

The Reconquista of the Mosque of Córdoba

Spain's most famous mosque is at the center of a dispute between activists seeking to preserve its Muslim heritage, and the Catholic Church, which has claimed it as its own. The result could determine the future of Islam in Europe.

BY **ERIC CALDERWOOD**

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CÓRDOBA, Spain — **For a few weeks last fall**, the Mosque of Córdoba, Europe's most important Islamic heritage site, disappeared from the map.

Or, at least, from Google Maps. If a tourist had Googled directions to the mosque in mid-November, he or she would have only found a reference to the Cathedral of Córdoba — the Catholic house of worship that lies within the mosque's ancient walls.

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The disappearance of Spain's most famous mosque (and also one of its main tourist attractions) spawned a public outcry. Spaniards **flooded** Google Maps' editor with indignant emails, and a group of citizen activists in Córdoba launched an online **petition** demanding that Google Maps restore the word "mosque" to the monument's name. The petition accused the bishop of Córdoba of a "symbolic appropriation" of the monument, and it warned that the change to the monument's name "erases, in the stroke of a pen, a fundamental part of its history." The petition received over 55,000 signatures in less than three days. On Nov. 25, Google **reinstated** the mosque, under the official name that has been in use since the early 1980s: the "Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba."

Just what prompted the incident, however, remains shrouded in mystery: The Catholic Church has denied any involvement; Google, in a **statement** to Spain's leading newspaper, *El País*, merely said that its map information "comes from very diverse sources." But in the mosque's brief, unexplained disappearance, many Spaniards saw a hint of something more sinister: an ongoing effort to erase any traces of Islamic heritage from a building that was once the intellectual and spiritual heart of Muslim Iberia.

In the 10th century, Córdoba was the most spectacular city in Europe and perhaps in the entire world. The city boasted paved and well-lit streets, running water, thousands of shops, and a wealth of booksellers and libraries, including the caliph's library, which held some 400,000 books. Córdoba's crown jewel was the colossal mosque commissioned by 'Abd al-Rahman I in A.D. 785 and expanded by his successors in the Umayyad dynasty that ruled Córdoba. By 929, the Umayyads had claimed for themselves the mantle of the caliphate, in a bid to cast their capital, Córdoba, as the center of the entire Muslim world.

The Mosque of Córdoba was the symbol of Umayyad power and also the center of the city's intellectual life. Large enough to hold 40,000 people, the mosque served as both the city's main prayer space and also the university, where the intellectual elite of the western Islamic world went to study. The building commanded such respect that when Córdoba succumbed to the forces of Ferdinand III in 1236, its new Christian rulers transformed the mosque into a cathedral, while preserving its prayer niche (facing toward Mecca) and its celebrated red-and-white horseshoe arches.

In its heyday, the Mosque of Córdoba was the embodiment of the cultural achievements of *al-Andalus*, the Arabic name for medieval Muslim Iberia. Today, the hybrid structure — a cathedral within a mosque — has come to encapsulate a different ideal: The building evokes a supposedly harmonious past, when Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together in peace, an idea that the Spanish refer to as *convivencia*, or “coexistence.”

But *convivencia* is looking increasingly shaky in modern-day Spain. Despite its Muslim past, the country is currently home to some of the highest levels of anti-Islam sentiment in the West: In 2013, 65 percent of Spaniards surveyed by the **Bertelsmann Foundation** agreed with the statement that “Islam is not compatible with the Western world,” as compared to 55 percent in France and 45 percent in Britain.

At the same time, Spain is looking to cast itself as a leader in the ongoing conversation about Europe’s increasingly troubled relationship with Islam — based in part on Córdoba and Andalusia’s historical reputation for religious tolerance. The country is trying to position itself as both an international symbol of interfaith harmony and a major destination for Muslim tourism and business.

At the center of these forces stands the Mosque of Córdoba, which has become a focal point in the increasingly fierce debates over how Spain’s Islamic past should inform its present and its future.

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The mosque’s brief disappearance from Google Maps in November is just one chapter in an evolving dispute about the monument’s name and meaning. Since 2006, the Cathedral Chapter of Córdoba, the branch of the Catholic Church that administers the site, has slowly wiped away the word “mosque” from the monument’s title and from the print and online publications about the site, where it is now officially called the “Cathedral of Córdoba.”

The church has also revised the tourist literature for the site in order to emphasize its Christian identity. The official tourist brochure from 1981 extolled the structure as “the foremost monument of the Islamic West” and called it the epitome of “the Hispano-Muslim style at its greatest splendor.” In the mid-2000s, however, the church debuted a new brochure whose introduction does not mention the monument’s Islamic past and, instead, states that the building “was consecrated as the mother Church of the Diocese in the year 1236.” The brochure continues, “Since then and without missing a single day in this beautiful and grandiose temple, the Cathedral Chapter has celebrated solemn worship, and the Christian community comes together to listen to the Word of God and to participate in the Sacraments.” The introduction concludes by asking the visitor to the Cathedral “to be respectful with the identity of this Christian temple.” The period of Muslim rule is relegated to a sidebar, titled “The Muslim Intervention.”

In fact, the new brochure aims to convince the visitor that the building was Christian before it was Muslim, and that the five centuries of Muslim rule were just a parenthesis in Córdoba’s long-standing history as a Christian city. Archaeology plays an important role in this narrative. The church has funded excavations in an attempt to document the existence of a Visigothic church, the Basilica of Saint Vincent, underneath the oldest part of the mosque. “It is a historical fact,” the brochure declares, “that the Basilica of Saint Vincent was expropriated and destroyed in order to build on top of it the subsequent Mosque in the Islamic period.”

Today, when you visit the monument, the first thing you encounter is a glass-covered hole in the floor, through which you can observe excavated mosaics, which a nearby plaque attributes to the Basilica of Saint Vincent. Nevertheless, the church’s archaeological reconstruction is, at best, speculative. Art historian Susana Calvo Capilla, a leading specialist in the history of the building, argued in a public [lecture](#) in Córdoba in October that the archaeological findings do not give any clear evidence of a church existing on the site where the mosque was built in the eighth century.

The church's assault on the monument's name and Muslim heritage spawned a local outcry in Córdoba, but it did not become a national and international *cause célèbre* until the past year. The renewed attention was in large part due to the intervention of a group of citizen activists who call themselves the "Platform for the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba." The group launched an online [petition](#) in early 2014, demanding that the word "mosque" be restored to the monument's official name and calling for the building to be administered by a public authority, rather than by the Catholic Church. The petition now has almost 400,000 signees, including such cultural luminaries as the British architect Norman Foster and the Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo. In addition, the platform's activities have attracted the attention of many international media outlets, including the BBC and Al Jazeera. In December 2014, the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), which represents 52 member states, released a statement condemning the name change, calling it "an attempt to obliterate the landmarks of Islamic history in Andalusia, and a provocation for Muslims around the world, especially Muslims of Spain."

For platform members, the mosque-cathedral is more than just a place. It is "a universal paradigm of concord between cultures," in the words of their petition. "The fundamental idea of the Córdoba paradigm is to recuperate the historical glory of what Córdoba represented in the ninth and 10th centuries," said spokesman Miguel Santiago — to preserve it as an "interreligious beacon" for Muslims, Catholics, Jews, and all religions alike.

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Historians today are divided on whether or not Umayyad Córdoba was actually a place of exceptional tolerance. Scholars hoping to deflate its reputation as a model of interfaith harmony point to such cases as the "martyrs of Córdoba" — Christians who were executed in the city in the ninth century for publicly insulting Islam. Many historians would also point out that it is anachronistic to use the modern concept of "tolerance" to describe social relations in the medieval past.

Yet there are certainly compelling cases of interfaith life from Spain's Muslim period. Those who want to celebrate al-Andalus as a multicultural paradise exalt figures like **Hasdai Ibn Shaprut**, a 10th-century Córdoba Jew who served as the personal advisor, physician, and diplomat for the caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III (who ruled from 912 to 961). Hasdai was also the patron to the Jewish writer **Dunash ben Labrat**, whose adaptation of Arabic poetry's meter and themes into Hebrew led to a golden age in Hebrew poetry. Dunash exhorted his fellow Andalusian Jews to "let Scripture be your Eden and the Arabs' books your paradise grove."

The truth, though, is that we base our claims about interreligious relations in Islamic Córdoba on a fragmented archive that gives us only fleeting glimpses of what day-to-day life in the city really looked like. How we weave together those fragments into coherent stories about the past depends as much on the historical archive as it does on the hopes, desires, and ideals that we project onto the past. Whether or not Hasdai and Dunash are illustrative cases of medieval Córdoba culture or outliers, their lives continue to speak to us precisely because they provide a counterweight to our world, with its myriad conflicts between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. In the end, assertions about the tolerance of Islamic Córdoba tell us more about our current moment than they do about the medieval past.

The idea of a once-multicultural and tolerant Córdoba has become even more powerful in the post-9/11 era, when it has often served as a corrective for the "clash of civilizations" mentality that underwrote the Bush-era "war on terror." U.S. President Barack Obama evoked Córdoba's "proud tradition of tolerance" in his famous 2009 speech in Cairo. Playing on this same theme of tolerance, the Muslim leader behind the controversial "Ground Zero mosque" in New York, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, called the proposed Islamic cultural center "Córdoba House." The name, he wrote in his book *Moving the Mountain*, was meant to recall a place and time in which "Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived in what was then the most enlightened, pluralistic, and tolerant society on earth."

The idea of Córdoba's tolerance has become the bedrock for a potent marketing strategy for the former capital of the caliphate. At the same time that the mosque-cathedral's Islamic identity is under threat, business and cultural leaders in Córdoba are working to position the city as a major destination for Muslim tourism and as the leading European producer of halal food and services. According to a [report](#) published by Thomson Reuters and the consulting firm DinarStandard in December, the global Muslim market spent \$140 billion on travel in 2013, accounting for 11.5 percent of global travel expenditures, and \$1.3 trillion on food, or 17.7 percent of global expenditures. With growing international competition for a share of what the report dubs "the global Muslim lifestyle market," Córdoba and Granada, two of the most emblematic cities of al-Andalus, are positioning themselves to lead the Spanish charge in this new market. Córdoba's city government has partnered with several Spanish Muslim organizations to propose the creation of a [halal "cluster"](#) in Córdoba, which, they say, will host as many as [1,300 businesses](#) devoted to halal food and service in a region where the [unemployment rate](#) hovers at around 34 percent.

When the Halal Institute, which certifies halal food and products in Spain, announced the "Córdoba Halal" project on its [website](#) in late 2014, it suggested that Córdoba's multicultural past made the city a logical home for the initiative: "In the collective imaginary of Muslims, Córdoba is a historical point of reference of Islamic civilization in the West, and, therefore, what we seek when we visit this city is to find a place that carries values such as concord, mutual respect, religious freedom, diversity."

The Córdoba brand has also created a space for Spanish travel agencies that focus exclusively on Muslim tourism to Spain. Most clients of the Madrid-based agency [Nur and Duha](#) come from Southeast Asia or the Gulf countries, said Flora Sáez, the agency's director and a Spanish-born convert to Islam. For her clients, Sáez said, Córdoba is "a myth," which symbolizes "the past, the lost splendor." She said, "We've seen more than a few of our clients cry from the emotion of visiting the Mosque of Córdoba."

Andalucian Routes, another tourist agency, works mostly with Muslim youth groups from Western countries. The agency's director, Tariq Mahmood, was born in Pakistan and grew up in Birmingham, England. He first traveled to Spain as a teenager on a road trip with friends. At the time, he says, he was experiencing an "identity crisis" because he did not feel accepted in British society. Visiting Spain's Islamic heritage sites gave him "the missing link for my Asian-Muslim-Islamic identity and my Western identity." He believes that travel in Spain can help young European Muslims see that "there's no contradiction" between being Muslim and being European.

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Scholars and journalists alike have tended to see the presence of Muslims in Europe as a postwar phenomenon, related to the migration of former colonial subjects to such metropolises as Paris and London. Spain, too, has seen these demographic shifts: According to the most recent [census of Spain's Muslim population](#), there are currently 1,858,409 Muslims living in Spain, and of them, almost 800,000 are Moroccan citizens. Most of the Moroccans in Spain hail from the northern regions of Morocco, which were part of the Spanish protectorate in Morocco from 1912 to 1956.

What distinguishes Spanish Muslims is not demographics but discourse. French Muslims are often cast as a new challenge to old republican values — and, in particular, to the idea of *laïcité* (secularism). Spanish Muslims, in contrast, can draw upon the country's Muslim past in order to envision themselves as essential parts of Spanish identity, rather than as awkward additions to it.

A recent spike in Spanish Islamophobia, however, has challenged Spanish Muslims' efforts to see themselves as part of their country's social fabric. Politicians on the Spanish right have taken to scaremongering about an imminent Muslim "reconquest" of Spain: In a press conference held in Córdoba in November, Santiago Abascal, the fiery leader of a populist far-right Spanish political party named Vox, [accused](#) the platform — the group petitioning to restore "mosque" to the mosque-cathedral's name — of throwing "a lifeline to jihadism." He also [warned](#) that "Córdoba, Granada, and al-Andalus ... are in the sights and the ideology of the most radical Islam."

In the run-up to the March 22 Andalusian elections, Vox produced an incendiary YouTube [video](#) about the mosque-cathedral. In a fake newscast dated March 2018, the newscaster announces that the government of Andalusia has “expropriated” the monument from the Church, and that “the Mosque of Córdoba will be reserved, from now on, for Muslim prayer.” The newscaster then goes to a fake reporter in Córdoba, a woman dressed in a headscarf, who reports that over 20 Muslim countries have sent delegations to congratulate the Andalusian government on its decision, with the biggest delegation coming from Iran. She concludes by estimating that more than 2 million Muslims are planning to move to Córdoba in order to “reconnect with their past and their culture.” The video cuts to black, and then the following text appears: “Do you want a future like that? We can still change it. Vox.”

The video drew more than 300,000 views in less than a week, and it was the talk of the town in Córdoba. The massive response to Vox’s video did not translate into votes; in the March elections, Vox only received [0.33 percent](#) of the city’s vote. But the provocative video is, nonetheless, a stark reminder of the Islamophobic backdrop against which the mosque-cathedral debate is unfolding.

I first spoke with Santiago, the spokesman for the “Platform for the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba” on Jan. 8, the day after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks. The events in Paris cast a long shadow over our conversation. Santiago presented the mosque-cathedral, with its hybrid architecture and origins, as an antidote to the extremist ideology behind the attacks that ravaged Paris. The edifice, he said, is “a universal mirror to tell the world that intercultural life is possible, that interreligious life is possible because humans are mixed.” Antonio Manuel Rodríguez, another prominent voice in the platform, called Córdoba’s tradition of tolerance “an extraordinarily useful social tool” in the face of Europe’s increasingly fraught relationship with Islam.

The members of the platform are not alone in seeing the debate over the mosque-cathedral as an important flashpoint in the broader debate about intercultural life in contemporary Europe. When *El País* organized an **homage** for the victims of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the paper's president, Juan Luis Cebrián, gave a speech in which he criticized the bishop of Córdoba for removing the word "mosque" from the name of the mosque-cathedral. In the same speech, Cebrián accused the bishop of "assaulting" Spanish Muslims and of provoking "attitudes of hate and fundamentalism." Guillermo Altares, a staff writer for *El País*, wrote a few weeks later that Córdoba "is missing an opportunity to become a pole of dialogue between religions at a moment when that is more necessary than ever."

Whatever the international repercussions of the controversy might be, Muslims in Spain are already feeling its effects. All of the Muslims I interviewed for this article shared recent stories about times when they or their friends had been harassed when visiting the mosque-cathedral. When I asked Kamel Mekhelef, the president of the Association of Muslims in Córdoba, about these anecdotes, he replied: "Those aren't anecdotes; they're realities.... Just 10 days ago, a couple from Arabia came to visit, a man and his wife. I took them to visit the mosque. Even though the guards there know me, the second we entered, they started talking with each other on their walkie-talkies and following us. Because they have that paranoia that every Muslim who enters there is going to try to pray."

The former president of the Córdoba-based Islamic Council, Mansur Escudero, made an international splash when he petitioned Pope Benedict, in 2006, to turn the Cathedral of Córdoba into an ecumenical space, open for both Muslim and Christian prayer. When the petition was rejected, Escudero began performing his Friday prayers outside the mosque-cathedral as a protest against the Church's decision. Escudero died in 2010, and the Islamic Council has since retracted its call for universal use of the monument.

For Mekhelef, the issue is not whether Muslims are allowed to pray in the mosque-cathedral. What bothers him more is that some non-Muslim Spaniards do not want to see the history of Islamic Córdoba as part of their own history. "There is an attempt to falsify history," he said, and to make Spaniards believe that the medieval Islamic civilization built there "is something alien to them. And that's not how it is, because it's something that came from here. It is Córdoban." The famous philosophers and physicians of the period "weren't from Arabia or from Algeria or Morocco. They were Córdobans."

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In June of 1766, the Moroccan ambassador to Spain, Ahmad bin al-Mahdi al-Ghazzal, passed through Córdoba on his way to Madrid to negotiate a peace treaty between Spain and Morocco. The trip was a homecoming of sorts. In 1492, Ghazzal's ancestors had been driven off the Iberian Peninsula. By crossing the Strait of Gibraltar, Ghazzal was also crossing the threshold between present and past in order to reconnect with one of the greatest periods of cultural splendor in Islamic history.

Córdoba and its famous mosque were the centerpiece of Ghazzal's nostalgic tour. Ghazzal visited Córdoba over 500 years after its Christian conquest, but when he entered the city's most renowned monument, he did not see a cathedral. Rather, he saw a time when Córdoba was the home of 70 libraries and some of the leading philosophers, doctors, and poets of the world.

"We remembered what had happened there during the time of Islam," Ghazzal writes. "All of the sciences that were studied there, and all of the Qur'anic verses that were recited there, and all of the prayers that were performed there, and how many times God (let him be exalted!) was revered there. And we began to imagine that the mosque's walls and its columns were greeting us and consoling us from the great sorrow we felt, until we began to address the inanimate objects and to embrace the columns, one by one, and to kiss the walls and the surfaces of the mosque."

Today, 1.5 million visitors a year follow Ghazzal's footsteps to the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba, hoping to catch a glimpse of a time when the most culturally advanced part of Europe was Muslim. Saad Bourkadi, a Moroccan engineer from Rabat, is one of them. Bourkadi has visited Córdoba every year for the past three years as a member of a Moroccan cultural association that organizes an annual trip to Spain's Islamic heritage sites in Córdoba, Seville, Granada, and Toledo.

In February, Bourkadi told me that his group doesn't plan to visit Córdoba this year because they are afraid of visiting the mosque. There has been a "radical change in the treatment of Muslims," he said. "When you enter the mosque, and the guards see that you are Muslim," he told me, "they tell you that prayer is forbidden." When Bourkadi and his group visited the site in the summer of 2014, they expected to be warned not to pray. What they didn't expect was that the guards would trail them closely from section to section, making sure that that they didn't even try. Bourkadi says that the guards' harassment of Muslim visitors is so severe that he thinks "they want to make sure that you know that you are being harassed." He observed that his group was visiting the monument alongside a group of Japanese tourists, who were able to walk around and take pictures without any monitoring from the guards. (A spokesman for the Cathedral Chapter denied that his organization gives any special instructions to the security guards about how to treat Muslim visitors.)

And yet Córdoba and its mosque remain an important symbol for Bourkadi and his fellow Moroccans, millions of whom claim descent from al-Andalus. In fact, the 2011 Moroccan **constitution** enshrines al-Andalus as a major component of Moroccan "national identity," which the constitution describes as "the Moroccan people's attachment to the values of openness, moderation, tolerance, and dialogue" — in short, *convivencia*. It is this spirit of intercultural dialogue that attracted Bourkadi, an engineer, to become an amateur historian and enthusiast of Spain's Islamic past. "I believe that the study of al-Andalus is a way of creating common ground with Spain," Bourkadi told me. "It is a means of drawing Spain and Morocco closer together."

But Bourkadi no longer feels welcome here. And for now, he has no plans to come back.

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