

Bolivia -- Key Muslim Converts Assert Local Peril, Ally With Zealots Abroad

Bolivia has a Muslim population of 1,000 people, constituting less than one tenth of one percent of its total population. A number of local Islamic leaders have ties to Iran or the Palestinian territories -- in one case with an individual affiliated with a suspect involved in the 1994 Hizballah bombing in Argentina -- and at least one community leader has expressed support for violent resistance in the Palestinian territories. While Bolivia under President Evo Morales has proposed a number of economic development agreements with Iran, and in March 2009 expelled Israeli diplomats citing Israel's handling of the Palestinian territories, these strategic political actions were not a result of Bolivian Muslim influence. The following paper is an overview of mosques, Islamic organizations, and religious leaders in Bolivia and their susceptibility to foreign Islamist influence.

Demographic Information

Bolivia's National Statistics Institute (INE) keeps no official statistics or demographics on the country's Muslims, but in early 2008 the centrist Santa Cruz regional daily *El Nuevo Dia* estimated the country's total Muslim population at 1,000, predominantly located in La Paz and Santa Cruz (24 February 2008).

- The online version of the independent La Paz daily *La Razon* cited a claim by Sheikh Mahmud Ahmer Abusharar, president of the Bolivian Islamic Center in Santa Cruz, that there are 500 Muslims in that city alone (14 January 2007).
- There are also Muslim organizations in Sucre and Cochabamba. The Saudi-funded pan-Arab satellite news channel Al-Arabiya notes the Muslim population of Sucre is mainly composed of immigrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon (www.alarabiya.net, 6 February 2006).
- INE statistics showed that nearly half of Bolivia's roughly 8 million people in 2001 were from indigenous Amerindian groups, the two largest of which are the Aymara and the Quechua. Open sources do not indicate that any specific indigenous group has been targeted for Islamist recruitment or indoctrination.

In October 2005, the Saudi-based religious magazine *Al-Mujtamaa* described Bolivia's small Muslim community as "threatened" by a growing number of evangelical Protestants it viewed as "enemies of Islam" and closely allied with Bolivia's Jewish community, whose "media outlets...distort the image of Muslims [to] turn the Bolivian people away from Islam."

- *Al-Mujtamaa* recommended that Bolivian Muslims "cooperate in solidarity" and engage local media, political parties, trade union organizations, and labor and human rights bodies. The magazine appealed to the ministries of religious affairs in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and the Al-Azhar University in Cairo to send teachers and preachers to Bolivia (www.almujtamaa-mag.com, 10 October 2005).

Bolivian Islamic Center (Centro Islamico Boliviano -- CIB)



CIB Mosque

Centro Islamico Boliviano

Address: 2815 Calle San Joaquin, Santa Cruz,
PO Box 4777

Registry ID: N/A

Phone: (00591) (03)468488

Fax: (00591) (03)467616 e

websites: islamenbolivia.com;

www.centroislamicoboliviano.org

President: Sheikh Mahmud Amer Abusharar

The CIB website claims the organization was founded in Santa Cruz in August 1986 by the current president, Mahmud Amer Abusharar, who arrived in Bolivia in 1974 from the Palestinian territories, and with other Muslim immigrants, founded the CIB because he feared "losing his faith." The CIB registered with the Bolivian Ministry of Foreign Relations and Worship in May 1989 (www.rree.gov.bo), and claims to have built Bolivia's first mosque in 1994. In 2006, Abusharar told *Al-Arabiyah* that the mosque serves more than 50 congregants for Friday sermons (*Al-Arabiyah* online, 6 February 2006).

As of March 2009, in addition to its headquarters, the CIB website references branches at unspecified locations in Sucre led by Hasan Tawafshah; in Cochabamba led by Daud Abujder; and in La Paz. Extensive pictures of the outside and inside of the Santa Cruz facility were posted on *YouTube* in February 2009 under the username "IslamBolivia"

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mkQzhg273U&feature=channel_page).



Mahmud Amer Abusharar
(*imago.catedradigital.org*, 24
October 2007)

The CIB website identifies Isa Amer Quevedo -- a Bolivian convert -- as the group's administrative director and head of its translation department. Quevedo has a degree in Islamic jurisprudence from the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia (islamenbolivia.com/articulos/cuando.html). He has translated a number of Islamic-themed books into Spanish, including a biography of the Prophet Muhammad, according to a posting on *Islamhouse.com*, a multi-lingual Islamic resource portal of unknown ownership (www.islamhouse.com).

CIB leaders publicly claim to support "open-mindedness and peace," but numerous on-line statements reveal a strong anti-US position. In an October 2007 interview with students posted on the *Imago* website of the Universidad Autonoma Gabriel Rene Moreno in Santa Cruz, Abusharar blamed any "arrests of Muslims in Bolivia" on US influence in Bolivian politics (imago.catedradigital.org/secciones/seccionesrecursos/revistackta.pdf). Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, Quevedo criticized the United States on the CIB website: "Today we see the US declaring armed Jihad against terrorism. They aim their bombs at UBL and Afghanistan, whom they financed and trained."

The CIB has ties to Saudi Arabia-based organizations, including the Islamic Organization for Latin America and the World Islamic League.

- The Islamic Organization for Latin America is sponsored by the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), a subgroup of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).¹
- The Muslim World League (Rabita al-Alam al-Islami) is the parent organization of the International Islamic Relief Organization (iiosa.org/portal/aboutus.php), which a researcher cited in the Argentine center-left daily *Pagina 12* described as "one of the financial and operational vehicles of militant Islam" (*Pagina 12*, 8 September 2002). Spain's rightist online daily *La Razon* described the league as one of the most active entities for spreading Wahabi Islam on a global level (12 February 2006).
- The CIB website notes that since 1994, the CIB has been the Bolivian headquarters for the Riyadh-based World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), "to establish a formal organization of Bolivian Muslim youth" (www.centroislamicoboliviano.org).



Isa Amer Quevedo (left) discusses Islamic objections to national legislation on channel 13, Santa Cruz (www.centroislamicoboliviano.org, 14 April 2005).

¹ The OIC, headquartered in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, has 57 member nations (www.oic-oci.org).



WAMY's Bolivian headquarters, owned by the CIB (L); Banner from the front page of WAMY's Saudi website. Text: Help Your Brothers in Palestine (centrobolivianoislamico.org; www.wamy.org)

Bolivian Muslim Cultural Association (Asociacion Cultural Boliviana Musulmana -- ACBM)

The ACBM, located in Sucre, is led by Fayeze Rajab Khedeer Kannan, a Palestinian medical doctor and lawyer who has openly praised Libya and Muammar al-Qadhafi in an Arabic-language posting on the website of the Libyan International Center for Studies and Research of the Green Book. On the website, Rajab asks the Libyan center to intensify its efforts in Latin America, and the website reveals that Rajab attended an April 2009 "All Power to the People" conference at Garyounis University in Benghazi, Libya, sponsored by the Center (www.greenbookstudies.com).

- According to the conservative Sucre-based daily, *El Correo del Sur*, in February 1998 the Sucre city council ceded roughly five acres of land in the Los Libertadores neighborhood to the ACBM over 30 years for the construction of an educational center and clinic. The work was undertaken under the auspices of the World Islamic League and primarily financed by the Islamic Development Bank based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.
- In January 2003, *El Correo del Sur* reported that the ACBM would be allowed to build a private school on the land despite the city's threat to vacate the agreement days earlier. The next month, Rajab said he would halt work until the city completed the title transfer and claimed the city requested documentation not required by original agreement. After the mayor's office unilaterally revoked the transfer, Rajab brought a lawsuit that was resolved in 2006, when a court found town counselors liable for fines and penalties (30 January 2003, 11 February 2003; 6 March 2006). The current status of the project could not be determined from open sources consulted.

Iranian Activity in Bolivia

Bolivia and Iran have strengthened their political and economic ties since Bolivian President Morales visited Tehran in September 2008.²

Hojatollah Soltani -- currently the head of the Latin America Department in the Iranian Foreign Ministry and the former charge d'affaires in both Bolivia and Venezuela -- in a 5 April

² For further information on President Evo Morales' efforts to expand relations with Iran, see the 14 November 2008 OSC Analysis, **Bolivia -- Morales Moves To Strengthen Ties With Iran** (LAF20081114471001).

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2009 television interview on the Arabic-language "From Tehran" program praised Morales's seizure of foreign multinational assets in Bolivia and his expulsion of the US ambassador. Soltani also identified a number of economic projects in Bolivia "under study," according to Tehran Al-Alam Television -- Iran's state-run network, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) 24-hour news channel, which targets a Pan-Arab news channel.

- Soltani, who has also brokered numerous business agreements with Bolivia, confirmed in February 2009 that Iran would set up its first embassy in the country, according to Santa Cruz's centrist, pro-business online version of *El Deber* (26 February 2009).
- Bolivia officially broke diplomatic ties with Israel on 14 January 2009, citing the country's treatment of the Palestinian territories. Morales also announced that Bolivia would sue Israeli President Peres and Prime Minister Olmert for war crimes before the International Criminal Court (*El Deber*, 15 January 2009).

Iran has begun investing heavily in the Bolivian economy, in agriculture, oil, and health care. In 2008, an unsuccessful attempt was made to establish a TV station.

- IRIB planned to establish one television channel in the Chapare region of central Cochabamba Department, which would have partnered with the regional Venezuela-based Telesur network (*El Deber* online, 26 February 2008). A report in Cochabamba's conservative daily *Los Tiempos* said that Soltani announced in September 2008 that these plans had been abandoned, however (29 September 2008).
- In August 2008, *El Deber* reported that Soltani announced that six new milk processing plants would be set up in Bolivia, and that Iran would donate 650 tractors and 200 agricultural tools for sowing and harvesting potatoes (17 August 2008).
- In April 2008, *La Razon* reported that Bolivia and Iran were negotiating agreements related to Bolivia's hydrocarbon industry (*La Razon* online, 14 April 2008). In August 2008, Morales traveled to Libya and Iran to seek investment in the hydrocarbons industry from the two countries (*El Deber*, 27 August 2008).
- Cochabamba's conservative online version of *Los Tiempos* reported in October 2008 Soltani's announcement that Iran would open two medical clinics in La Paz and Cochabamba, the installation and management of which would be handled by Iranians. The medical corps would be composed of native Bolivians (10 October 2008).





Soltani (R), President Morales (C), and Bolivia's Minister of Health and Sports, sign bilateral agreements on 10 October 2008 to develop the Bolivian health care system (www.daylife.com).

Shia Muslim Organizations

Bolivian Islamic Cultural Foundation (Fundacion Cultural Islamica Boliviana -- FCIB)

The Bolivian Islamic Cultural Foundation is a 20-member group founded in August 2007 in La Paz. According to *La Razon*, as of February 2008, the FCIB was located in an apartment on the second floor of the Gamarra Building at 221 Calle Landaeta, and has both Bolivian convert and immigrant members (24 February 2008).

		<p>FCIB</p> <p>Denomination: Shia Address: 221 Calle Landaeta 2nd floor, La Paz Registry ID: N/A Phone: N/A E-mail: N/A Web: islambolivia.blogspot.com/ President: Roberto Chambi Calle</p>
<p>Roberto Chambi Calle (www.icalp.org.bo)</p>	<p>FCIB members pray in the mosque (La Razon, 24 February 2008)</p>	

The FCIB's president is Roberto "Yusuf" Chambi Calle, a 32-year-old, who according to an essay he wrote on the Brazilian legal resource portal *Jus Navigandi*, is a lawyer and adjunct law professor at the Universidad de Aquino in La Paz (jus2.uol.com.br/doutrina/texto.asp?id=3608). Chambi, who converted to Islam in 1996, told *El Nuevo Dia* that after his conversion he studied classical Arabic and "prepared himself" in Argentine and Iranian mosques, adding that he was an "admirer" of Iran because it is a "theocracy and a democracy" (24 February).

The FCIB's *YouTube* page, <http://www.youtube.com/user/robertoyusuf>, records part of a conference given by Chambi and his wife Maria Sdenka Saavedra at the National Academy of Sciences in La Paz, that was also attended by Sheikh Abdul Karim Paz (an Argentine convert born Santiago Paz Bullrich) and his wife, Masuma Assad de Paz.

- Paz and his wife are frequent presenters at FCIB events in Bolivia, according to articles in Chile's conservative daily *El Mercurio* and Argentina's top-circulating daily *Clarín* (*El Mercurio*, 10 August 2001; *Clarín*, 12 March 2006). An e-mail allegedly posted on www.nacionalypopular.com by Paz on 27 February 2009 identifies him as the director of the At-Tauhid Mosque in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Paz became the director in 2004, succeeding Mohsen Rabbani, the former Iranian cultural attache to Argentina who was implicated in the 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA) building in Buenos Aires, and who currently lives in Iran.³

³ For further information on the AMIA bombing and Abdul Karim Paz, see the 21 December 2006 OSC Report, **Argentina: Overview of Muslim Communities** (LAF20061221359001).

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- Chambi created a blog entitled "Civilizacion Islamica" at islambolivia.blogspot.com, which features a picture with Paz. While the blog houses only one posting dating from October 2008, it seems that the FCIB and its leadership have a close connection to Paz.


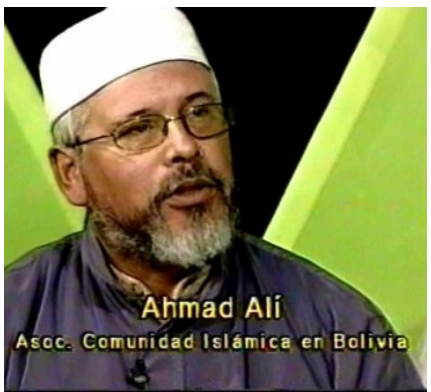
Though small, the FCIB holds frequent events, regularly using the Municipal Library of La Paz, and universities in the city and elsewhere. A clip uploaded to the group's *YouTube* page shows events being held at the Public University of El Alto, outside La Paz. Another event was held at the Nicolas Fernandez Auditorium in Santa Cruz. An individual named Mohssen Mustahid Saadi appears in a number of the videos; no additional open source information was available on Saadi.

	
<p><i>The Foundation welcomes Iranian President Ahmadinezhad to Bolivia (FCIB www.youtube.com, 26 December 2008).</i></p>	<p><i>Paz (center left) and Chambi (center right) with two unidentified men on FCIB's blog (Islambolivia.blogspot.com).</i></p>

	
<p><i>Abdul Karim Paz, with his wife Masuma Assad, at FCIB events (www.youtube.com, 25 February 2009)</i></p>	

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Association of the Islamic Community of Bolivia (Asociacion de la Comunidad Islamica de Bolivia -- ACIB)

	 <p>Ahmad Ali Asoc. Comunidad Islámica en Bolivia</p>	<p>ACIB</p> <p>Address: 590 Calle Corrales, La Paz, PO Box 12492 Registry ID: RAP 393 (2/9/04) Phone: 2225191 or 72540969 E-mail: asocisbol@yahoo.com lapaz_bolislam1@yahoo.es Web: www.geocities.com/asocisbol/ President: Ahmad Ali (G. Cupita)</p>
<p>Prayer room (www.la-razon.com, 14 January 2007)</p>	<p>President Ahmad Ali (www.geocities.com)</p>	

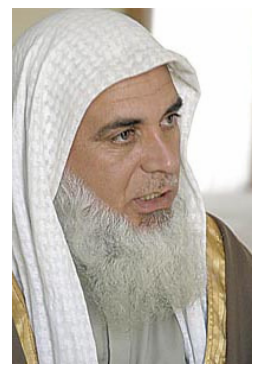

The ACIB is located at 590 Calle Corrales, in the Miraflores district of La Paz. According to *La Razon*, between 12 and 30 people regularly attend its mosque, named Masjidum Jbelannur (written as "Yabalan-nur" on the ACIB website). The ACIB is led by an apparent Islamic convert, Ahmad Ali, whose birth name the paper says is Gerardo Cutipa Trigo (14 January 2007).

Islamic Association of Bolivia -- As-Salam Mosque (Asociacion Islamica de Bolivia, Mezquita As-Salam)

The Islamic Association of Bolivia is located at 725 Calle Fernando Guachalla, in the Sopocachi district of La Paz. The most recent media coverage of the mosque published by *La Razon* in January 2007 named its leader as Mahmud Ali Teheran. According to the paper, the mosque had a congregation of roughly 70 people, about "90 percent" of whom were Bolivian youth. *La Razon* states that Teheran is Peruvian, though at least one parent is Iranian.

- In October 2008, the online version of independent regional Uruguayan daily *El Acontecer* reported that Teheran travels weekly to Durazno, Uruguay to host a radio program called "The Voice of Islam" to provide instruction on Islam (23 October 2008).


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		<p>Mezquita As-Salam Denomination: Shia Address: 725 Calle Fernando Guachalla, La Paz Registry ID: Rap 168/05 (23 March 2005) Phone: +591-2-2413170 E-mail: info@islam-in- bolivia.com Web: www.islam-in- bolivia.com President: Ali Teheran</p>
<p><i>Imam Ali Teheran</i> (www.la-razon.com, 14 January 2007)</p>	<p><i>Mosque in the Sopocachi District</i> (www.islam-in-bolivia.com)</p>	

- Top-circulation Uruguayan daily *El Pais* had earlier identified him as a leader of Muslims in Montevideo, according to the online version (24 October 2008).

The as-Salam mosque's website is sparsely populated, and it does not appear that it is regularly updated. Additional open source information is limited. Before MSN Groups stopped its service, the Association maintained a chat room at: groups.msn.com/islamboliviaLAVERDAD. Only a portion of the room is still available through Internet caching. Teheran's chat room e-mail address was fulan33@hotmail.com; open sources methods consulted found no other instances of the e-mail, however.

Shia Islamic Community of Bolivia (Comunidad Islamica Shia de Bolivia)

	<p>Comunidad Shia Islamica Address: PO Box 24369, La Paz Registry ID: N/A Phone: 2751044 E-mail: ahlul-bait.bolivia@hotmail.com Web: www.usuarios.lycos.es/shiabolivia President: Tommy Nelson Salgueiro Criales</p>
<p><i>Tommy Salgueiro</i> (www.webislam.com)</p>	

According to its website, the Shia Islamic Community of Bolivia was founded in March 2006, and its president is identified as Tommy Nelson Salgueiro Criales aka Husayn Salgueiro. The website, launched in January 2009, is still under construction, sparsely populated, and provides little information.

- On the opening page of the site, the community features a list of people and organizations and extends its thanks to Safdar Razi, identified as the current director of the Al Qaem Institute (Hazwa Al-Ilmiyya Al-Qaem), a Shia seminary located in Dearborn, Michigan.

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- Salgueiro claims in a February 2009 posting on the Spanish-language section of the of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Broadcasting (IRIB) website that it has "approximately" 13 members (spanish.irib.ir).
- In a June 2005 posting on *Zawajmuslim.com*, a French-language Muslim marriage site, Salgueiro lists his date of birth as 16 May 1973, and his profession as a psychologist (www.zawajmuslim.com).

Local Muslim Protests Motivated by Opposition to Israel, Not Religious Extremism

On 15 January 2009, a spokesman for the Palestinian community in Venezuela Ayman Altaramsi thanked Morales for expelling the Israeli ambassador, and announced a vigil in La Paz for the next day followed by a march to protest the "destruction" in Palestine (*La Razon*, 15 January 2009).

Protests were held a week earlier on 7 January in La Paz and Santa Cruz, according to *El Deber*. About 100 people in Santa Cruz burned Israeli flags to condemn Israeli military action in Gaza the previous month. *El Deber* noted that the CIB in Santa Cruz did not participate in the protest but condemned Israeli actions. Jalal Dames, the president of the Palestinian community in Santa Cruz, spoke at the protest (7 January).



*Jalal Dames addresses protestors
(www.eldeber.com.bo, 7 January 2009).*

The community's Salgueiro is active in protests in La Paz, and is an outspoken critic of Israel. Salgueiro maintains a *YouTube* page in the community's name at www.youtube.com/user/IslamShiaBolivia. One video there urges Palestinians to continue their struggle. Another shows Salgueiro being interviewed by a local news station during a march of some 200 people in La Paz, saying: "What we are trying to accomplish...not just in Bolivia, but worldwide, is that human rights are respected," he said. "It cannot be that one country is above all the others, destroying all human rights."

<p>Comunidade palestina da Bolívia protesta contra invasã</p>	<p>Comunidade palestina da Bolívia protesta contra invasã</p>
<p><i>Altaramsi, 7 January 2009 protest, La Paz (Tvig.ig.com)</i></p>	<p><i>Salgueiro, 7 January 2008 protest, La Paz (Tvig.ig.com)</i></p>

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Appendix

The following list of Islamic centers and addresses, by department, was drawn from *Islamicfinder.org*, *Latinodawah.org*, *Webislam.com*, and various other open sources. Organizations and information that could not be corroborated is noted as such.

La Paz

Bolivian Islamic Cultural Foundation

Denomination: Shia

Address: 221 Calle Landaeta, Gamarra Building, 2nd floor, La Paz

Registry ID: N/A

Phone: N/A

E-mail: N/A

Web: islambolivia.blogspot.com

Association of the Islamic Community of Bolivia (ACIB)

Denomination: Shia

Address: 590 Calle Corrales, La Paz, PO Box 12492

PO Box 12492

Registry ID: RAP 393 (2/9/04)

Phone: 222-5191 or 72540969

E-mail: asocisbol@yahoo.com; lapaz_bolislam1@yahoo.es

Web: www.geocities.com/asocisbol/

Shia Islamic Community of Bolivia

Denomination: Shia

Address: PO Box 24369, La Paz

Registry ID: N/A

Phone: 275-1044

E-mail: ahlul-bait.bolivia@hotmail.com

Web: www.usuarios.lycos.es/shiabolivia

Islamic Association of Bolivia -- As-Salam Mosque (AIB)

Denomination: Shia

Address: 725 Calle Fernando Guachalla, La Paz

Registry ID: Rap 168/05 (23 March 2005)

Phone: 241-3170

E-mail: info@islam-in-bolivia.com

Web: www.islam-in-bolivia.com

Santa Cruz

Bolivian Islamic Center (Santa Cruz)

Denomination: Sunni

Address: 2815 Calle San Joaquin, PO Box 4777, Santa Cruz

Registry ID: RAP 467/06 (11 December 2006)

Phone-Fax: 346- 8488
Fax: 346 7616
Website(s): islamenbolivia.com; centroislamicoboliviano.org

La Paz Islamic Center

Address: Hunahuaca 874, Santa Cruz
Phone: 372-818-327-021

(N.B. This information appears on latinodawah.org as above and cannot be verified using other open sources.)

Cochabamba

Bolivian Islamic Center (Cochabamba branch)

Denomination: Sunni
Address: Cochabamba
Registry ID: N/A
Phone: 422-2211

(N.B. This information appears on latinodawah.org. Though the CIB claims the existence of this center, no additional information was available in open sources consulted.)

Chuquisaca

Bolivian Islamic Center (Sucre branch)

Denomination: Sunni
Registry ID: N/A
Phone: 645-2378; 646-1613

(N.B. This information appears on latinodawah.org. Though the CIB claims the existence of this center, no additional information was available in open sources consulted.)

Bolivian Muslim Cultural Association (Asociacion Cultural Boliviana Musulmana -- ACBM)

Denomination: Sunni
Registry ID: N/A
Phone: Unknown

Musulmana

Address: PO Box 316, Sucre
Fax: 691-2121

(N.B. This information appears on Islamicfinder.org as above and cannot be verified using other open sources.)