
Context and conflict: unpacking the sources of opposition to mosques in Catalonia

Context i conflicte: anàlisi de les fonts d'oposició entorn de les mesquites a Catalunya

Avi Astor

Departament de Ciències Polítiques i Socials. Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Correspondence: Avi Astor. Grup de Recerca Interdisciplinari sobre Immigració.
Departament de Ciències Polítiques i Socials. Universitat Pompeu Fabra.
Campus de la Ciutadella, Edifici Jaume I.
C/ Ramon Trias Fargas, 25-27, 08005 Barcelona.
E-mail: avi.astor@upf.edu.

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Abstract

Although opposition to mosques has become increasingly common throughout Spain, it has been most prevalent and intense in Catalonia. This article analyzes the factors that account for why mosques have elicited such a high degree of hostility in the region. I begin by bringing attention to the comparatively large presence of Muslims – especially North Africans – in Catalonia due to its proximity to France and the traditionally strong demand for unskilled labor. The high visibility and precarious status of Muslims in the region have contributed to the production of powerful associations between Islam, immigration, and urban marginality. These associations have been reinforced by the heavy concentration of Muslim communities in narrowly-circumscribed neighborhoods, many of which suffered from municipal deficits prior to their arrival. The tendency of Muslims to concentrate in these neighborhoods has been influenced significantly by the socio-spatial development and organization of the municipalities where they are located, particularly those in the Barcelona metropolitan area. The pronounced divisions and inequalities characteristic of these municipalities have amplified contestations over public space and led to disputes surrounding mosques becoming integrated into broader struggles over social privilege and public recognition.

Keywords: Islam, mosques, Catalonia, immigration.

Resum

L'oposició a la construcció de mesquites és quelcom comú arreu d'Espanya però ha tingut una incidència especial a Catalunya, on és més freqüent i intensa que a les altres comunitats autònomes. L'objectiu d'aquest article és analitzar els factors que expliquen l'alta presència de conflictes entorn de les mesquites a Catalunya. L'article parteix de la constatació que hi ha una presència i una visibilitat més grans dels col·lectius musulmans a Catalunya, especialment magrebins, a conseqüència de la proximitat amb França i de l'alta demanda de

treballadors no qualificats. Aquest fet ha facilitat que les associacions entre l'islam, la immigració i la marginalitat social siguin freqüents. Aquestes associacions s'han vist reforçades per l'alta concentració de comunitats musulmanes en determinats barris, un gran nombre dels quals ja patien nombroses mancances abans de l'arribada de poblacions estrangeres. La tendència de la població musulmana a concentrar-se en aquests barris està relacionada amb el desenvolupament socioespacial dels municipis històricament industrials a través d'onades successives d'immigració interna i externa. Les desigualtats i divisions pronunciades que caracteritzen aquests municipis han amplificat les queixes i reivindicacions en l'espai públic i han fet que els conflictes entorn de mesquites es vinculin a lluites més generals sobre posicionament social i reconeixement públic.

Paraules clau: Islam, mesquita, Catalunya, immigració.

Resumen

Aunque la oposición a las mezquitas es cada vez más común en toda España, ésta ha sido más prevalente e intensa en Cataluña que en el resto de las comunidades autónomas. Este artículo analiza los factores que explican la alta presencia de conflictos en torno a mezquitas en la región. Empieza destacando la presencia comparativamente elevada y visible de musulmanes en Cataluña, especialmente magrebíes, debido a su proximidad a Francia y su alta demanda de trabajadores no cualificados. La visibilidad y situación precaria de los musulmanes en la región han contribuido a que se generen fuertes asociaciones entre el Islam, la inmigración y la marginalidad urbana. Estas asociaciones se han visto reforzadas por la alta concentración de comunidades musulmanas en barrios selectivos, un gran número de los cuales sufrían carencias municipales antes de la llegada de poblaciones extranjeras. La tendencia de la población musulmana a concentrarse en estos barrios está estrechamente relacionada con el desarrollo y la organización socio-espacial de los municipios a los que pertenecen, particularmente en el área metropolitana de Barcelona. Las pronunciadas desigualdades y divisiones que caracterizan a estos municipios han amplificado las contestaciones en el espacio público y han hecho que los conflictos en torno a mezquitas se vean integrados en luchas más generales sobre privilegios sociales y reconocimiento público.

Palabras clave: Islam, mezquita, Cataluña, inmigración.

1. Introduction and methods

In recent years, contention surrounding mosques has become an increasingly common occurrence in Spain, particularly in Catalonia ([Map 1](#)). Since 1990, residents of 31 different Catalan municipalities have mobilized in protest of the presence of mosques in their neighborhoods. The high level of opposition elicited by mosques in the region has had important social, political, and legal ramifications. According to Moreras (2009), there has been a decline in the rate at which new mosques have been opened in Catalonia since 2003, as Muslims have become increasingly fearful of eliciting hostility from local residents. In addition, anti-mosque rhetoric has proven to be a useful resource for conservative and far-right political parties seeking to bolster their support in areas where traditionally they have had little sway. The high prevalence and intensity of opposition to mosques in Catalonia also played a central role in motivating the Generalitat – Catalonia's regional Government – to pass a Law on Centers of Worship¹ in July of 2009. The main impetus for passing the law was to provide clarity and support for local governments faced with managing disputes over the establishment of mosques in the region.

The aim of this article is to explain why opposition to mosques has been so frequent and intense in Catalonia. I draw upon a heterogeneous assortment of data derived from Spanish media coverage

1. Llei 16/2009 dels centres de culte.

of mosque conflicts, national and regional surveys, and semi-structured interviews. My review of Spanish media enabled me to document the prevalence of opposition to mosques in Catalonia and other Spanish regions.² The data I gathered from national and regional surveys allowed me to see broad trends in attitudes and associations regarding immigration and religious diversity, and the information I collected from semi-structured interviews enabled me to access the meanings and motivations that have underpinned opposition to mosques.³

MAP 1. Sites of mosque opposition in Spain



SOURCE: Author's review of Spanish press coverage and SOS Racismo's annual reports on racism in Spain.

To begin, let me clarify that the phrase “mosque opposition” refers here to organized attempts by local communities to shut down an existing mosque or to prevent the establishment of a new one. In most instances, such opposition has occurred through petition campaigns that aim to dissuade local governments from authorizing the use of a given locale for worship. These campaigns generally have been organized either by neighborhood associations or by *ad hoc* pressure

2. I relied primarily upon the online databases of *My News* (1995–2010) and *WebIslam* (1997–2010). I conducted supplementary searches of articles indexed directly by *ABC*, *El País*, and *La Vanguardia*, whose electronic archives date back to 1995, 1976, and 1881 respectively. I also analyzed the annual reports of SOS Racismo (1995–2009), which contain a significant amount of information on mosque opposition in Spain.

3. I conducted 77 interviews in Barcelona, Badalona, Mataró, Santa Coloma de Gramenet, and Viladecans between 2008 and 2010. Interviewees included members of neighborhood associations and local residents, leaders of Muslim religious and cultural associations, municipal and regional government officials and bureaucrats, intercultural mediators, journalists, and Catholic priests.

groups formed specifically for the purpose of opposing mosques. In addition to initiating petition campaigns, residents have taken to the streets on occasion in protest of mosques. Notable anti-mosque demonstrations have taken place in Badalona, Mataró, Premià de Mar, Reus, Salt, Santa Coloma de Gramenet, and Viladecans. My focus here on *organized* opposition raises the question of whether the comparatively high degree of hostility elicited by mosques in Catalonia reflects something distinctive about public sentiment in the region or whether it has resulted from the generally activist character of the communities where Muslims have tended to settle. It could be, for instance, that anti-mosque sentiment is similarly strong across Spanish regions, but that neighborhood communities in Catalonia are better organized and therefore more likely to engage in protest actions.

As I will explain below, the fact that many of the communities where mosques have been established have a legacy of activism dating back to the urban movement that took place during the waning years of Franco's regime has certainly influenced their propensity to engage in organized protest. Nevertheless, recent survey data show that it is also the case that residents of Catalonia, on the whole, feel more negatively toward mosques than residents of other Spanish regions. A study conducted in 2009 by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), for instance, finds that 54% of respondents from Catalonia believe that opposing mosques is acceptable, compared to just 34% of respondents from other Spanish regions.⁴ Anti-mosque sentiment in Catalonia, moreover, is not confined to a conservative segment of the region's population, but rather cuts across the political spectrum. The following table shows how attitudes toward mosques break down by political orientation, according to a recent survey conducted by the Generalitat's Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió (CEO).

TABLE 1. Attitudes toward mosque opposition in Catalonia by political orientation

	Party voted for in the last regional election						
	PP N = 79	CiU N = 323	PSC N = 153	ERC N = 74	ICV N = 57	Did not vote N = 494	
People's protest against the construction of a mosque in their neighborhood	49.0%	25.6%	24.5%	30.5%	15.0%	22.9%	Very acceptable
	25.9%	41.5%	33.0%	32.4%	31.5%	31.5%	Pretty acceptable
	10.7%	21.1%	20.6%	22.2%	35.4%	24.1%	Not very acceptable
	5.6%	7.7%	13.3%	7.0%	15.1%	12.1%	Unacceptable
	8.8%	3.4%	8.3%	5.0%	3.1%	8.5%	Does not know
	0.6%	0.7%	0.3%	2.9%	0.0%	0.9%	No answer

SOURCE: CEO (2010). REO 638: *Percepció dels catalans i catalanes sobre la immigració*. Generalitat de Catalunya.

Although respondents who voted for conservative parties, particularly the PP (75%), were the most accepting of opposition to mosques, a majority of respondents who voted for the PSC (58%) and the ERC (63%) also found opposition to mosques to be acceptable. Even 47% of respondents who voted for the ICV, the region's most liberal and left-wing party, approved of mosque opposition.

4. See: CIS (2009). Study #2817: *Actitudes hacia la inmigración III*.

Given that anti-mosque sentiment cuts across the political spectrum in Catalonia, it is unlikely that the high prevalence of opposition to mosques in the region is attributable to the presence of a small group of xenophobic activists or to general social conservatism. Interestingly, the CEO survey additionally finds that anti-mosque sentiment is slightly greater among those who identify primarily as “Spanish” than among those who identify primarily as “Catalan.” This, along with the fact that several of the most intense mosque conflicts in Catalonia have occurred in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, suggests that anti-mosque sentiment in the region is not reducible to the strong nationalism of its inhabitants, as some have argued (cf. Prado, 2008).

What then accounts for the high level of hostility toward mosques in Catalonia? In answering this question, I treat opposition to mosques in Catalonia as a “demi-regularity,” which Lawson (1998, p. 149) defines as a “partial event regularity which *prima facie* indicates the occasional, but less than universal, actualization of a mechanism or tendency, over a definite region of time-space.” My analysis thus presumes that the high level of conflict over mosques in Catalonia is not random, but rather has resulted from the presence of a series of factors specific to the Catalan context. With that said, my aim is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the origins of every instance of opposition to mosques in the region: each episode of mosque contention has its own set of idiosyncratic features that must be taken into account when explaining the timing and intensity of residents’ opposition, the specific actors involved, and the extent to which conflict escalates or dissipates over time. Nor do I intend to specify a list of conditions under which opposition to mosques will necessarily occur in any given instance. My goal is rather to illuminate a set of factors that have made mosques particularly *vulnerable* to opposition in Catalonia. In so doing, I will provide insight into several commonalities found among the numerous episodes of mosque conflict that have occurred in the region.

2. The precarious status of Muslims in Catalonia

Part of the difficulty with explaining the high level of hostility toward mosques in Catalonia derives from the strong linkages that exist between Islam and immigration in the region. As Casanova (2007) argues, “This entails a superimposition of different dimensions of otherness that exacerbates issues of boundaries, accommodation, and incorporation. The immigrant, the religious, the racial, and the socioeconomic disprivileged other all tend to coincide” (p. 61). Given that the term *Muslim* has strong ethnic and class connotations that extend beyond its primary signification as a religious category, it is important not to assume *a priori* that conflicts surrounding mosques are reducible to “Islamophobia,” a catch-all term that has been relied upon to do far too much analytical work in explaining contention over mosques and other symbols of Muslim presence (Maussen, 2005).

Building on this point, it is noteworthy that anti-mosque campaigns began to become commonplace in Catalonia prior to September 11th, 2001. Protests against mosques in Banyoles (1999), Granollers (2001), Lleida (2001), Mataró (2001), Premià de Mar (2001), and Reus (2000) all commenced before September 2001. Nevertheless, as public attention has shifted increasingly to the dangers of Islamic extremism, academics and non-academics alike have tended to overlook other dimensions of mosque conflict that are equally important to consider. To be sure, prejudices and fears of Islam are certainly present in Catalonia and have undoubtedly contributed to the susceptibility of Muslims in the region to discrimination. However, explaining why contention over mosques has been more prevalent and intense in Catalonia than in other Spanish regions requires a more nuanced understanding of how generalized prejudices and fears have interacted with factors specific to the Catalan context.

According to the aforementioned 2009 CIS survey, residents of Catalonia feel more negatively than other Spaniards not only toward mosques, but also toward North Africans and Muslims more generally. As part of the survey, respondents were asked to identify an immigrant group that they dislike the most. The following [table](#) compares answers given by respondents from Catalonia and the rest of Spain:

TABLE 2. Least preferred immigrant groups in Catalonia and the rest of Spain

	Catalonia N = 435	Rest of Spain N = 2,401
Moroccans, other North African nationalities, Arabs, <i>moros</i> or Muslims	37.1 %	18.8 %
Africans, Sub-Saharan, Senegalese, Nigerians or Blacks	0.9 %	1.7 %
Latin Americans, Ecuadorians, Argentines, Peruvians, Colombians or other Latin American nationalities	6.6 %	5.7 %
Eastern Europeans, Romanians, Bulgarians or other Eastern European nationalities	11.1 %	19.5 %
Asians, Chinese, or other Asian nationalities	3.3 %	1.2 %
No group	33.7 %	46.5 %
Other	7.3 %	6.6 %

SOURCE: CIS (2009). Study #2817: *Actitudes hacia la inmigración III*.

The relatively high degree of antipathy felt toward North Africans and Muslims in Catalonia is traceable, in part, to their strong numeric presence in the region. Although Andalusia and other Spanish regions are closer in proximity than Catalonia to Morocco – the chief sender of Muslim immigrants to Spain – Catalonia is home to the country’s largest Muslim population. A recent study carried out by the Observatorio Andalusi (2010) estimates there to be 368,000 Muslims residing in Catalonia. The vast majority are of Moroccan origin, though the region’s Pakistani, Senegalese, and Gambian populations have grown significantly in recent years.⁵ According to the Observatorio de Pluralismo Religioso en España, about one fifth of Spain’s 989 Muslim communities are located in Catalonia.

The large size of Catalonia’s Muslim (and particularly Moroccan) population has generated immediate associations between immigration, on the one hand, and the presence of North Africans and Muslims, on the other. Table 3 compares the top answers given by respondents from Catalonia and from the rest of Spain to the following question: “When talking about immigrants who live in Spain, whom do you think about most immediately?”

As shown by the table, residents of Catalonia are much more likely than the typical Spaniard to associate immigration with the presence of North Africans and Muslims.

The tendency of those who reside in Catalonia to single out North Africans and Muslims as the prototypical immigrants in the region does not derive solely from their large numeric presence. Indeed, census data indicate that there are actually more foreign nationals from Latin America (390,000) than from North Africa (245,000) in the region. Nevertheless, 55% of Catalans identify “Maghrebians” or “Arabs” as the largest immigrant group in the region, while just 23% identify Latin Americans as the largest immigrant group.⁶

5. There are nearly 234,000 Moroccan nationals residing in Catalonia. Pakistanis now number over 35,000 and have concentrated largely in the Barcelona area. There are also over 20,000 Senegalese and nearly 17,000 Gambians in Catalonia, many of whom reside in the county of Maresme.

6. CEO (2010). REO 638: *Percepció dels catalans i catalanes sobre la immigració*. Generalitat de Catalunya.

This misperception may be attributed, in part, to the fact that Moroccans have a relatively strong and enduring presence in a number of municipalities across Catalonia, whereas Latin Americans and other newly-arriving groups have only recently begun to disperse to areas outside of Barcelona (Bayona i Carrasco, 2008). In addition, Moroccans and other Muslim immigrants have faced a much higher level of scrutiny from the media, public administrators, social analysts and other actors that are influential in shaping public opinion, particularly since the attacks of September 11th, 2001 in the US and March 2004 in Madrid (Moreras, 2009).

TABLE 3. Groups most immediately associated with immigration in Catalonia and the rest of Spain

	Catalonia N = 435	Rest of Spain N = 2,401
Moroccans, other North African nationalities, Arabs, <i>moros</i> or Muslims	45.3 %	19.9 %
Africans, Sub-Saharan, Senegalese, Nigerians or Blacks	8.1 %	14.4 %
Latin Americans, Ecuadorians, Argentines, Peruvians, Colombians or other Latin American nationalities	21.7 %	23.5 %
Eastern Europeans, Romanians, Bulgarians or other Eastern European nationalities	3.8 %	14.2 %
Asians, Chinese, or other Asian nationalities	3.3 %	1.1 %
Other	17.9 %	26.8 %

SOURCE: CIS (2009). Study #2817: *Actitudes hacia la inmigración III*.

Perceptions of Moroccans and Muslims as the prototypical immigrants in Catalonia have led mosques in the region to become iconic symbols not only of religious difference, but also of immigration and “foreignness” more generally. Long-time residents commonly associate their presence with an assortment of social problems (i.e., crime, drugs, and the formation of ethnic ghettos) that they attribute to the growing presence of immigrants in their neighborhoods. Although these problems may have little, if anything, to do with mosques *per se*, the fact that mosques are concrete and tangible structures that symbolize the durable presence of Muslim communities makes them a convenient target for those who perceive immigration as a chief cause of the difficulties afflicting their neighborhoods. This is reflected in the remarks of Mohammed Halhoul, a spokesman for the Islamic Cultural Council of Catalonia:

Of course when people connect immigration, Islam, and sometimes other social issues in a neighborhood [or] a city, this can be a factor that somewhat complicates the presence of a prayer room, no? ... It depends on the area where you are, how the local atmosphere is, how the social environment is. Because if there are social conflicts, of course, it is possible that people will treat the mosque or the prayer room as nothing more than a “scapegoat” as they call it – in other words, as a pretext for a conflict that already existed, like conflict related to marginalization, to areas where drugs are sold, to areas where there is poverty... In these areas, a problem with protest against a prayer room might emerge very quickly. By contrast, in areas where people live normally, where all segments of society are present... there aren't [problems]. If a prayer room is created, people don't think about it – they don't care because there aren't conflicts.

Halhoul's comments bring attention to how anti-mosque protests in Catalonia often serve as a pretext for residents to voice broader concerns related to the impact of immigration on the quality and image of their communities. He astutely observes that such protests are especially likely to emerge in contexts where powerful associations are drawn between Islam, immigration, and urban marginality.

3. Migration and urbanization in Catalonia

The presence of powerful associations between Islam, immigration, and urban marginality in Catalonia has been exacerbated by the strong socio-spatial divisions that exist in historically industrial cities where Muslim immigrants have tended to settle, especially those located in the Barcelona area. Prior to explaining how such divisions have contributed to the precarious status of Muslims and physical symbols of their presence in the region, it is necessary to explain their precise character and the manner in which they have developed over time.

Historically industrial cities in Catalonia such as Badalona, Mataró, and Terrassa are commonly characterized by pronounced divisions between peripheral Spanish-speaking neighborhoods inhabited primarily by working-class internal Spanish migrants and their offspring, on the one hand, and more affluent central neighborhoods composed of either long-time residents whose roots in Catalonia extend for generations or internal migrants who have been able to elevate their social status and economic standing over time. Whereas central neighborhoods are relatively well-accommodated, host an assortment of upscale commercial enterprises, and are inhabited by middle- and upper-middle-class residents, peripheral neighborhoods are often severely lacking in municipal services and inhabited almost exclusively by the working class.

The divisions between central and peripheral neighborhoods typical of municipalities in Barcelona are traceable to the area's development through successive waves of migration. Migration to Barcelona was originally driven by its strong industrial sector. While most regions of Spain did not industrialize until the 20th century, Barcelona underwent significant industrialization during the 19th century. The demand for labor generated by its industries attracted migrants from rural areas of Catalonia and other regions of Spain (Recaño & Solana, 1998). The largest wave of internal Spanish migration to the region occurred during the 1950s, when a new philosophy of economic development rooted in greater openness to the outside world enabled Spain to take advantage of foreign investment and tourism, producing a tremendous economic boom commonly known as the "Spanish miracle" (Harrison, 1985). The infusion of capital to the country during the decades that followed generated significant industrial development in certain regions, most notably Catalonia, Madrid, Valencia, and the Basque Country. The concentration of economic growth in these regions led them to receive a large influx of workers from poorer and more rural parts of Spain.

The entry of internal migrants to Catalonia during this period came to be known colloquially as the "pacific invasion" (Giner, 1980). Spanish migrants from Andalusia, Extremadura, Murcia, and other regions that were distant geographically, culturally, and linguistically were viewed as "foreign invaders" who threatened the established way of life in Catalonia. Upon arriving in Barcelona, Spanish migrants faced a significant degree of discrimination and spatial segregation (Candel, 1965; Esteva Fabregat, 1973). Their difficulties integrating into urban life resulted, in part, from the broader context of national struggle taking place under Franco's dictatorship. In an effort to centralize Spain, Franco banned the use of Catalan in public life and discouraged its everyday usage through propaganda campaigns. The rapid entry of internal, Spanish-speaking migrants to Catalonia was perceived by many as part of the general assault upon the region's language and culture (Colomer, 1986). Consequently, economic barriers to social and geographic mobility within the city were reinforced by cultural barriers linked to regional identity.

Arguably more important than the exclusivity of native residents, however, were a host of urban factors that limited the integration of internal migrants into the cities in which they settled. By the

time of the major boom in migration that took place between the late-1950s and mid-1970s, many city centers in the Barcelona area were already well-developed, densely populated, and expensive, largely due to the transformations brought about by prior waves of rural-to-urban migration.⁷ In combination with a general lack of urban planning and regulation, as well as rampant speculation by corrupt Francoist officials, this led to the relegation of internal migrants to marginalized peripheral neighborhoods composed of shanties and other types of seriously deficient “infra-housing” (Costa et al., 2003).

Although improvements were made to poorer neighborhoods following Spain’s transition to democracy in 1978, significant disparities have remained between central and peripheral neighborhoods in the Barcelona area. This has led to the persistence of large discrepancies in the cost of housing across urban neighborhoods. These discrepancies, in turn, have led newly-arriving foreign immigrants, most of whom are working-class, to concentrate heavily in delimited areas, generally in peripheral neighborhoods that historically have been home to internal Spanish migrants. A recent study by López Redondo and Rey Carneiro (2008) demonstrates that the concentration of foreign immigrants in delimited areas reaches more extreme levels in Barcelona, especially in cities that have been characterized by mosque opposition, than in other metropolitan areas with large Muslim populations, such as Madrid and Valencia. With respect to Muslim immigrants in particular, Martori and Hoberg (2008) find that immigrants from Morocco and Pakistan are among the most segregated groups in Catalonia.

4. Ethnic concentration, territorial stigmatization, and opposition to mosques

The heavy concentration of Muslims and other foreign immigrants in specific neighborhoods in the Barcelona area has generated concerns about the formation of what residents commonly call *ghettos*. The perception that immigrants have “colonized” certain neighborhoods is reflected in local terms and expressions used to describe neighborhoods with large immigrant populations. The most well-known example comes from the capital city of Barcelona itself, where the name *Ravalistan* is used to describe the city’s Raval neighborhood, which hosts the area’s largest Pakistani community. But examples may also be found in other municipalities in the area, such as Mataró, where the working-class neighborhood of Rocafonda is commonly called *Rocamora*, due to its large population of North African immigrants.⁸ As Josep Lluís, a 76-year-old residing in Rocafonda, explains:

[I]n the rest of the city of Mataró, instead of being Rocafonda, you will see that it is called *Rocamora*... It is a play on the words *Rocafonda* / *Rocamora* because we have a very high number of people from the Maghreb, as we do of people from whichever culture, eh? It doesn’t matter whether you’re from a low-[status] culture or a middle-[status] one – regardless, they call us “moros” and they call us “Rocamora.” We are trying... to look for ways and manners to get... people from outside our neighborhood to come here and to realize that, as the saying goes, “The lion is not as fierce as he is portrayed.” That is, it is not, by any stretch of the imagination, so ugly, so unsafe, so...

Like Rocafonda, many of the neighborhoods in the Barcelona area that were originally constructed for internal Spanish migrants and have now become home to large foreign immigrant populations suffer from what Wacquant (2007) has termed “territorial stigmatization.” According to Wacquant, certain places come to be known as “urban hellholes” rampant with “violence, vice,

7. In addition to the jobs generated by Barcelona’s strong industrial production, earlier migrants to the area had been attracted by employment opportunities afforded by the World Fairs of 1888 and 1929, as well as the construction of Barcelona’s metropolitan train system in the 1920s.

8. Opposition to a mosque in Rocafonda forced the Muslim community in the area to search for another venue to locate its mosque in 2001.

and dereliction.” A stigma of place is consequently superimposed on residents already stigmatized for their class, ethnic, or immigrant status. In an effort to evade such stigma, residents attempt to separate themselves symbolically from others living in the vicinity by engaging in practices of “lateral denigration and mutual distancing,” which undermine possibilities for communal solidarity (Wacquant, 2007, pp. 67-68).

The intense opposition that mosques have encountered in the Barcelona area must be understood in light of the more general anxieties that residents have regarding the ethnicization and ghettoization of their neighborhoods. Mosques are perceived by many as symbolic of the actual or potential transformation of their neighborhoods into hubs of immigrant concentration. Not only do they signify the durable presence of Muslim immigrants, but they are also viewed as “magnets” that attract more immigrants to a given area and actively contribute to the development of ethnic ghettos.⁹ Such a view is expressed in the following excerpt from a manifesto opposing a mosque in Badalona in 2009. The manifesto states:

[W]e the residents of Sant Roc and Artigas do not estimate that the opening of a mosque in our neighborhood is acceptable, in these moments, for [the sake of] coexistence and for [the sake of] impeding our conversion into a ghetto, if we are not one already. We are concerned that the mosque, moreover, will be converted into a county-wide referent for Muslims, leading to an even greater over-occupation of public spaces which generates problems of coexistence.

The argument advanced by the authors of the manifesto that increased immigration has led to the degradation of public spaces is one that has surfaced quite frequently during episodes of contention over mosques in Catalonia. Not only do residents voice complaints about the noise, traffic, parking problems, and overcrowding generated by mosques, but they also commonly assert that mosques and the populations they attract contribute to the deterioration of public spaces that were once integral to the social life of their communities.

The perceived degradation of public space also sparks memories of past neglect by public authorities, who are often accused of favoring minorities and failing to address the challenges generated by immigration. Indeed, some of the most potent mosque conflicts in the region have centered on the cession of public land and buildings to Muslim communities for the establishment of mosques. In such instances, those opposing mosques have argued that government property should instead be used for libraries, day care centers, police stations, or other public facilities, highlighting how mosque conflicts are commonly bound up with broader struggles over public recognition and resources (cf. Moreras, 2008).

5. Urban privilege and neighborhood defense

Not all opposition to mosques has occurred in the most marginal of neighborhoods, or in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations. In some cases, Muslim communities have attempted to establish mosques in middle-class neighborhoods or in working-class neighborhoods

9. According to newspaper reports, concerns about the formation of ghettos have been associated with the presence of mosques in a number of Catalan municipalities, including Badalona, Banyoles, Igualada, Lleida, Premià de Mar, Reus, Sant Feliu de Guíxols, and Viladecans. It is important to note, however, that although residents often refer to their neighborhoods as *ghettos*, these neighborhoods are quite distinct from traditional racial or ethnic ghettos found in the US. That is, they are not ethnically homogenous, the majority of residents are still native to Spain, and they remain functionally tied to more affluent neighborhoods. Indeed, it is precisely because these neighborhoods are still populated primarily by the native born and benefit from a decent level of urban infrastructure and amenities that they have taken on the features of what Suttles (1972) has called *defended neighborhoods*, including sharp boundary definition and defense, and practices of exclusivity toward those perceived as outsiders.

of higher status, often at the behest of city governments trying to evade mosque conflict and ethnic clustering by ceding property in neighborhoods with smaller immigrant populations. Nevertheless, opposition has emerged in many of these neighborhoods as well. In explaining why mosques have encountered opposition in these settings, it is once again essential to highlight the important role played by the configuration of urban space and local conceptions of privilege and marginality.

Residents of more affluent neighborhoods are often aware of the negative image that poorer neighborhoods have acquired as a result of being focal points of immigrant concentration, and they desire to avoid sharing the same fate. For this reason, some of the most intense anti-mosque campaigns have been initiated in relatively well-off neighborhoods. This is, in part, because residents of these neighborhoods have more privileges to defend. They worry, for instance, that property values might decline as more immigrants move to the area, or that crime and drugs might enter their neighborhoods from poorer areas along with the populations served by mosques.

A particularly salient example of opposition in a higher status neighborhood comes from Mataró. In 2001, pressure from residents to close a mosque in Rocafonda, a neighborhood with one of the largest immigrant populations in the city, led the local Muslim community to seek space for a mosque in a nearby area with very few immigrants. The mosque was to be located on Herrera St. at the border between L'Havana and Escorxador, two relatively high status neighborhoods in the city. The building designated for the mosque was located just outside the limits of El Palau and Rocafonda, which are known for their large immigrant populations (Map 2).

Upon learning of the Muslim community's plans in March 2001, 200 residents of L'Havana and Escorxador assembled and selected ten residents to head a commission against the establishment of the mosque in the neighborhood.¹⁰ Some complained that the space reserved for the mosque should instead be used for a pre-school, a park, or a soccer field, and that the city government's support for the proposal reflected its failure to prioritize the needs of the neighborhood.¹¹ Others expressed fear that social problems associated with El Palau and Rocafonda, such as crime and drugs, would enter the area along with those attending the mosque. Juan, a resident who was present in Mataró at the time of the conflict, recalls:

...[T]he neighborhood of El Palau and Rocafonda is a sort of enclosure with a border that is more or less delimited. When it was proposed that the mosque be placed a little further out, where they were anticipating the establishment of a series of apartments that, although not of high standing, were very well-valued because they were near the beach – this then was a *casus belli*. It was a manner of saying “We won't tolerate it”... Placing the mosque there meant a spilling over of the neighborhood El Palau / Rocafonda, which people had already more or less labeled.

Residents of L'Havana and Escorxador feared that the establishment of a mosque in the area might blur the boundaries that separated their neighborhoods from the stigmatized neighborhoods of El Palau and Rocafonda. To them, the proposed mosque signified the expansion of an emergent ghetto which threatened the privileges that accompanied residence in a “peaceful” neighborhood. Opposing the mosque was perceived by residents as an effective way to shield their neighborhoods from the dangers associated with the large-scale entry of foreign immigrants, most notably Moroccans, in Mataró at the time. A little over a month after forming the anti-mosque commission, residents submitted over 7,000 signatures to the city government in protest of the proposed mosque.¹² In the face of such strong popular opposition, the Muslim community abandoned its project to establish a mosque in the neighborhood.

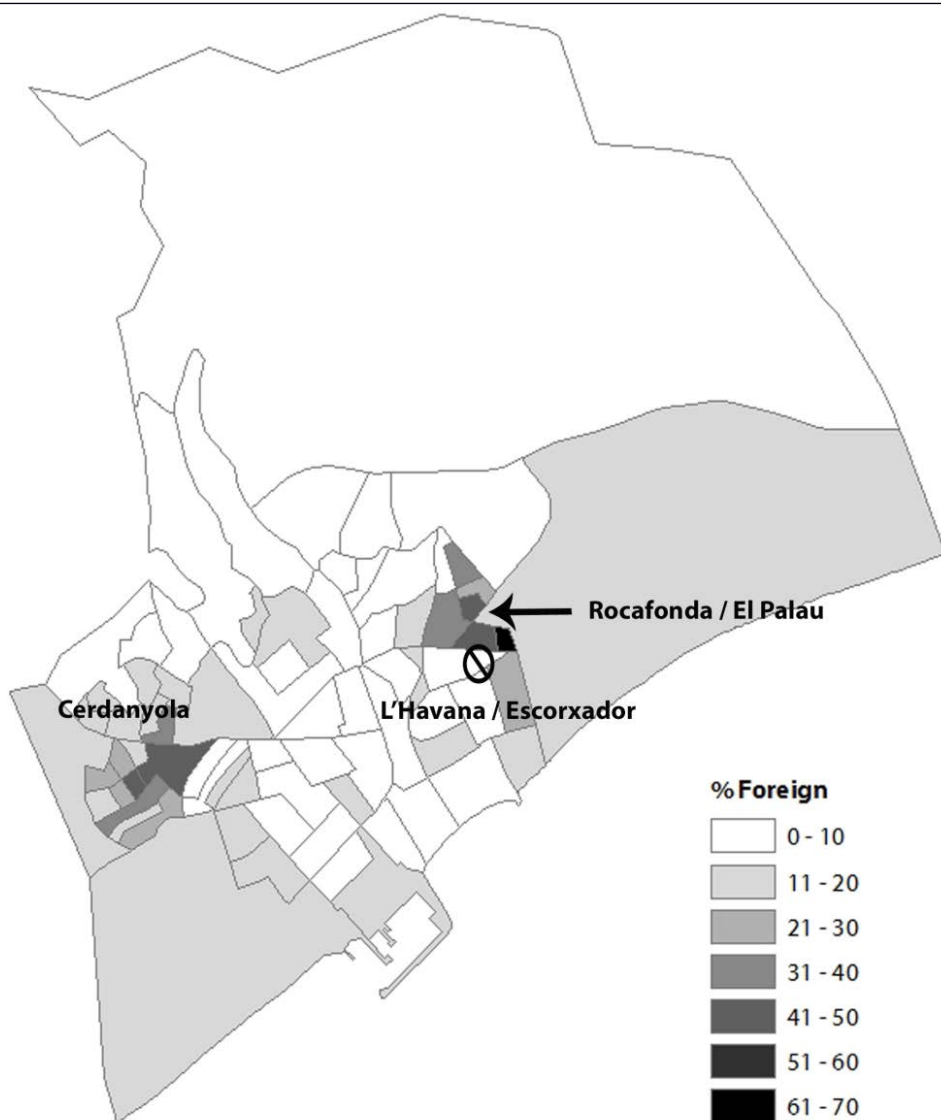
10. “Veïns de Mataró s'oposen a la construcció d'una mesquita al seu barri.” (2001). *Avui*, March 20.

11. “Creix l'oposició veïnal contra el pla per fer una mesquita a Mataró.” (2001). *Avui*, March 21.

12. “Vecinos de Mataró recogen 7.000 firmas en contra de la construcción de una mezquita.” (2001). *El País*, May 1.

Although the complaints voiced by residents about mosques in higher status neighborhoods such as L'Havana and Escorxador are different than the complaints raised by residents in poorer neighborhoods, both are tied to the power of mosques to catalyze struggles over urban privilege. Those residing in marginalized neighborhoods oppose mosques as part of a broader effort to elevate the status of their neighborhoods relative to more affluent neighborhoods, or at least to prevent further marginalization and stigmatization. Those who reside in higher status areas, by contrast, oppose mosques as part of a broader effort to protect themselves from the stigma and problems suffered by marginalized neighborhoods. In both cases, residents look beyond the boundaries of their own neighborhoods to evaluate the potential impact that mosques and the populations they serve will have on the quality and image of their communities.

MAP 2. Distribution of foreign nationals across census tracts in Mataró.



SOURCE: INE, 2008 municipal census data.

6. Mosque conflict and the incorporation of Muslims in Catalonia

As a result of the opposition that mosques have elicited in Catalonia, there is an extreme dearth of space for Muslim communities to pray. The garages and apartments that they currently use as provisional prayer rooms are often inadequate to accommodate their growing numbers. Consequently, it is not uncommon for worshipers to spill out onto the streets on Fridays and major holidays. This has reinforced associations drawn between Islam, social disorder, and urban degradation. In some instances, Muslims have been compelled to pray in plazas, parks, and gymnasiums, further contributing to perceptions that they are “colonizing” public and communal spaces. Opposition to mosques in the region has thus contributed to the very conditions and associations that account for its emergence.

In several municipalities, local authorities have attempted to avert conflict by encouraging the establishment of mosques on industrial estates (*polígonos industriales*) that are located at a distance from residential areas.¹³ Some have called this new pattern of mosque establishment *Islam from the estate* (*islam del polígono*).¹⁴ There are those who feel that this trend is the best solution to a difficult situation, as industrial warehouses often provide the best option for meeting the increased demand for space by Catalonia’s growing Muslim population. Others, however, have voiced concern that locating mosques on industrial estates will contribute to the segregation and exclusion of Muslims from social life. Jordi Griñó, an architect and urban planner who was hired to evaluate the possibility of moving the main mosque of Lleida from the city center to an industrial estate, concluded that such an action would involve “the segregation of a group to an isolated and inappropriate area that in no way favors relations with other strata of society.” He added that it “[e]ntails a distancing and isolation in the social order” that violates “the municipal legislation of the region.”¹⁵

Griñó and others opposed to the trend of locating mosques on industrial estates argue that, although this practice may provide a short-term solution to the conflicts that have emerged, it contributes to the peripheralization of Islam from urban life, hinders residents from growing accustomed to mosques in their neighborhoods, and delays the process of cultural and religious acceptance. Critics of “Islam from the estate” have also raised concerns about how the spatial isolation of mosques fosters the conditions under which extremist elements within Islam thrive. A report by the Mossos d’Esquadra, for instance, concluded that militant Salafist groups commonly elect to establish mosques on industrial estates, as they prefer discretion and privacy. Whether or not there is any truth to such claims, they speak to how the establishment of mosques on industrial estates may exacerbate, rather than alleviate, fears of Islamic radicalism.

Although the high degree of opposition to mosques in Catalonia has forced several Muslim communities to pray in locations that are inconvenient, undersized, or unsuitable for prayer, the effects of such opposition have not been uniformly detrimental to the integration of Muslims in the region. Cesari (2005) notes that disputes over the establishment of mosques often constitute the first step to dialogue between Muslim immigrants and the broader communities in which they reside. Given that the presence of Muslims in contemporary Spain is still relatively new, their engagement with civil society and the residents alongside whom they coexist is often quite minimal. In Catalonia, however, Muslims have been forced to be proactive and innovative in reaching out to local communities and convincing residents of their intention to live in accordance with local norms and values.

The efforts of Muslim leaders have been complemented by those of community activists and government officials seeking to promote tolerance of diversity and more peaceful inter-

13. According to Moreras (2009), there are between 15 and 20 mosques located on industrial estates in Catalonia.

14. CARRANCO, Rebeca; VISA, Lluís (2010). “Los riesgos del ‘islam de polígono.’” *El País*, September 22.

15. VISA, Lluís (2010). “Un informe judicial afirma que abrir mezquitas en polígonos es ‘segregar.’” *El País*, September 21.

ethnic and interreligious relations. Indeed, initiatives that aim to promote cultural and religious understanding, tolerance, and interaction have generally been more common in Catalonia than in other parts of Spain. With that said, Muslims in the region continue to confront significant barriers to acceptance, as evidenced by the growing influence of far-right groups, such as the *Plataforma per Catalunya*, and the persistence of prejudicial attitudes among a large segment of the general population.

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