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Al-Andalus, a myth or an example and a solution to bring the two shores closer ?



*Representation of the Mediterranean sea in the Middle Ages.
From the "Catalan Atlas of Cresques Abraham" (1375, reproduced in 1959).*

Al-Andalus refers to the Muslim-ruled area of the Iberian Peninsula, which existed between 711 and 1492. The term is used to name the former Islamic states settled in the current territories of Spain, Portugal, Southern France and Gibraltar. At its greatest geographical extent, it occupied most of the peninsula under Umayyad rule. However, these boundaries changed constantly through these seven centuries, marked by the Christian "Reconquista".

Known as a period of prosperity and supposedly peaceful coexistence between conquering and conquered peoples - especially Catholic, Jews and Muslim faithful - Al-Andalus has been the subject of much research, as its political, religious and societal structure questioned the medieval historians. As part of the "Two Shores Youth Scheme" seminar, organized by the Mediterranean Foundation of Strategic Studies, we analyze, in the essay, if this period of our common history could be used as an inspiration to foster the cooperation between the States of the Mediterranean region.

I. Historical background : Al-Andalus model

Before the Islamic conquest, the Iberian Peninsula was governed by the Visigoths. In the 5th century AD, the Visigoths began their domination of the Peninsula after expelling the Vandals, who subsequently set their sights on North Africa. The Romans eventually drove the Vandals out of North Africa in 543 AD. Originally, the Vandals had taken control of the Iberian Peninsula in the 3rd century, and the region's named, Vandalusia - meaning "Land of the Vandals" - derives from them. The Arabs later renamed it Andalusia, or Al-Andalus in Arabic.



It is not well known that the invasion of Spain occurred due to a combination of Muslim preparedness to attack and a request for help from a faction of the Visigoths known as the “Witizans.” After King Witiza's death in 710, the Witizans lost their power and sought assistance from Musa Ibn Nusayr (Ummayyad Dynasty governor in the west) to combat the usurper Roderick. In response, Musa sent an Amazigh army, led by Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād, across the strait now called the Strait of Gibraltar, named after Jabal al-Ṭāriq. By July 711 AD, they had achieved a decisive victory over Roderick in battle. The Islamic state of Al-Andalus survived for seven centuries, from the 8th century to the 15th century AD.

- Demography :

The swift success of Islamic forces in Hispania can be attributed to the lack of unified integration within Hispano-Visigoth society. The Jewish community, in particular, was antagonistic towards the Christian government due to stringent legal ordinances in Toledo. The Muslim conquest brought several benefits: taxes were generally lower than during the later Visigoth period; serfs who converted to Islam (known as mawālī) were elevated to freedmen status and became dependents of victorious nobility; and Jews, no longer persecuted, gained equal status with the remaining Hispano-Romans and Goths. Consequently, a new society emerged in 8th-century Muslim Spain. Arabs constituted the elite class, divided into those who entered Spain in 712 under Musa, and the Syrians who arrived in 740 under Balj ibn Bishr. The Imazighen, who were the main force in the invasion and continuously augmented by African reinforcements, were below the Arabs in status. The native converts to Islam, the musālimah, and their descendants, the muwallads, formed the bulk of the population, with many tied to Arabs through patronage of Amazigh origin. Christians and Jews who retained their original religions were lower in the social hierarchy and dwindled over time. The lowest group comprised slaves, both captives from Northern Spain and Europe, and black captives or mercenaries.

- Economical activities :

Agriculture was the most important economic activity in Al-Andalus and Muslims introduced significant technological innovations.

- Governance :

The political authority present in the city was either sovereign - such as the Umayyad Caliph in Cordoba, the Nasrid Sultan in Granada - or delegated, such as the Sayyid of Seville representing the Almohad Caliph of Marrakech. In both instances, the political authority in the city was involved in urban administration, either directly or through agents dependent on this authority, in order to maintain order and uphold the framework of urban life. In the cities, order was maintained by police and judicial institutions connected to political authority, characterized by a complex system combining repressive and judicial power. With regard to the maintenance of urban space, throughout the urban history of Al-Andalus, no aspect of the capital's urban planning- whether it be the city walls, bridges, cemeteries, leper houses, or hospitals - escaped the attention and concern of the governing elites.



- The role of communities :

Various communities (ahl al-, literally meaning "the people of-") were participating in the administration of the city. Described by A. Raymond as "popular institutions", these groups played an active role in urban life even if the political authority did not grant them an official function, as they were acting as intermediaries between the subjects and the authority. The management of major Arab cities in Andalusia mechanisms were hence based on the interaction between authorities and communities. The political power acknowledged the existence of the leaders of these groups without granting them any official status within the city government, or giving them the opportunity to become a counter-power. Instead, it leveraged their authority over the populations to govern them and, consequently, to manage and administer the city.

- Religion coexistence :

Al-Andalus is often seen as a model of tolerant coexistence, a hub of cultural and artistic exchanges between the Arab and European spheres, and a symbol of benevolent globalization in contrast to narrow national identities. However, this idealistic view of inter-communal relations in Medieval Iberia is based on a misunderstanding of the relationship between power and minorities, specifically the status of *ḍimmīs*, the "tribute-paying" or "protected" individuals in Islam. The *ḍimma*, the status of religious minorities in Islamic territories, has been portrayed by some, like Menocal and supporters, as a sign of essential tolerance within Islam.

On the other hand, other researchers, based on different ideological stances, have highlighted the discriminatory aspect of the *ḍimma*, describing it as demeaning. In reality, this legal status is neither solely positive nor negative; it operates on the premise of legal personality, where different legal norms apply to different groups. This communal system ensured the protection of property, individuals, and religious freedom of *ḍimmīs* while establishing the symbolic superiority of Islamic law. It is both unequal and protective, communal and tolerant, allowing groups to manage themselves autonomously within an overarching legal framework, delegating regal prerogatives to the communities. Despite its flexibility, this status is part of a legal framework that could be contested, circumvented, transgressed, or even completely ignored. It is a legal standpoint and does not fully capture the practical interfaith relations within specific territorial enclaves or at the borders of these principalities.

The debate over the inherently tolerant essence or, conversely, the intolerant and militaristic nature of Islam deprives minorities of any initiative, historical protagonism. These minority groups developed autonomous strategies tied to power dynamics to negotiate collectively or more commonly on a familial or individual level. In the 11th century, for instance, the Jews of al-Andalus, represented by figures like Samuel Ben Nagrila who rose to become a vizier and advisor to the Granada prince, established a vizier dynasty. Yet, the power acquired eventually turned against these prominent members of the Andalusian Jewish community, leading to instances of persecution and violence, illustrating the inherent risks in power strategies for not only Arabized Jews and Christians in Islamic territories but also for Muslim communities that survived after Christian conquests like the Mudejars in Aragon from the 13th to early 16th centuries, as extensively detailed by Kathryn Miller.

Therefore, it is not so much the Muslim, Jewish, or Christian religions themselves that are inherently intolerant in the name of which power is exercised, but rather the very essence of power, founded on coercion, that establishes a system of favors, resistances, and sometimes violence. Viziers in the medieval Muslim world are not disgraced because they are Jews; rather, they face disgrace because of



their significant power, posing a threat to sovereign authority and becoming convenient scapegoats when the population is discontent.

Based on this global analysis of Al-Andalus society, we see, in a second part, if certain aspects of this historical period can serve as inspiration to strengthen cooperation between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

II. Al-Andalus, an inspiration for modern cooperation in the Mediterranean region

- Politics : The "myth" of Al-Andalus in the building of Nation-States and European identity

As we have seen precedently, the political structure of Al-Andalus was very diverse, as the territory changed, during its seven-centuries-long history. However, centuries later, Al-Andalus organization inspired the intellectuals and political powers for the construction of European nation-states, especially the Spanish one.

First of all, in the 18th century, Al-Andalus "myth" was used, in the mark of the "Enlightenment", by historians and philosophers - especially French and English ones - to undertake the construction of a universal narrative about European history, in order to create a European identity (Gabriel Martinez-Gros, 2017). Doing that, they acknowledged the role and the importance of Greek and Arabic civilizations in the past of the continent.

Then, in the XXe century, after forty years of dictatorship, Al-Andalus inheritance played a key role in the building of the Spanish democratic State. The "myth" of a good cohabitation between different religious groups, notably due to the involvement of religious leaders, inspired the relationship between the Spanish State and the religious communities.

In 1992, the cooperation agreements between the Spanish State and the Islamic Commission of Spain, and the Spanish state and the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain, were signed. The objective was to provide Islam and Judaism a legal status, as the 1978 Spanish Constitution restated religious freedom and equal treatment under the law as fundamental rights. In 1999, according to the journalist Cristina L'Homme, "Spain was the only country that had adopted such of a progressive legislation on religion freedom". Even if these agreements and its implementation were imperfect, it led to several initiatives towards the religious minorities, especially in certain autonomous regions such as Catalonia. During this period, Spanish society also underwent a re-reading of its history, marked by greater integration of its Muslim heritage. It was visible during the celebrations of the « Quinto centenario » - the fifth centenary of the "new world discovery" - in 1992, which were marked by "an exaltation of the Serfarade and Muslim heritage of the Iberian Peninsula, says sociologist Danielle Rozenberg.

This trend grew even stronger in the 2000s. After the Madrid attacks of 2004, there was an awareness of the need to foster the coexistence between people from different backgrounds and religions. In 2004, the Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation was created by the government, under the supervision of the Spanish Ministry of Justice. Its mission is to guarantee the exercise of religious freedom and the construction of an adequate framework for coexistence throughout the Spanish State. Nowadays, according to a survey from the UCIDE (Union of Islamic Communities of Spain), 67% of Spanish Muslims feel comfortable in Spanish society.



- Religion : an inspiration for religious coexistence

The religious situation in modern society is at a low ebb. Long considered an example to follow, the history of al-Andalus, in religious terms, shows a fluctuation between periods of tolerance and coercion, reflecting the impact of power politics on religious freedom. Recognizing these complexities is crucial for a nuanced analysis. It helps to understand that religious coexistence is often conditioned by political and economic factors, rather than by pure theological tolerance. This understanding can inform modern policies by highlighting the importance of political and legal structures that protect minorities and promote religious freedom. Reflecting on the eras of tolerance in al-Andalus can inspire contemporary initiatives for interreligious dialogue. The periods when coexistence was practiced, even if sometimes imperfect, demonstrate that multi-religious societies can thrive.

Modern initiatives should therefore focus on creating and maintaining interreligious dialogue forums, such as Alliance of Civilization Global Forum (UNAOC), where different communities can collaborate and openly discuss their differences and similarities in a respectful and equitable framework. This, while supporting policies and initiatives that promote religious coexistence. In this regard, the United Nations is an excellent actor, notably with resolution A/RES/65/5 setting up World Interfaith Harmony Week.

This can take the form of grants for community projects that promote interreligious dialogue, or policies that encourage fair representations of all religious communities in the media and public forums. By strengthening these initiatives, governments can help create a social climate where peaceful coexistence is the norm rather than the exception. The inclusion of religious leaders in discussions on peace and coexistence is also crucial, to ensure that religious perspectives are directly integrated into conflict resolution strategies as notably recommended by Prof. Beatriz Mesa. Religious leaders often play a key role in mobilizing and influencing their communities, and their participation can help ensure that coexistence agreements are respected and valued by the faithful. Examining the religious history of al-Andalus offers important lessons for formulating policies aimed at improving interreligious dialogue and coexistence in the contemporary world. Policymakers can leverage these lessons to build more inclusive and peaceful societies, where religious diversity is not only tolerated but actively celebrated as a force for the common good.

- The Geographic Significance of Andalusia

Andalusia, located in southern Spain, has long held a place of immense historical and cultural importance due to its strategic geographic position. We examine whether this region is merely a mythic symbol or a practical example of bridging the divide between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean.

Strategic Location. Andalusia's location, directly facing Morocco across the narrow Strait of Gibraltar, is key to its historical significance. This strait, approximately 14 kilometers wide, serves as both a natural barrier and a crucial bridge for interactions between Europe and Africa. For centuries, it has facilitated the exchange of cultures, ideas, and goods, establishing Andalusia as a focal point for Mediterranean and transcontinental trade routes. The Strait of Gibraltar's strategic importance in maritime navigation ensures Andalusia's pivotal role in connecting the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea, significantly influencing global trade and maritime activities.

Climate and Agriculture. The Mediterranean climate of Andalusia, with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters, is highly conducive to agriculture, a cornerstone of the region's economy. This climate



supports the thriving cultivation of olives, grapes, and citrus fruits, which are not only economically valuable but also integral to the cultural identity and culinary traditions of Andalusia. The region's agricultural output significantly contributes to Spain's position as a leading producer of olive oil and wine, with these products being exported worldwide, thus boosting the local economy and fostering international trade relationships.

A diverse Landscape. Andalusia's landscape is remarkably diverse, featuring coastal plains, fertile river valleys, and the majestic Sierra Nevada mountains. This geographical variety supports a wide range of economic activities. Coastal areas attract millions of tourists annually to its pristine beaches and historic cities. Fertile valleys support extensive agricultural activities, while the mountainous regions are rich in minerals, facilitating mining operations. This environmental diversity not only supports economic resilience by spreading economic activities across different sectors but also enhances the region's attractiveness to tourists and investors alike.

Maritime Significance. Maritime traffic through the Strait of Gibraltar is a critical component of Andalusia's strategic significance. This narrow passage is one of the busiest maritime routes in the world, with thousands of vessels passing through annually. The strait's importance for global shipping means that Andalusia is at the heart of significant maritime logistics and trade operations.

- Economy : A powerful economic zone developed in medieval times

"Foreign trade developed extraordinarily when it became part of the Islamic trade routes with the East and Africa and with the trade of Christian Europe", said M. Torres M (2021). Those economic exchanges allowed culture to flow from one shore to the other, making it important the connection between the two sides, and onto the rest of Europe. The Muslim cosmopolitanism provoked an economic rebirth. The cities were "developed thanks to the revitalization of old trade routes and the opening up of new markets, which made it possible to exchange ideas, products and scientific novelties" (Torres, M. 2021). The main products that were exchanged are cotton, fabrics, wool and some luxury items from Al-Andalus that were exported to the Maghreb and the Orient.

Currently, the major ports of Andalusia, such as Algeciras and Málaga, play a vital role in the Mediterranean and in global trade. Algeciras, one of the largest ports in Europe, serves as a key transshipment hub, facilitating the flow of goods between Europe, Africa and beyond. These ports are essential not only for the economic exchange of goods but also serve as gateways for cultural and social interactions, reinforcing Andalusia's role as a bridge between continents. The bustling activity at these ports supports local economies, creates jobs, and fosters a multicultural environment, enhancing the region's economic dynamism and cultural richness.

- Culture : from cultural blending to shared identity

The cultural blending between the northern and southern Mediterranean regions has had profound and lasting impacts, fostering a sense of shared identity that transcends geographical and political boundaries. This phenomenon has manifested in various aspects of daily life, creating a unique Mediterranean identity that is both diverse and cohesive.

It can be seen in various aspects, such as arts, architecture, gastronomy, language, literature, social practices, among others.



Arts and architecture. One of the most visible impacts of this cultural blending is in the realm of arts and architecture. The intricate geometric patterns and arabesques of Islamic art, for example, can be found in the Alhambra in Spain, while the classical columns and structures of Roman architecture are evident in ruins scattered across North Africa and the Middle East. These artistic exchanges have enriched the visual and architectural landscapes of both regions, creating a shared aesthetic that is distinctly Mediterranean. The influence of southern calligraphy, mosaics, and decorative arts can be seen in northern regions, while the classical styles of the north have permeated southern artistic expressions. This blend has led to a unique Mediterranean style that draws from both sides of the sea, symbolizing a shared cultural heritage.

Gastronomy: A Culinary Fusion. Cuisine is another area where cultural blending has had a significant impact. The Mediterranean diet, celebrated for its health benefits, is a perfect example of this fusion. Ingredients such as olive oil, garlic, tomatoes, and various herbs are staples in both northern and southern Mediterranean cuisines. The exchange of culinary techniques and ingredients has led to dishes that incorporate the best of both worlds, creating a rich and diverse food culture. Southern spices and cooking methods have influenced northern dishes, adding depth and variety to Mediterranean cuisine. Similarly, northern culinary techniques and ingredients, such as the use of certain cheeses and wines, have been adopted and adapted by southern cooks.

Language and Literature: A Cross-Pollination of Ideas. The exchange of languages and literary traditions has also played a crucial role in creating a shared Mediterranean identity. The translation movements in medieval Spain, where Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars worked together to translate scientific and philosophical texts from Arabic into Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, are a key example of this cultural synthesis. These translations helped to transmit the knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman texts, preserved by Muslim scholars, back to Europe, fuelling the Renaissance. This cross-pollination of ideas has led to a rich literary and intellectual tradition that draws from both northern and southern sources. Today, the Mediterranean region continues to produce literature that reflects its diverse heritage, with themes that resonate across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Social Practices and Shared Traditions. Shared social practices and traditions further illustrate the impact of cultural blending. Festivals, music, and dance in the Mediterranean often feature a mix of influences from both sides of the sea. For instance, the flamenco music of Spain has roots in the musical traditions of the Moors, while the traditional music of North Africa has been influenced by the rhythms and instruments of southern Europe. These shared cultural practices foster a sense of unity and common identity among Mediterranean peoples. Celebrations, rituals, and communal activities provide opportunities for people to come together, reinforcing social bonds and mutual understanding.



Conclusion

The shared identity that emerges from this cultural blending has important implications for unity and cooperation in the Mediterranean region. Recognizing the common cultural heritage can help to bridge political and religious divides, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual respect. Educational programs that emphasize the rich, shared history of the Mediterranean can promote greater understanding and cooperation among the region's diverse populations. By celebrating the commonalities and appreciating the differences, Mediterranean societies can work towards a more inclusive and harmonious future. Initiatives such as cultural exchange programs, joint academic projects, and cooperative economic ventures can build on this shared identity to address common challenges and opportunities.

"The Mediterranean is not a sealed whole that separates, it is a liquid continent that connects [...]. It is a living synthesis, a fruitful intertwining, a shared heritage which opens to the quest for a common sense which we will call thought of the two shores." - Thierry Fabre, French historian

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