as actors in a process born out of their aspirations as citizens. For the most part, children of immigrants share an everyday experience in which they are defined by their religion, while also expressing their desire to break away from labels and distance themselves from the identification of Islam as experienced in immigrant communities, institutionalized Islam in mosques, associations and cultural centres, and the Islam of convert activism. The journey from the mosque to the town square is one taken time and again by these young people—followed during a multisited ethnography involving six years of research—that clears the way for a religiosity that is closely tied to the everyday experiences of young people continuously hearing about other situations (e.g., the war in Syria, the protests during the so-called Arab Spring, the 15 May Movement). In the process of differentiation and confrontation with Islamic people in the Spanish context, new association-building and new activism have emerged, with some connections to European youth associations and a growing commitment to global causes like the fight against Islamophobia and against international terrorism (the 'Je suis Charlie' movement) and feminist causes (#MeToo).

**Keywords:** Islam; youth; social movements; Spain; France

## 1. A Few Thoughts on Spanish Islam

In a context characterized by long centuries of Islamic history, speaking about Islam in Spain in the twenty-first century means speaking about a sociological reality that is fundamentally tied to Spain's transformation into a country of immigration in the 1990s. Although Spanish Islam continues to be defined by the media and by more than a few scholars as 'immigrant Islam', Islam in modern Spain has other characteristic elements that must be considered to better understand the current situation in terms of institutionalization and representation before the administration. This also helps to explain the dynamics found among the young Spanish Muslims examined in this study.

A quick presentation of the demographic characteristics of Spanish Muslims reveals that their presence in the country is not, in fact, particularly recent. In the last decade of the Franco dictatorship (the 1960s), several hundred citizens from Middle Eastern countries that had established good political and diplomatic relations with Spain settled in the country. As Muslims, they were a religious minority, without any specific

legal status, protected by the existing weak legislation regarding religious freedom. Most were students in Spanish universities and many stayed in Spain, some even participating in the creation of the first Muslim associations, which they continue to lead to this day.<sup>1</sup> Spanish Muslims as a group must also take into consideration the distinct population living in the North African cities of Melilla and Ceuta, who have played an important role in the process of institutionalizing Islam in the country.<sup>2</sup>

Spain is also home to a community of Spaniards who have converted to Islam. Although journalistic accounts have calculated around 5000 converts, other analysts estimate a lower number, around 1000. The most visible groups live in the provinces of Cordoba, Granada, and Seville in Andalusia in addition to Barcelona and Valencia, and have very active religious associations that draw attention to their presence (López García and Contreras 2002). These ‘neo-Muslims’ are particularly visible in projects that underscore the importance of so-called Muslim Spain and the cultural wealth of Spanish Islam. Like the earlier groups, they have also played a very important role in the process of negotiating and recognizing Islam as a religion with *notorio arraigo* (the legal status of being well known and ‘deeply-rooted’ in Spain) and in later negotiations with the Spanish state regarding the Cooperation Agreements between the state and the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE). The Cooperation Agreements, a small church–state concordat without any economic commitment on the part of the state, enumerate the religious rights specifically recognized for Muslims living in Spain, both as individuals and as a group (Contreras Mazarío 2018).

The Cooperation Agreements were signed in 1992—a highly symbolic year as the fifth centenary of the so-called discovery of America, the conquest of Granada, and the beginning of modern Spain under the reign of the Catholic Monarchs (who had to be commemorated using other words)—after earlier conversations with representatives of the different Muslim communities and associations and the constitution of the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE) as the sole counterpart with the state. The CIE, whose history has been presented in other studies, has shown itself over time to be a body with little cohesion, the lack of which has been a source of inefficiency if not paralysis, and it is little appreciated by Muslims in the country, generally speaking.

Finally, all of these groups, which are characterized by strongly heterogeneous origins and social backgrounds, have been joined by citizens from Muslim majority populations, part of a wave of late twentieth-century economic migrants who have acquired Spanish nationality. This wave was notable for its high number of Moroccans, who constitute the largest group of Spanish Muslims in the country today.<sup>3</sup>

The spaces of Islam created by this heterogeneous community correspond to two fundamental types. The first comprises the large associations and cultural centres and mosques that have become increasingly visible in Spain’s larger cities. In the case of Madrid, whose squares and streets form the setting for the Islam of the young people presented in this article, the initiative of Muslims in the 1970s and 1980s led to the construction of two separate mosques: the M30 Mosque (so-called because of its location on a hill above the M30 motorway that rings the city), a powerful centre of ideological influence financed and controlled by Saudi Arabia; and the Abu-Bakr Mosque (known as the Strait Mosque because of its location next to the *Estrecho* metro station) led by a group of

<sup>1</sup> See ‘Chronology of Modern Spanish Islam up to the signing of the Cooperation Agreement with the Spanish State in 1992’ in (Planet Contreras 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Largely born in the cities, these Muslims were not granted the status of citizen until after 1987, in the wake of the civil clashes that responded to the first Spanish law on foreigners enacted in 1985, months before Spain acceded to the European Economic Community and part of the required legal adaptation. The law left this group without any legal status and a documentary regularization process was required (Guia 2014).

<sup>3</sup> This question is particularly complex in Spain because it is not possible to request any public documentation containing data on the religious affiliation of citizens. The figures used here are estimates based on migration and origin statistics provided by the National Institute of Statistics. A large—and self-interested—effort at gathering statistics is made every year by the Observatorio Andalusi. Founded in 2003, the observatory is an independent, nonprofit organization associated with one of the largest federations of Muslim communities, the Union of Islamic Communities in Spain, and defines itself as an ‘institution for observing and monitoring the situation of Muslim citizens and Islamophobia in Spain’ <http://observatorio.hispanomuslim.es/>.

Spaniards of Syrian origin. Both sites serve as examples of spaces of traditional religious-community (re-)production, where modes and manners of living as Muslims in a minority society are transmitted that respect pre-established religious precepts according to the theological model of the reference country. Along with these large mosques are a few dozen mosques and oratories whose characteristics are similar to those found in other countries in Europe.<sup>4</sup> These are self-managed, small and located on little streets in the centre of municipalities or displaced to industrial zones on the outskirts where they are able to offer more services in better facilities. In many of these spaces, practices associated with so-called ‘ethnic churches’—services attended by worshippers from the same country—take place. These institutions have played an interesting role in the migration processes of their members, as their attendance facilitates a socialization pattern based on common faith and their status as migrants, distinguishing their integration into Spanish society.

The ethnic nature of space is not, however, exclusively associated with Moroccan migrants. A similar dynamic characterizes the movements of the brotherhoods and tariqas migrating from sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>5</sup> with their strong ethnic-cultural undertones. Also divided into dozens of neighbourhood centres and mosques, their relationship with the majority society is scant, with both positive and negative experiences in their few direct encounters with the authorities, who often delegate or simply ignore the processes of collective representativeness in which the others participate.

One particular space of Islam is found on the Internet. Thanks to the charisma and constant presence of some of the best-known exponents on social networks, alliances and connections have sprung up in the virtual sphere that are very sensitive to the evolution of a ‘homegrown’ Islam and clearly critical of the more traditional views put forth by earlier groups. These associations contain committed activists who usually take up issues that concern them personally and are recognized as native Spaniards, denouncing racism, Islamophobia and intolerance in Spanish society, but also criticizing the backward-looking positions taken by institutionalized Islamic groups with regard to questions including LGBTB rights, the patriarchy and the position of women in worship.

This scenario is not, however, limited to spaces of worship and online activism. As the title of this piece indicates, there is space for Islam and Muslims outside the mosques. Recent years have witnessed the consolidation of a new sociopolitical subject, headlined by youth-led association-building projects that call for a different form of Islam in terms of both identity and religion. In dialogue with other viewpoints, young Spanish Muslims are beginning to search for their own associative spaces where they can progressively become independent from existing spaces. Moreover, their practices seem to reveal a specific will to transform themselves from ‘consumers’ of an Islam proposed by others to ‘producers’ of an Islam characterized by being young, Muslim, Spanish, and European (Madonia 2018). What follows is a look at both how this step has been taken and the protagonists themselves.

## 2. From ‘11-M’ to ‘Je suis Charlie’: A Decade of Evolution

The terrorist attack of 11 March 2004 represents one of the most shocking and traumatic moments in the collective memory of recent Spanish history. At that time, in the face of the brutality of the attack,<sup>6</sup> the Islamic community went out on to the streets and presented itself to the media as a compact community, united in grief and sharing the shock of an incomprehensible massacre with the rest of the citizenry. In the words of an interviewee who lived through the experience:

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<sup>4</sup> A complete census of associations and mosques can be found on the Observatory of Religious Pluralism website maintained by the public groups, Pluralism and Coexistence and the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces: <http://www.observatorioreligion.es/directorio-lugares-de-culto/>.

<sup>5</sup> See (Cerroloza 2014).

<sup>6</sup> The attacks took place in the early morning of 11 March 2004 on several Madrid commuter trains, both in the Atocha Train Station in the centre of the city and in the small El Pozo station in a suburban working-class neighbourhood. In Spain the attacks are often referred to simply as ‘11-M’.

When I . . . ,I was young, it'd been 13 years . . . well, no, more, at the time of the 11-M attack. [ . . . ] A group of older young people, I mean, I was one of the little ones at the time, they were 20-something, decided to get together and buy wreaths and go to Atocha to show our respect in the name of young Muslims, you know? [ . . . ] Atocha was crammed with people and all the girls went in with their veils on and the boys, they were all Muslims. And the people were . . . everyone was silent, all the people, the whole station. [ . . . ] Then they went in and put the flowers down. They prayed and when they bent down, the whole station applauded [laughter]. It was an almost magical sight [I. 19, 22-year-old male, Syrian origin].

However, in the days following the attack, after it awoke from the nightmare, the Islamic community found itself enveloped in a climate of suspicion and fear that became more widespread as the investigations advanced. This climate also affected the daily lives of young Muslims, who began to be identified as a threat to the point, as Razi asserts, that the way they were perceived by Spanish society changed:

Obviously, they didn't look at us the way they did before [I.11, 22-year-old male, Syrian origin].

As a result of this situation, the Islamic institutions whose work largely centred on the transfer of religious-cultural knowledge began to pay more attention to young people. They did this not only by supporting the activities of the existing youth associations, but also by facilitating new initiatives backed by the most representative mosques in the country. These new concerns led the leaders of cultural and religious centres to implement specific activities for young people such as classes on 'manners', which became sites of debate on the correct religious interpretation of relationships between young Muslims and their non-Muslim social environment; meetings with experts on the Qur'an and religious figures from various Arab-Islamic majority countries; and encounters where young people could discuss their proposals with older members of the mosque (Téllez 2008; Téllez 2014; Téllez and Madonia 2018).

Over time, the combination of this institutional umbrella and the lack of freedom when it came to developing more participatory activities led young people who no longer identified with the institution's discourse, views, and activities to gradually distance themselves from it. When asked about this, the young people criticized the progressive stagnation of an institutional position that, by not allowing the participation of young people as actors, had progressively lost the ability to address their daily needs and problems, as the following comment highlights:

A: I was going to several . . . , to several meetings. Well, yes, to several meetings of young Muslims, activities held in the mosque and more, but the same . . . , the same conclusion. We didn't modernize the dialogue, we didn't modernize the message and it's always the same. So, it's as if . . . as if the mosque was, let's say, a centre to instil these values or to instil in us how to treat the rest of society right. We form part of this society, so, why not instil in the others how to treat us right? Do you understand? It's like we marginalized ourselves and they are pushing, pushing, "you have to do this", "you have to do that", "you have to whatever", but they don't really sit down with us and ask us, "What problems have you had?" and whatever, you know what I mean? "Ok, ugh, this is the topic, this is what we're going to talk about", why don't we vote? [ . . . ] [I. 22-year-old female, Moroccan origin].

These young people are not denying what they identify as the mosque's traditional role of cultural transmission but, in a more complex way, they are asking to be allowed to initiate some activities aimed at participating in Spanish society, in which they feel they play an active part. Instead of the positive image of the Muslim who is well integrated into society, they call for a pro-positive image of Muslims participating in a society where they have a role to play:

For example, from the times that I've gone and such, I think that if we put more effort into, maybe, I don't know, we could participate in things like . . . I don't know, social events,

you know? Like cultural events, and I think there are a lot . . . What happens is that we often shut ourselves up inside the mosque, you know? And we try . . . it's very nice, and I agree, you know? It's really basic and fundamental being, or working with things from Islam and learning more and going to their talks, that's really good, but take it outside, too. That's my opinion, I see it like that, because outside, with non-Muslims, we have to make ourselves seen, you know? [I. 16.1: 20-year-old female, Moroccan origin and I. 16.2: 22-year-old female, Ecuadorian origin (convert)].

As will be explored in further depth below, both the attrition in terms of representation and the experience of citizen participation out on the streets would lead to the autonomy of some associations formed in the mosques and the emergence of new groups in no way subject to institutional control. Ten years after the fateful morning of 11 March, a collaborative organization between different youth associations had emerged and made itself visible in, for example, the use of public space as a way of distancing themselves from terrorism.

On 11 January 2015, shortly after the terrorist attack in the editorial office of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris, the Islamic Culture Foundation<sup>7</sup> called for a silent march in Madrid under the slogan, 'Against Terrorism and Radicalism'. According to several media outlets, more than 500 representations from Islamic cultural centres, secular civic associations, and several Spanish youth associations attended the demonstration, united in their determination to break the link between Islam, terrorism, and radicalization. This street demonstration revealed a clearly distinct dynamic from what was happening in France, where the Islamic community chose to become less visible in the public space after the attack. As some scholars have noted, this reaction correlates with the gulf that seems to exist between the representatives of institutionalized Islam and Muslims on the street (Mauger 2015).

In the Spanish case, then, a determination to occupy the street in a compact, united way became apparent. However, a more detailed observation of the participants reveals that the ambitions of the actors involved in Islamic youth association-building were engaged in a different undertaking. As in France, these young people were breaking ties with traditional representatives and associations. In the French context, several authors agree that the terrorist attack aggravated a 'generational crisis' in the representation model for the Islamic community (Geisser et al. 2017). The institutionalized position that blindly adhered to the national rhetoric of republican values and accepted that its sole role was to condemn the attacks was juxtaposed by the more critical and complex position supported by young people. These groups, which identify as Muslim and French (Brouard and Tiberj 2005), insisted on using the collective mourning as a time of necessary reflection about both the cultural and political causes behind terrorism and also the processes of exclusion and dispossession faced by the Muslim population in the country (Geisser et al. 2017).

As in other European contexts, imams, mosque leaders, and administrators of Islamic cultural centres in Spain incorporated rhetoric similar to that of the French in their discourses. In addition to condemnation and distancing, in Spain, emphasis was also placed on rejecting any falsely religious view that supported or permitted terrorism. As a result, the position of the Islamic community adopted by the institutional representatives during the act at Atocha was the religious delegitimization of terrorists and the negation of any Islamic basis for terrorism. 'We', the Muslims, were represented by religious leaders at the forefront of a heterogeneous community raising a unanimous voice against the terrorists' views of a murderous Islam.

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<sup>7</sup> The Islamic Culture Foundation (FUNCI) is a Spanish nonprofit, apolitical, and nondenominational scientific organization established in 1982 with the aim of tearing down the walls of misunderstanding between the Western world and the Arab and Islamic world. FUNCI specializes in the culture of al-Andalus, as an important part of this common heritage, a model of intercultural respect and a suitable tool for promoting understanding. FUNCI maintains a twofold approach to both facilitate an intercultural coexistence where differences become an additional value for enabling greater social cohesion, and to promote sustainable actions in 22 Mediterranean countries through the Med-O-Med network. See <https://funci.org/>.

Parallel to these raised voices were more timid representatives and members from other initiatives, from spaces of civic engagement and advocacy, from the small neighbourhood mosques. Beyond condemning terrorism, these voices also demanded that society pay more attention to the dissemination of Islamophobia, which had found a breeding ground in the social climate of growing fear and widespread suspicion towards Islam. Sociopolitical demands began to take shape that renewed the need for a more committed, fluid institutional dialogue that was not limited to a commemorative event, but would begin the task of recognizing and legitimizing the daily needs of Islamic communities in the country. In short, social and religious actors appeared in the public space who proposed different views and positions in response to a global cause.

In addition to street actions, after the Paris attack, different representatives and members of the new Islamic youth associations engaged in an animated debate on the social networks. At that time, critiques of the institutional position were accompanied by appeals against Islamophobia as well as positions supporting and rejecting the *Je suis Charlie* movement, demonstrating a different capacity to engage and participate in the collective mourning. They did not abandon the street, however, and several associations like the Spanish Association of Muslim Girls (ACHIME), the Complutense University of Madrid Muslim Student Association, and the Fuenlabrada Association of Young Muslims,<sup>8</sup> decided to demonstrate their unity on the street, thus solidifying a presence in the compact, collective public space as another sociocultural player with ties to the other demands being made, but one that insisted—in opposition to institutionalized voices—on being homegrown, Spanish, and victims of the same violence and terror, like other Spaniards and Europeans.

What, then, were the key factors in this process of independence, what experiences may have influenced this development and according to what sociocultural dynamics are the new forms of associative participation evolving? The following sections explain the events that occurred during this decade of activism and citizenship.

### 3. Thoughts about Islam, Youth, and Social Movements: From the Arab Spring to the ‘15-M’ Movement<sup>9</sup>

In December 2010, events in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, ignited a series of citizen demonstrations and uprisings throughout the Arab world that came to be known as the ‘Arab Spring’. Alongside the professors, activists, Spaniards, and foreigners of all ages from Madrid who went out onto the streets to demonstrate in front of the embassies of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and other countries whose citizens were rising up were young people participating in the actions both as individuals and as members of associations. In this context of euphoria and the assertion of rights, during which the people of Madrid were also calling for the regime to fall, initial contacts were established that solidified during the various demonstrations held in front of the embassies. As trust spontaneously grew among the demonstrators, the number of young Muslims attending the rallies increased as well. Contacts made on the ground were strengthened on Facebook, where links were formed between clusters of Muslim boys and girls and various human rights and ‘No a la Guerra’ anti-war association activists.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This is an association made up of young people from the mosque in Fuenlabrada, a municipality near Madrid with a markedly urban character. It is now represented by the Fuenlabrada Al-Umma Youth Association (AJUF).

<sup>9</sup> The 15 May Movement (often referred to Spain as ‘15-M’) was a popular movement that took to the streets and squares of the largest cities in Spain, especially the emblematic Puerta del Sol square in the centre of Madrid in spring 2011. This occupation constituted one of the first ‘Occupy’ movements and was the setting for the *Indignados* anti-austerity movement. For a comprehensive assessment of this movement, see the issue coordinated by Cameron (2014).

<sup>10</sup> This slogan was used in all the protests heard on the streets of Spain in 2003 in an infrequent exercise to reject the conservative government that was supporting the new American military action in Iraq as part of its Global War on Terrorism strategy. This section of the article discusses some of the results of the fieldwork done by Salvatore Madonia between 2011 and 2016 in the Community of Madrid under the auspices of the research project *El mundo arabe-islámico en movimiento: migraciones, reformas y elecciones y su impacto en España* (CS02011-29438-C05-01) financed by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, directed by Ana I. Planet Contreras. This was a multisited participant observation that began with sociopolitical activism for the Syrian cause and then developed into participation in various processes, such as the creation of an association of young Muslims conceived by some young members of a Facebook group that is a prosperous university association with

Later in 2011, and shortly after the beginning of the revolts in Syria, a permanent sit-in began in front of the Syrian embassy in Madrid. Just 100 m from the front door of one of Madrid's main museums, the Prado, and on one of the city's most heavily trafficked streets, this civil action was accompanied by protests every Sunday. The sit-in was organized around a tent used to hold the provisions for the demonstrators, a table to collect signatures calling for the expulsion of the Syrian ambassador and several posters. Week after week, the direct presence and participation of young people from Syrian families grew, despite the fact that their presence at the embassy could pose problems for their families and friends living in Syria.<sup>11</sup> This dangerous situation fostered solidarity between young people from different places—Moroccans, Palestinians, Egyptians, Tunisians—and non-Muslim Spaniards. The presence of the young people, especially females, conquered the fears of their parents and the Syrian community living in Madrid. The sit-ins became organized dates (with music, dancing, and even live conferences from Syria with participants in the revolts), bringing together more than 100 people each Sunday for three years in the heart of the city. Moreover, as with any other action involving demands, the use of social networks, particularly Facebook, was fundamental, without replacing the physical meetings where the internal organization of the protest and new initiatives were debated. This is what Arturo Guerrero has defined in his description of a Spanish-speaking Islamic virtual sphere as an agora; a virtual space that facilitates direct communication between Internet users also fosters off-line connections between them (Guerrero 2018).

Throughout the demonstrations, a set of group rituals took shape that strengthened and advanced the group's internal relationships. The everyday needs that appeared on a regular basis—from preparing the space in front of the embassy to putting up posters and flags, writing manifestos, taking care of the sound equipment and, finally, taking everything down at the end of each demonstration<sup>12</sup>—led to meetings on demonstration days in the form of a group breakfast in a cafeteria next to the embassy and lunch in a Turkish restaurant after each session. Lunchtimes became well-attended gatherings, moments for group reflection on what had happened during the demonstration and for further debate on the next steps to take. In the on-line sphere, the organization of a Facebook group led to the creation of sub-commissions that met in closed access groups to handle various needs. During one of these ritualized moments, it was collectively decided to use the virtual network of the existing Facebook groups to create a humanitarian aid association. The operating procedures of the social networks, characterized by direct and participative access to virtual debate (Madonia 2014), led to the creation of the Aid Association for the Syrian People (AAPS).<sup>13</sup> The group thus created its first open Facebook page where it could freely post all types of

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a physical headquarters today. The fieldwork also involved participation in courses on Arabic and on Islamic manners and culture in one of the large mosques in Madrid as well as in some of the centre's religious celebrations, rituals, and practices. Finally, the social network created during this time, particularly on Facebook, was monitored thanks to the growing contacts with Muslims and Islamic institutions and associations in the Spanish-speaking virtual sphere with Islamic content. Over the course of the ethnography, numerous interviews were done with young Spanish Muslim men (10) and women (15) between 18 and 35 years old, with different sociodemographic features regarding level of studies, social class, parents' country of origin (Syria, Morocco, Palestine, Egypt) and age. All were Sunnis although with different degrees of declared religious practice. The citations that appear in the text distinguish the speaker by gender, the country of origin of one or two of the parents, and age.

<sup>11</sup> For example, before the ambassador was expelled, photos were seen being taken from the embassy windows and the Facebook pages of the future Aid Association for the Syrian People were attacked on several occasions. These acts were publicly reported both in the media and to the police.

<sup>12</sup> Although the permanent sit-in continued, to avoid being evicted, they reached an agreement with the police to dismantle the tent, leaving just a flag and a symbolic chair during the rest of the week.

<sup>13</sup> The AAPS continues to be active as a humanitarian association. Its Facebook page reads: 'The Aid Association for the Syrian People was founded in summer 2011, inspired by the demonstrations against the Syrian dictatorship taking place since March. The first association of Syrians in Spain formed in response to the need for moral and material support for those protesting inside Syria for a better future. Although the organization has clearly taken a side, defending and supporting the revolutionary movement in Syria created in mid-March 2011, from the beginning the association has been apolitical and does not side with any faction, ethnicity, religion or other distinction beyond the division that separates those who struggle for freedom from those who continue to support the dictatorship. Made up primarily of Syrians and Spanish-Syrians, the group also has members and sympathizers from several countries, including Italy, Morocco,

information and propaganda and suggest activities. The main characteristic of this space was that it facilitated more open, democratic collective participation where all the members could propose ideas, make suggestions and vote to approve or reject a proposal with equal influence.<sup>14</sup> One result of the growing organizational capacity and larger number of participants was the organization of the first large demonstration, held in Madrid in May 2011.

The spring of 2011 was a time of exceptional activism and political action in the streets of Spain. In May 2011, the 15 May Movement permanently occupied Puerta del Sol, the main central square in Madrid. Previous experiences and contacts with activists in Madrid made it possible for the members of the association to assist the Syrian people to develop relationships and participate in the wave of collective protest.<sup>15</sup> Some of the members participating in the 15-M *Indignados* demonstrations began to forge ties with the general organization on the square. This was not an easy task, as in very little time, a number of commissions and clusters had formed off Puerta de Sol, each one focused on very specific and different demands (Martín Rojo and Frutos 2014). Every proposal issued by a commission had to be first presented to the general proposal commission and, if it did not violate the overall values of the movement, could then be presented to the public and finally voted on by majority consensus in the group meetings periodically held on the square.

In the case of the young Muslims and their non-Muslim peers, it was decided to distribute informative brochures and gather signatures to request the expulsion of the Syrian ambassador from Madrid. These early initiatives received significant support from the people walking around the square, which encouraged the young people to incorporate slogans and posters from the *Indignados* movement into the pro-Syrian demonstrations. Later, several demonstrations related to the 15 May Movement dovetailed, and they joined in solidarity with the Sunday demonstrations in front of the Syrian embassy, located a short walk from Puerta del Sol. In the end, the decision was made to set up a tent in the Puerta del Sol camp as a place to spend the night, raise awareness, and propagandize for the Syrian cause. This made it possible to create stronger ties with the movement in general and also with young people with various stances regarding what was occurring in other Arab countries. As a result, it became possible to organize larger acts that connected Puerta del Sol with the global protests of the early Arab Spring youth movements as well as with older protest movements. From the minutes of silence held in the square for Syria to the live connections with Al-Tahrir Square in Cairo and the moments of solidarity with the Amazigh protests in North Africa, the Sahrawi protests in Morocco and the Palestine protests in Gaza, the local situation in the square became connected to the various global protests that characterized that moment in space and time, visibilizing many languages rarely heard in the public space of Madrid, such as Greek and Arabic (Martín Rojo 2014).

#### 4. New Islamic Youth Association-Building as a Key Player in the Future Evolution of a Homegrown Islam

It was not only the Syrian cause that motivated the participation of the young people, however. In the same way and during the same time as the events described above, some young people who self-defined as Muslims began to use social networks to form Facebook groups where they could

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Germany, Iran and, of course, Spain. This is due to the humanitarian nature of the association, which has always been faithful to its *raison d'être*: to dedicate itself exclusively to activities that help the Syrian people reach their legitimate aspirations. These activities, which began with demonstrations, localized tent cities and sit-ins, slowly expanded to include bike rides, talks, exhibitions, meetings with social agents and politicians, and charity events. The group's most important development was the establishment of the 1st Humanitarian Aid Campaign, during which a shift took place from requesting aid from institutions to organizing shipments of humanitarian material ourselves (clothing, medicine and medical material). Available online <https://www.facebook.com/AsociacionAAPS/> (accessed on 17 December 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Examples of internal clashes and external pressures affecting the association are described below. Often events or situations that took place during offline demonstrations were widely and eagerly debated online on the social networks.

<sup>15</sup> What happened on the streets and squares of Madrid during the 15 May Movement and the subsequent activism and mobilization in other municipalities inside and outside the country can be seen as part of the broader global Occupy the Street movement.

debate and launch activities. In 2011, the embryo of the Complutense University of Madrid Muslim Student Association took shape on the Internet and soon moved into the university space with the broad objective of talking about Islam and the Arab world in general, especially with regard to what concerned them as young people:<sup>16</sup>

Q: Have you participated in any associations for young Muslims?

A: Um . . . , virtual ones. [Laughter].

Q: Tell me a little bit about it.

A: Well . . . really . . . Yes, for example, a little while ago one was created on Facebook. Well, in fact, we're trying to create a real one now at the Complutense University that's just got going. It's being led by a girl who converted to Islam who's doing her Masters in Arab studies or something like that, or Eastern studies, and she had the idea. She's from Complutense and we're working on it now [ . . . ]

Q: What association is it?

A: It's 'Muslim Students from Spain' and it's on Facebook.

The progressive search for independence from more traditional institutional control was justified by a different way of conceiving of collective dynamics and practices. In their rejection of a stricter community model, the young people established their need to experience and think about their religious identification in light of their day-to-day experiences and in their immediate sociocultural environment. From the beginning, their primary need appeared to be getting to know and collectively supporting each other as a group of young people with the same necessities and identifying themselves in the same living situation:

Q: What is your goal? What are you doing?

A: We support each other in our studies and get to know each other, um . . . also Arabic. There are people . . . there are, well, since a lot of people, a lot of Muslims were born here in Spain and don't speak Arabic and whatnot, we put up videos, links and things where you can learn Arabic and so forth.

Q: Do you also address issues related to Islam?

A: Yes, we talk about Islam . . . then in the group chat, sometimes we even talk about whether we should speak Spanish or Arabic in the chat room and it's true that we speak more Spanish.

Q: What other topics do you discuss?

A: Everything related to the Arab world. For example, the last thing I posted, which is the alternative to Facebook, but Muslim, which is *Iquabook* [laughter] and whatever, films about . . . the typical film about terrorism and that sort of thing, clichés about Muslims, trying to break the moulds out there [I. 12, 23-year-old female, Moroccan origin].

The main objectives of this association reveal the need for these young people whose parents came from abroad to find ways to deal with their daily problems, beginning by challenging the clichés and stereotypes that directly affected them as a minority group in a majority non-Islamic society:

Q: What goals do you have beyond getting to know each other?

A: Support, too, because a Muslim . . . in other words . . . usually a Muslim has a difficult life and the support might . . . and the same thing, it's breaking the moulds that . . . the clichés

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<sup>16</sup> Specifically, the Philology Faculty at the Complutense University of Madrid, where several of the young men and women who created this new association have been enrolled.

out there. We're trying to have debates, conferences, talks in the association and in principle, it's that.

Q: What are the stereotypes?

A: What the press and, well, Muslims who say they're Muslims, and I think that they aren't or at least they don't show it. The clichés? Well, terrorism, machismo, um . . . being inferior, I think, being poor. Also Muslims are seen as poor, um . . . ignorant, too, when really it was a great civilization and . . . I think that Muslims represent everything bad [laughter]. Unfortunately, that's the case [I. 12-year-old female, Moroccan origin].

The lack of any vertical control or pre-imposed activities fostered constant collaboration between the different members who were invited into a horizontal participation in all the decision-making processes related to the evolution of the association from the beginning. The result was a space for collective association and socialization that produced dynamics of direct confrontation and interaction inside and outside the group. The characteristics of the operation of social networks encouraged multiple debates and proposals for activities, and the group's Facebook page became not only an arena for discussing plans for future activities, but also for the association's very goals, halfway between a charitable and a sociocultural association:<sup>17</sup>

Lara: I wanted to say that I would like us to take the initiative in our association to do something, even if it's just a gesture, for the Muslims killed in Myanmar. What do you all think?<sup>18</sup> [Young female Muslim].

Najem: Suggestions accepted! [Young female Muslim].

Fahima: I personally support any type of assistance to anyone. And, as far as Operation Kilo goes, we can do it among the members of our association and then send it or deliver it to whoever needs it [Female convert].

[ . . . ]

Lara: That seems like a good idea, but (my personal opinion), as a student association, we should do more activities like talks, conferences, workshops, excursions . . . about topics that interest us. For example "Myanmar", talking about what happened, because almost nobody knows anything. I mean, providing information in talks and the like and from there we could give information so whoever wants to help can get in touch with another association . . . [ . . . ] But not collecting food, I don't know if I'm making sense . . . in other words our objectives are more educational, right? [Young female Muslim].

Hsina: I'm also in favour of doing talks and conferences about topics related to Islam and what's happening in Arab-Muslim countries today [Young female Muslim].

Off campus, beginning in August 2012—but with female university students acting as leaders—a group of Muslim girls from informal groups with younger members decided to form a women's association for female Muslims. In this association, which is headquartered in Madrid but organizes activities across the country, the participants plan and coordinate quite innovative projects, always insisting on their autonomy and originality. They stress the idiosyncrasy of being young, Muslim, and Spanish females, highlighting the novelty of the confluence of these particular traits with regard to their contextual needs. For these young Muslim females, Islam is a way of life, and they are united in the decisions they reach by consensus and want to improve their living conditions. In their statutes,<sup>19</sup> the association asserts that its main objectives include fostering a 'Spanish-Muslim' identity, religious

<sup>17</sup> Discussion in the Complutense University of Madrid Young Muslim Students Facebook group [last visited 12/03/12].

<sup>18</sup> First post 9/12/2012, last post 15/12/2012. It has received 106 views and 10 comments.

<sup>19</sup> Available in the two histories of the Facebook group and webpage.

dialogue and, in general, improving relations in their society, helping each other face the problems of daily life and prejudice towards their religion. Here, too, the virtual sphere has become important in terms of providing greater freedom with regard to decision-making and participation. In addition to a Facebook page,<sup>20</sup> this association also has a website,<sup>21</sup> which works somewhat like a blog, making it easy for members to learn about and follow the different activities.

At the collective level, these two examples of new youth association-building demonstrate the autonomous, homegrown orientation of some young people who seem to have left behind the pre-established models for how to be and appear Muslim in Spanish society (if, indeed, they ever followed them), in order to begin to construct their own religiosity as a component that enriches their Spanish society. The possibility of being able to organize and direct their activities more freely and independently allows them to construct their own arguments related to their needs and logic in their sociocultural environment, since they can decide and directly and proactively have a say in conferences, meetings, and activities designed by and for them.

Over time, these young people have started to create their own ways of being in society as a group. Their activities are connected to their daily experiences and, for example, they have begun to invite non-Muslim experts to their conferences to discuss topics of interest to them as young people. These activities not only allow internal debate between the youths, but also more broadly facilitate meetings and confrontations between activists or experts who would otherwise be reluctant to engage in direct confrontation. In several cases, after the encounters promoted by the associations, the topics debated prompted considerable response on social networks or, on the contrary, topical issues motivated the young people to organize spectator events or to participate directly. For example, after Tunisian activist Amina Tyler was punished, a broader debate was launched about possible convergences and divergences between the FEMEN feminist movement and Islamic feminism or, more recently, after the #MeToo movement took off, young activists participated in the publication and dissemination of a hashtag linked to Islamophobic attacks on Muslim women wearing the headscarf. These same young people have participated in and taken ownership of civil-social causes, opening up other areas of citizen participation such as the pink march to raise funds for breast cancer and the promotion of charity drives to collect food and clothing for the neediest.

In this second phase of youth association-building, the forms and content of the promoted activities display the development of a contextualized, daily religious viewpoint. The young people combine different activities in a single event to make it more attractive, mixing recreation with religion, or reinventing religious celebrations as mountain excursions, for example, where community reflection and prayer mix with ski sessions and shopping, breaking the Ramadan fast in various parks around the city or celebrating the Eid holidays in a public swimming pool, 'eating up the sunshine', in the words of the poster that announced this initiative.

Greater decision-making and cooperative freedom, a rejection of institutional control, the need to participate in immediate circles and the creation of synergies with other sociocultural movements are, then, the elements that characterize the identitarian-collective identification of these young people as Muslims and Spaniards. In this process of differentiation, the religious element that characterizes them as Muslims continues to be central, since these youths are not renouncing their religiosity, but they also demand active and direct citizen participation from the identity perspective of being and seeing themselves as Muslims.

Beyond the possible differences between the associations, all share the fact that they participate in a process of collective identification; they are all Muslims acting in a sociocultural context in which their image as Muslim is under construction. Moreover, they want to participate actively in this construction. These young people usually share activities, participate in meetings, and collaborate

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<sup>20</sup> Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/achimeoficial/?fref=ts> (accessed on 17 August 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Available online: <http://www.asociacionachime.com/> (accessed on 17 August 2016).

with several associations at the same time in a process of collective mobilization that breaks with old patterns and proposes new forms of religiously interpreted interaction. In this way, a contextual identity-related religious interpretation materializes that reopens the discussion about European Islam and Europeanized Islam, proposing instead a homegrown Islam. Indeed, in the case of these young people, their religiosity—although still far from the ambitions and pretensions of experts and critics—remains intensely rooted in their daily lives.

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