Manifold Destiny
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Arabs led mosques and prayer halls as well as commemorated ‘eidun (holy days, in Arabic) at the border under a fading authoritarian apparatus. But in 1994, their faith was questioned after the post-authoritarian Argentine state neither deterred nor detained the perpetrators of an attack in Buenos Aires which leveled a historic building home to Jewish Argentine associations, referred to as AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina, or Jewish Argentine Mutual Association, in Spanish). Arabs on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border found themselves being accused of complicity in the still unresolved violence.

Having mobilized around Sunni and Shia markers of difference at the border during and after authoritarian rule, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians came to collectively see themselves as foils for the AMIA attack that remains without resolution. In the immediate aftermath and since that time, Argentine and US authorities perceived Arabs at the border as suspects who would or could kill Jews, and expected Brazilian and Paraguayan officials to do likewise. Argentine security forces detained and released Arabs venturing onto the Argentine side of the border, while Argentine and US government officials put pressure on Brazilian and Paraguayan counterparts to scrutinize Arab religious leaders who were apprehended, investigated, and released as well. Without evidence against them in the still unresolved bombing, Arabs rebutted Argentine, US,
and other powers that they felt scapegoated them. In this Ummah America, Arabs shaped and were shaped by the ideal of a universal Islamic camaraderie, condemning the anti-Jewish violence in Argentina that had been similarly denounced in the US and further consolidating Islam on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border.

This chapter explores what political scientist Olivier Roy called “the new frontier of the imagined ummah” in this hemisphere’s unresolved anti-Semitism. Since arriving at the border, Arabs began to institutionalize an Ummah by accommodating state power and steering clear of its violence, including Argentina’s “Dirty War” (1976–1983). After the bombing of AMIA in Buenos Aires, however, Arabs at the border felt “compelled . . . to apologize for acts they did not commit [and] to condemn acts they never condoned,” to paraphrase anthropologists Sally Howell and Andrew Shryock in their critique of post-9/11 backlash in the US. In consonance with the considerable scholarship on Jewish suffering after the AMIA bombing, this chapter shifts focus from ground zero in Buenos Aires to the subsequent backlash at the border. Argentine and US officials, having failed to redress attacks against Jews in the Argentine capital, pressured Brazilian and Paraguayan counterparts to profile and pick up “Muslims” or “Arabs” at the border, who were later discharged. Folding into an Ummah America, Arabs mobilized on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border in response to accusations that they perceived to be emanating from Argentina and the US.

This chapter contributes to scholarship on military power in Latin American political transitions by directing attention to a seldom acknowledged shift after authoritarian rule. In historically US-backed Argentine, Brazilian, and Paraguayan authoritarian regimes, the military was deployed on domestic territory by alleging to combat terroristas (terrorists), who were construed as neither Arabs nor Muslims but rather communists, dissidents, or anyone perceived as such. With the formal end of authoritarian rule, civilian-led administrations attempted to limit the military in domestic affairs, but the Argentine state suspended such norms in order to search for suspects in the unresolved bombings in Buenos Aires, pressuring
Brazilian and Paraguayan counterparts to do likewise under US scrutiny. Consequently, an array of civilian and militarized security forces helped carry out exceptional domestic operations that targeted Muslim Arabs at the border in the name of so-called antiterrorismo (counterterrorism, in Portuguese and Spanish), an authoritarian legacy in the transition toward civilian rule. Arabs’ faith was tested as a target proxy in post-authoritarian times.

Crossing, Redrawing, and Debating Borders

Arabs “crossed and reinforced” borders. Ali Said Rahal stated that the mosque and school, introduced last chapter, fostered “community union, integration into Foz do Iguaçu society, and the . . . development of Arab cultural values in the region of the Three Borders.” But in naming the mosque, Rahal and other Sunni chose Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, a figure they claimed was “considered by Muslims as the ‘prince of believers.’” This naming estranged Shia for whom Omar Ibn Al-Khattab usurped power from ‘Ali, who they theologically imagined as the true heir to lead the Ummah. “Wealthy Sunnis,” it was said, chose the designation so that “no Shia would want to go” to the mosque. Meanwhile, the adjacent school was named ‘Ali Ben Abi Taleb, because this caliph was a “gateway to knowledge” according to Kamal Osman, not the wronged Muslim leader as Shia believe. As a result, Shia tended to coalesce around the Islamic Benevolent Society in a nearby building they named after Iran’s religious leader, Imam Al-Khomeini, and frequented its prayer space (mussalah, in Arabic) that they called the huseiniya (in Arabic), after Husein, the martyred son of ‘Ali. Arabs traversed the borders of the Ummah but also redrew “Sunni” and “Shia” boundaries within it.

Sunni and Shia at the border also debated the 1991 Gulf War that Washington, DC, initiated, Brasilia kept watch over, Asunción sat out, and Buenos Aires sent troops for. “Impassioned Sunnis . . . backed Saddam Hussein” and ignored his brutality toward Shia, remembered a Shia shaykh in the huseiniya. Indeed, Sunni Lebanese and Palestinians called for renewed support of the Iraqi leader as “the gateway of the Arab world to the east.” Both Mohamad
Figure 3.1. Article on the upcoming inauguration of the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab mosque. © Nosso Tempo
Barakat and Kamal Osman euphemized Iraq's invasion of Kuwait as “the Iraqi state's recuperation of an area that belonged to it,” which in fact precipitated the US declaration of war. Wafa Abdel, president of Sanaûd, likewise considered “that Iraq has historical rights in the region.” In contrast, a Shia Lebanese, Ali Farhat, “expressed his opinion” that “Iraq's invasion of Kuwait is unjust and Iraq's president is a true war criminal.” Another Shia Lebanese, Hussein Abbas, then director of the Islamic Benevolent Society, pointed to the US equivocation of having previously supported Iraq against Iran. The then shaykh of the huseiniya, Ibrahim Kassir, echoed that the US had been aligned with Iraq against Iran. Having gained salience during the Iraq-Iran War mentioned last chapter, Sunni
and Shia boundaries at the border became further entrenched by US-led war in the Middle East.

At the border, as well as across and beyond the hemisphere, liberal progressives and Sunni counterparts coalesced in the “demonization” of Shia and Iran. Having collaborated with Sunni Lebanese, the Nosso Tempo editor Juvêncio Mazzarollo criticized the “religious fanaticism” of Khomeini, in particular. Mazzarollo expressed concern over the “silencing” of the press after Khomenei issued the edict against Salman Rushdie. But Mazzarollo’s stand against censorship drew on standard orientalism in labeling Iranian mourners as “the largest manifestations of fanaticism in human history” after “the death of Ayatollah Khomeini.”

Figure 3.3. Article on the Arab cultural center and school attached to the mosque. © Nosso Tempo
the Islamic Benevolent Cultural Center shared this stance by calling Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini “a fascist” in response to a reporter’s question about the decree issued against Salman Rushdie after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. After his statement caused a “controversy” at the border about Khomeini’s “application of Islamic principles,” the new president of the Islamic Benevolent Cultural Center, Ahmad Hamad Rahal, “clarified” that “Khomeini simply leads one faction of Muslims.”

Exercising a short-lived enfranchisement after the ostensible end of authoritarian rule at the border, Shia reasserted themselves not as a “minority” or “faction” but rather as defining a global Ummah. The Shia-led Islamic Benevolent Society characterized Khomeini as the “maximum leader” of not only “Muslims” but also “the oppressed of the world.” In 1989, the Islamic Benevolent Society took out a quarter-page announcement in *Nosso Tempo* to “express its grief and consternation at the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Al-Khomeini.” Verse 156 of the Surat Al-Baqarah of the Quran was recited: “when sadness befalls, state, we are of God and to him we will return.” The piece reminded the public that Khomeini, before his death, called upon “Muslims of the entire world to defend the Islamic Republic of Iran as a ‘present of God.’” The Islamic Benevolent Society expressed “sincere condolences” to “the entire Islamic community” at the border and extended an invitation to “religious worship in praise of his (Khomeini’s) soul that will be celebrated . . . at the community center.”

Having migrated predominantly from Lebanon, Shia at the border advocated for Iran against the backdrop of the Brazilian state’s own rapprochement with the self-declared Islamic republic, as explored last chapter. Accordingly, in 1990, on the one-year anniversary of Khomeini’s death, Shia Lebanese in the Islamic Benevolent Society invited “the general public” to a religious observance and an “ideological symposium” about the “persona of the deceased Imam Khomeini and his generous and blessed revolution.” Instead of being held in the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab mosque, the Shia religious observance was carried out at the society’s own building and the political symposium in an upscale hotel. The new sheikh, Khaled Atai, led the events as well as the distribution of
two hundred food baskets to the needy who formed lines in front of the society’s building. Based in the state capital of Curitiba, Atai was called the “spiritual leader of the Colônia Islâmica [Islamic Community] of Foz do Iguaçu.” Atai clarified that the symposium intended to explore “the different sides of the Imam’s personality... and to clarify some subjects that the audience can ask in regards to him and the Islamic Republic.” With Iranian diplomats visiting from Brasília, Atai expressed his goal to break “the barriers of contradictory and confusing propaganda... against the personality of Khomeini and the Islamic revolution.” Shia Lebanese put their historic disenfranchisement in perspective, articulating a “politics based on Islamic principles.”

At this time, Shia Lebanese made up a slight majority of migrants, though greater numbers of Sunni counterparts began settling earlier. Overwhelmingly stemming from the Beqaa Valley and South Lebanon, Shia came in hopes to make a better life and “because of constant Israeli attacks on the region,” according to A Gazeta do Iguaçu. Take for instance a migrant who left the village of Khiara in the Beqaa Valley in 1980, sometimes referred to by the initials of his full name, MYA, Muhammad Yusef Abdallah. MYA initially joined his brother who had settled on the outskirts of Uberlândia in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, just before their ancestral village and much of South Lebanon was invaded by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Deciding to try his luck at the then booming border, MYA reached Foz do Iguaçu, and after some tepid business ventures, he and his family crossed the bridge from Brazil to Paraguay and opened a store in the Jebai Center. Just as Israel occupied their villages, Shia Lebanese migrated and equaled in number their Sunni counterparts at the border.

MYA mobilized an Ummah at what seemed to be the twilight of authoritarian rule. Before Stroessner was ousted in 1989, MYA helped establish the Centro Árabe Islâmico Paraguayo (Arab Islamic Paraguayan Center). MYA recalled that he never experienced a brush with the stronato or the successive regime because he steered clear of criticizing “military men.” In that transition, MYA idealized
a nineteen-story residential building whose forefront houses the green-domed Mezquita del Profeta Mohammed (sic, Mosque of the Prophet Mohammed). At the time, Andrés Rodríguez (1989–1993) led the internal military coup and became Paraguay’s first elected president,\textsuperscript{29} integrating the military into the new police force, the \textit{Policía Nacional}.\textsuperscript{30} Although this police force harassed Arab store-owners, mentioned earlier and more fully explored later, MYA did not express fear of reprisals from this illiberal democratic Paraguay. Located in downtown Ciudad del Este, the mosque began to be built in 1993 and opened in 1994. After the mosque, the adjacent nineteen-story building was constructed floor by floor. As Sunni continued to congregate in the mosque in Foz do Iguaçu, Shia frequented MYA’s mosque in Ciudad del Este. An Ummah became institutionalized at the post-authoritarian border.

In gaining greater visibility, Shia Lebanese at the border, like Brazilian and Paraguayan state authorities, expressed empathy as well as indifference toward Hizbullah and AMAL, self-styled resistance movements that took shape during Israel’s nineteen-year occupation of Lebanon that started in 1982, briefly mentioned last chapter. Respectively identified with each movement, the son of Fadlalla, from Beirut, and the shaykh of the Shia mosque in São Paulo, Mohsen Bilal Wehbi, came for the inauguration of the Mezquita del Profeta Mohammed in Ciudad del Este.\textsuperscript{31} Yet the idealizer, MYA, emphasized that he built the mosque for the “Muslim community,” the Ummah, of the border, not for any political party or movement. MYA’s father, for instance, arrived in the Paraguayan border town shortly after Israeli incursions in their Lebanese hometown of Khiara, in 1983 and 1984. When the Israeli military invaded their house to detain the father, the latter fled and found shelter with his son and daughter-in-law who had just settled at the border. Not only in the case of MYA, unfounded suspicions that Shia Lebanese could be formally organizing or fundraising for Hizbullah or any armed resistance had to do with their forced departure from then Israeli-occupied Lebanon.

Hardly conspiring between war-torn Lebanon and post-authoritarian Paraguay, Shia and other Lebanese in Ciudad del Este established the Centro Educacional Libanés (Lebanese Educational
Center), often called the Colégio Libanés (Lebanese School). According to anthropologists Paulo G. Pinto and Silvia Montenegro, the school began to be organized in 1992 when a Catholic priest from Qabrikha secured “the donation of land and afterwards the economic collaboration of some Arab merchants.” Eventually, the school was linked to the Asociación Beneficente Islámica del Alto Paraná (Islamic Benevolent Association of Alto Paraná), integrating educational materials approved by the Supreme Islamic Shia Council in Lebanon. A key figure in the school’s development was Ziad Fahs, born in Qabrikha and educated in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. In 1992, Fahs arrived on the Paraguayan side of the border, working with Lebanese and Paraguayan officials for an accredited curriculum. With official recognition from Paraguayan and Lebanese government education ministries, the Colégio Libanés is now authorized to transfer credits and coursework between Paraguay and Lebanon. Such institutional ties were likely mitigated by the AMAL movement that drew the sympathies of “various Shia leaders of Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad Presidente Stroessner” since Nabih Berri first came to the border in 1986 (and returned a decade later, discussed shortly).

In post-authoritarian times, Islamic institutions at the border bifurcated into, on the one hand, Sunni partial to pan-Arab nationalism, and, on the other, Shia sympathetic to the Iranian revolution as well as the Lebanese movements of Hizbullah and AMAL. Mentioned earlier, Said Taijen, nominally Sunni, opened a musallah on an upper floor of the building that he and his brother owned, ostensibly avoiding the Shia-led mosque that MYA established down the street on the Paraguayan side of the border. Initiated in 2012 and inaugurated in 2015, Said Taijen also led the construction of a new, ostensibly Sunni mosque in Ciudad del Este, discussed in the sixth chapter. Nonetheless, Said Taijen stressed to the Paraguayan statesman and writer, Alejandro Hamed Franco, “our religion makes no distinction of nationality, neither culture nor ethnicity. Every Muslim is a brother in religion, equal in rights, in all aspects.” Though praying in separate spaces, Sunni and Shia alike abided by the ideal of a universal Islamic camaraderie, an Ummah, unexpectedly interrupted by violence in Argentina.
Aftershocks of Anti-Semitic Violence in Post-Authoritarian Argentina

The bombing of AMIA on July 18, 1994, made the legacy of authoritarian-era violence and impunity all too real in post-authoritarian Argentina. President Carlos Menem (1989–1999) declared a state of emergency and the gendarmería (gendarmerie) closed the country's borders, including in Puerto Iguazú.38 The still unresolved 1992 Israeli embassy attack was etched in the minds of victims. First-responders and reporters in Buenos Aires called the bombed-out AMIA building la embajada (the embassy [of Israel]) in a “verbal lapse” that made the two places “synonymous with one another.”39 Clarín’s caption over news articles about the AMIA bombing put the watchwords in caps, OTRA VEZ (AGAIN). As the public perceived a repetition of violence similar to the state-sponsored terror that was then on trial, Argentina’s Interior Ministry proposed National Decree Number 2023, reserving “permanent funds” in order to “clarify the international terrorist attacks perpetrated against the EMBASSY OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL in our country and the headquarters of the ASOCIACIÓN MUTUAL ISRAELITA ARGENTINA, on March 17, 1992, and July 18, 1994.”40 Argentina’s “deferential” Supreme Court, having reversed censures of former military heads of state, took charge of formal investigations into both the 1992 Israeli embassy bombing and the 1994 AMIA bombing. In a larger systemic “operation of ‘forgetting’” that critic Beatriz Sarlo observed, militarized power benefitted and redefined its targets elsewhere.41

Accordingly, US-backed Argentine intelligence bureaus profiled Muslim Arabs at the border as terrorists who would or could kill Israelis and Jews in Buenos Aires. Clarín related that “the CIA” gave “the Argentine government a map . . . where it detected the presence of Hizbullah. . . . One of the marked zones is the tri-border between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.”42 Though not stated, the CIA’s map would have likely reached Argentina’s “civilian intelligence agencies” then dominated by “military officers,” namely the Central Nacional de Inteligencia (CNI, or National Center of Intelligence) that directly answered to the Argentine president, and the more independent Secretaría de Inteligencia del Estado (SIDE, or Intelligence State Secretariat).43 Indeed, such agencies claimed a
“terrorist structure” at the border “would provide logistical assistance for the attack against Jewish targets [objetivos israelitas].” A day after the bombing, the CNI “dusted off a report . . . about the supposed existence of a ‘support base’ of the pro-Irani organization, Hizbullah, . . . in the Brazilian south and in Paraguay, in Ciudad del Este.”

Arabs and Muslims on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border became undue foils of the lack of justice in post-authoritarian Argentina.

Under pressure from Argentina and elsewhere, Paraguay’s National Police and Interior Ministry were strong-armed into targeting “Muslims” and “Arabs” at the border. Initially, Enrique Martinetti, the Paraguayan National Police chief, dismissed as “exaggerated” the Argentine claim that Hizbullah established a base among “Lebanese or other Arab residents in Ciudad del Este” whose political sympathy for resistance against Israel did not indicate any institutional link, let alone complicity in violence against innocent civilians.

However, Paraguay’s Interior Minister, Miguel Ramírez, reproached Martinetti, relating that the police failed to assist “the Israelis” in locating a suspect who “would be protected by the numerous foreign colony (presumably Lebanese Arab [sic]) settled in the Ciudad del Este border city.” As a result, Martinetti toughened his position, stating that “Paraguayan, Argentine, Israeli, and Brazilian special agents continue to question Arabs at the tri-border.”

A year later, Martinetti went so far as to say that Ciudad del Este was “a sanctuary of sleeper cells of Hizbullah.”

The post-authoritarian Brazilian state rejected Argentine allegations of terrorism at the border but also increased security and “update(d)” police “files” on “Arab communities.” Brazil’s Federal Police as well as the Strategic Affairs Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic reported “no signs” that “the terrorist acts . . . in Argentina” were “planned from Brazil, as the Argentine government has come to suspect.” Later on, the Brazilian consulate in Buenos Aires wrote that “investigations pointed to the involvement of police officials of the province of Buenos Aires,” despite the Argentine government “discreetly insinuating that the blame lies with neighboring countries,” Brazil and Paraguay. Having discovered “small traders, some having been there” for some time, “the Brazilian government
maintained that there are no signs of the presence or even passage of terrorists on Brazilian territory,” repeated the Agência Brasileira de Inteligência (ABIN, Brazilian Agency of Intelligence), founded in 1999 and headed by career military men after the dissolution of the aforementioned Serviço Nacional de Informações (SNI, National Service of Information) of the “old authoritarian regime.” Though dismissing Argentine suspicions that the AMIA attack was planned from Brazil, in 1995, Brazilian foreign minister, Luiz Felipe Lampreia “ended up bending toward” an Argentine proposal for a security accord between the three states of the border “in the fight against terrorism, drug-trafficking, and smuggling,” explored later in this chapter.

Arabs and others on the Brazilian side of the border spoke with Argentine media in order to denounce anti-Semitic violence in Buenos Aires as well as to represent themselves as scapegoats. The Imam of the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab mosque dedicated his sermon to condemning violence and expressing solidarity with “the victims of the brutal attack on the AMIA headquarters.” Kamal Osman stated that there is no place for terrorists at the border because “I would be the first to turn them in.” Hussein Taijen specified to La Prensa, “the press wants to put all the blame on us.” Mohamad Barakat echoed that “they always throw blame on Arabs.” Mayor Dobrandino da Silva, having ushered in the return of civilian rule and inaugurating the mosque six years previously, reassured the Clarín reporter that “there are no undocumented Arabs” who are “well integrated in our society.” However, Argentine media diminished such standpoints by emphasizing the “armed guards” around Arab-owned stores on the Avenida República do Líbano in Foz do Iguaçu and lending more credence to predominantly Argentine and US suspicions of terrorists allegedly lurking at the border.

On Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border, Arabs again “condemned violence they never condoned” and portrayed themselves as easy marks. In A Gazeta do Iguaçu, they rebuked “the CNI” and Argentina for blaming “the Arab community of Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este” for “the terrorist attack against Buenos Aires.” Mohamad Rahal repeated, “we are against the terrorist attack in Buenos Aires” and no terrorists exist in Foz do Iguaçu
and Ciudad del Este because “We all know one another . . . we are relatives, friends, and acquaintances. . . . There are no strangers among us.” Kamal Osman warned that “national and international news coverage” about alleged terrorists is “bad for the city, for tourism, for business, and bad for all of us who live here at the border.” Osman also repeated his declaration to Clarín the day before, “I myself would denounce to the authorities anyone with terrorist or extremist tendencies.” Mustafá Jaber, a Palestinian Brazilian, likewise stated, “I will be the first to turn into the police any person who I mistrust may be a terrorist,” adding “Islam condemns criminal acts like that which occurred in Buenos Aires where innocents died and hundreds were wounded.” On the following day, the Imam of the mosque again condemned the AMIA bombing and “the suppositions of Argentine authorities and the international press in linking the attack . . . to the resident Arab community in Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este.”

Shortly after the bombing, Argentina’s gendarmerie took exceptional measures against Arabs. The gendarmerie retained power over the country’s infrastructure, including borders, after authoritarian rule, having aided the Argentine military junta’s repression and disappearance of tens of thousands of alleged “subversives.” With new orders to “minutely examine” the “foreigners” crossing onto the Argentine side of the border, in Puerto Iguazú, the gendarmerie commandeered admitted that: “We don’t have either a name or a face. Nothing. We are totally up in the air. . . . The only thing is that one speaks about the Arabs in general, so everything gets directed toward them.” Aware of Argentine “prejudice,” “Arabs in Foz do Iguaçu” began “avoiding crossing the border to the Argentine side” because the “climate is very tense at the tri-border.” Soon after, the gendarmerie in Puerto Iguazú detained six Shia Lebanese as AMIA bombing suspects. Living in Foz do Iguaçu and working in Ciudad del Este, they allegedly entered Argentina in order to pick up friends arriving at the airport in Puerto Iguazú. Argentine media spun conspiracy theories that they were a “sleeper cell of Hizbullah” at the border that planned the bombing. After transferring and holding them incommunicado in Buenos Aires for ten days, the Argentine state released the “suspects” since they “had nothing to do with the AMIA case.”
Arabs both appealed to and held the Argentine state responsible for exceptional measures. An Argentine lawyer of Lebanese origins, Alfredo Jalaf, came to the defense of Shia Lebanese migrants being held in extraordinary circumstances in Buenos Aires. Jalaf was the grandson of a distinct wave of Maronite Lebanese migrants from Zahle, growing up in the Argentine cities of Mendoza and Cordoba, before moving to the Misiones province.67 Called a misionero (inhabitant of Misiones) in the press, Jalaf was a member of the post-authoritarian constituent assembly that revised democratic municipal governing legislation in 1994. Jalaf defended the Lebanese citizens after their detention in Puerto Iguazu and while they were held incommunicado in Buenos Aires.68 Meanwhile, on the Brazilian side of the border, in Foz do Iguacu, Mohamad Barakat spoke out against “the government of Argentina” for “practicing terrorism in arresting . . . Lebanese who appear in their country. If there are suspects here at the border, then Argentina should release the list. We cannot accept that honest traders, family fathers, be despised by incompetent authorities . . . and kidnapped by the Argentine state.”69

Argentine scapegoating of Arabs at the border failed to redress the violence in Buenos Aires. In 1995, the Argentine state itself came under fire for hindering the prosecution of both the 1992 Israeli embassy bombing and the 1994 AMIA bombing. The Israeli ambassador complained that “not much has been done” by Argentina’s Supreme Court “to clarify the attack.”70 Rubén Beraja, the president of DAIA (Delegation of Jewish Argentine Associations), asked a Supreme Court judge to resign “if he could not advance the case.”71 The AMIA president likewise regretted that “Argentina is still a place where the attacks go unpunished.”72 Meanwhile, Argentine policemen were detained for interfering in the investigation, the Argentine Minister of Justice, Rodolfo Barra, resigned amid alleged Nazi sympathies, and the Argentine Minister of the Economy, Domingo Cavallo, stepped down and denounced not only the new Minister of Justice, Elias Jassan, but also the Minister of the Interior, Carlos Corach, for meddling with judges and prosecutors in each case.73 Public perceptions of a state cover-up exacerbated orientalist representations of the president Carlos Menem who was the son of Muslim
Syrians, and his ministers of Jewish origins, derogatorily called los judíos de Menem (Menem’s Jews).74

The US likewise faulted the Argentine state for failing to prosecute the violence perpetrated in its own capital. In 1995, the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee convened a hearing on “international terrorism in Latin America, in particular Argentina and the bombing of the Jewish Community Center (AMIA) in Buenos Aires.”75 Though another hearing on authoritarian Argentina had been held less than a decade and a half previously, there was no substantive engagement with the country’s past of state-sponsored violence and human rights abuses that were often justified by allegations of combating terrorism.76 The nearly two-hundred-page report on the AMIA bombing instead made a few references about Arabs or Muslims at the border and more frequent criticisms of the Argentine state’s handling of the two attacks in Buenos Aires. Philip Wilcox, the US Department of State’s Coordinator for Counterterrorism, explicitly blamed the unsolved bombings on Hizbullah, and claimed there were Hizbullah “cells” at the “tri-border area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.”77 However, the majority of Jewish Argentine testimonies, and their answers to US committee members, put greater emphasis on the “failings” of Argentine officials in punishing the perpetrators of the 1992 and 1994 bombings.

Failing to redress anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish violence, the Argentine state continued to point fingers at the border. President Menem took up a suggestion made on Capitol Hill, and proposed a “system of information” for Argentine, Brazilian, and Paraguayan law enforcement agencies to guard against alleged “terrorist cells” at the border.78 “Menem’s proposal,” reported Folha de S. Paulo, was “linked to recent pressures the Argentine government received from the local Jewish community and the United States.”79 A year later, in 1996, Menem’s plan spawned the comando tripartite (Tripartite Command), a security network with shared intelligence and rotating leadership between the Argentine and Paraguayan Ministers of the Interior, and Brazil’s Minister of Justice, the first of its kind since Operation Condor.80 Operationalized by Brazil’s PF, Paraguay’s PN, and Argentina’s gendarmerie, the security accord mitigated Argentine and Brazilian states’ distinct agendas in relation to Paraguay,
more fully explored in the next chapter. Argentine officials were interested in “fighting terrorism” and pushed for the “identification and documentation of foreign citizens who reside in the [border] region, principally those of Arab origin.”81 Brazilian authorities rejected the Argentine idea of IDs for Arabs as “discriminatory,” but they welcomed stricter border controls to curb tax-evasive trade and what was called “Paraguay’s endogenous banditry.”82 Argentina’s Interior Minister still blamed Arabs and “lax” border controls, but Brazil’s Foreign Minister retorted that Argentine officials used “conspiracy theories” in order “to excuse themselves” due to “unsuccesful Argentine efforts at finding the culprits” of the attacks in Buenos Aires.83

Making an Ummah America

Without full enfranchisement, Arabs in Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este nonetheless forged an Ummah that “signified both a common heritage and new modes of Muslim identity, unity, and difference,” to borrow from the work of religious studies scholar Jamilah Karim.84 Sobhi Mohamad Issa, for instance, migrated to Brazil in the 1980s where he met and married his wife, Cabura, born to Lebanese parents in northern Paraná. Settling at the border, this couple participated in the baptism of the son of Catholic Brazilian friends. Their children studied Arabic in the morning, and in the afternoon, they attended “a traditional high school of Foz do Iguaçu.” Cabura reflected, “we aren’t distorting our culture, but integrating into the society of the country that received us.”85 Likewise, the daughters of Hussein Taijen studied in Paraguayan and Brazilian schools, and after earning degrees, opened law and business offices in their father and uncle’s building in Ciudad del Este. The aforementioned prayer space functioned in this same building, typifying what Alejandro Hamed Franco called the “free exercise of Islamic worship in Paraguay.”86 Arabs enmeshed with such everyday dynamics, experiencing no inherent conflict in being Muslim, Brazilian, and/or Paraguayan.

Suspected of complicity in still unresolved violence in Argentina, Muslim Arabs at the border commemorated religious holidays
alongside Brazilian and Paraguayan authorities. Year after year in A Gazeta do Iguaçu during the 1990s, Sunni members of the Islamic Benevolent Cultural Center and the Omar Ibn al-Khattab mosque explained the meaning of Ramadan, the month of fasting from dawn to sunset, as a time of sacrifice and reflection. The “principal characteristic of Ramadan,” explained one adept, is “the integration of Muslims,” with the rich and poor coming together at the end of the day as well as a “more just distribution of wealth.” Through the 1990s, the mosque invited and hosted local government officials in celebrating Eid al-Fitr that marks the end of Ramadan as well as Eid al-Adha that commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son. Local media even covered children, like twelve-year old Leila who fasted during Ramadan: “The first Sunday was difficult. My mother was cooking and I took a plate to eat three times, but I overcame [the temptation] and learned to practice patience.” Thirteen-year old Iman Safa added that “the fasting doesn’t count if we have bad thoughts about others.” Twelve-year old Hanan concluded, “we come to know the suffering of poor people . . . when we feel hungry during this month.” Notwithstanding Argentine and US vitriol that disembodied them as threats, Arabs continued making an Ummah America.

Like their Sunni counterparts, Shia Lebanese publicly collaborated with government, media, and civil society at the border. Shia members of the Islamic Benevolent Society commemorated Arba‘iyyn, “the fortieth day,” after ‘Ashura, which observes “the martyrdom of the Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Mohamed.” Instead of the public banquets sponsored by the Omar Ibn al-Khattab mosque, Shia used this and other holy days to organize clothing or food drives, donating two and three “tons of clothing” for “the needy of the city” through a local, non-Arab NGO in 1996 and 1997. Speaking in the name of the Islamic Benevolent Society, Ali Abdallah reflected that “we collect the donations among the members of the Society and we store everything so we can donate to the most needy. The key is to collaborate with people.” In the following years, he and his wife, Hayat, continued to oversee the donations. Hayat Abdallah stated, “We are commemorating a very important date, because this is the month of Ramadan, in other
words, the month of God when we feel the religious and human obligation to help others. That way, we collaborate to diminish suffering in the world.” The Foz do Iguaçu mayor’s wife headed the NGO that received Muslim donations and redistributed them in Foz do Iguaçu, calling the Islamic Benevolent Society “an example for other civil society groups.

As Argentine and US authorities unduly associated Arab Muslims at the border with the AMIA and Israeli embassy bombings in Buenos Aires, Brazilian everyday citizens and government officials formalized the mosque in Foz do Iguaçu as an icon. A long-time staple of tourist maps and attracting thousands of visitors every month, the Omar Ibn al-Khattab mosque was formally opened for visitation in 1998, especially for elementary and high school students. The mosque’s cultural director, Ale Ahmad Ghazzaoui, reflected, “the last school we received touched us with the creativity of the questions made by the students. Sometimes, Muslims are not even that interested.” In the same year, the Brazilian post office branch inaugurated a commemorative stamp in homage to the mosque. Showing the mosque’s dome flanked by two minarets and its official title as the “Mesquita Omar Ben Al-Khattab,” the stamp was used on “all correspondence of the Islamic Benevolent Cultural Center.” Having frequently rebuked associations with lawlessness and violence in Argentina, the mosque’s secretary, Kamal Osman, called the Brazilian postage stamp “a historic mark,” literally and figuratively.

Arabs even enmeshed Islam with the Dia de Finados (All Souls Day, in English), a date in the Catholic religious calendar whereby the souls of the departed are remembered in prayer and through visitation to grave sites, officially recognized by the state in Brazil but not Paraguay. Stores and schools are closed in Foz do Iguaçu, as many head to the city’s cemeteries, São João Batista or Jardim São Paulo. Ali Ghazzaoui recounted that “Muslims of Ciudad del Este and Foz” partake in this Brazilian ritual of visiting the deceased “out of respect for the customs of the people who welcomed them.” Muslim families headed to the corner of the Jardim São Paulo cemetery, originally purchased in 1981 by and for Muslims to “bury their dead with the feet facing east.” Ghazzaoui noted that Muslims generally avoided the use of candles in the cemetery. Many, however, adopted
the Catholic practice of bringing flowers and placing them on the tombs. Whereas Catholic counterparts recited the “Hail Mary” and the “Our Father,” Muslims read aloud “Ya sīn, 36th surah [chapter] of the Quran” in front of the graves of loved ones whose “faces were turned toward Mecca, toward the sunrise, because on the final day of judgment, when the dead will rise, they’ll look toward the holy city.”

Amid Argentine and US machinations that vilified their transnational reach, Muslim Lebanese on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border maintained long-distance ties, including with Lebanon’s AMAL party, headed by parliamentary president Nabih Berri. In 1996, Berri and twenty-one Lebanese parliamentarians visited Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este. Berri stated his intention to “reinforce the ties between the Arab Community and the “Government of Lebanon.” Border media explained that “Berri commands the radical political organization, AMAL (Shiite)” and transformed himself from “one of the most feared terrorists of the world” to “an internationally respected persona.” Arabs hosted a banquet for a thousand people in the luxurious Hotel Bourbon and accompanied Berri on visits to the Iguaçu waterfalls, the Itaipu damn, and Islamic charity associations. In these venues, Berri referred to the nearly twenty-year Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon and emphasized that “the invaders are them [Israelis].” Lebanese at the border “wanted to show the parliamentary president the development that they brought to the region and reinforce support for the reconstruction of Lebanon.”

Arabs at the border imagined themselves as victims, not victimizers, publicly raising the question of whether Israeli incursions in Lebanon could fuel Argentine offensives against the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border. After Berri’s visit, in 1996, Israel shelled South Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley. Called “Grapes of Wrath,” the Israeli attack allegedly aimed to stomp out Hizbullah bases but it resulted in thousands of civilian casualties that provoked fear on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border. As Israel attacked Lebanon, a Foz do Iguaçu newspaper reported on “a rumor in the Arab community that the region would be a possible target of Israeli terrorists who would try to strike at Hizbullah and
the Lebanese government through their compatriots in Latin America." It was feared that “Israeli terrorists” would enter via Argentina in order to attack Arabs on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border. A military spokesman in Puerto Iguazú dismissed the rumor, attempting to disassociate Argentine stances toward Brazil and Paraguay from the Israeli attack on Lebanon.

At this hemispheric crossroads of an Ummah, Arab traders from Brazilian and Paraguayan sides organized a street march in protest of Israel’s shelling of Lebanon. “Stores run by Arabs in Ciudad del Este,” related A Gazeta do Iguaçu, “closed their doors . . . in protest and went to Avenida Brasil (in Foz do Iguaçu) where the demonstration began.” They joined some three thousand civic demonstrators who condemned the Israeli war on Hizbullah that resulted in thousands of innocent deaths in Lebanon. Although the Israeli offensive targeted Shia-majority areas of Lebanon, the protest’s most outspoken critics were Sunni. Kamal Osman, Mohamad Barakat, and others condemned Israel’s shelling that resulted in civilian and non-combatant deaths. To commemorate the forty-day anniversary of the war, in tribute to the civilians murdered, the Shia-led Islamic Benevolent Society held a ceremony that included these as well as other Sunni and non-Muslim residents. Together at an Ummah American border, Sunni and Shia Muslims mourned and protested the killing of innocent civilians.

With the unlikely return to villages attacked or occupied by Israel, Shia Lebanese deepened their roots at the border by founding a new school, the “Escola Libanesa Brasileira” (Lebanese Brazilian School). According to Reda Soueid, “this school” would “better connect the Arab community into the Iguaçu community” and “the cultural exchange between them.” Mohsen Bilal Wehbi from São Paulo collaborated with the Islamic Benevolent Society, arranging for a Lebanese migrant, Ali Khazan, to become the school principal. Opened in 2000, the school is located on a main highway outside the city center in Foz do Iguaçu. It started offering “elementary education” for some six hundred children on three floors and around twenty-seven classrooms, expanding later on. According to the Brazilian principal, Regina Venâncio, the Escola Libanesa Brasileira and the previously established Colégio Líbano
Brasileiro, “have the goal of attending to the children, descendants of the Islamic community, as well as all the students from other communities.” Brazil’s Ministry of Education approved the school curriculum with classes in Arabic, English, and Portuguese, as well as Islamic religion and history. “Dona Regina,” as she is known, observed that parents would arrange for children enrolled at the Escola Libanesa Brasileira to study abroad in Lebanon, who after a short time, returned to Foz do Iguaçu. Migrant parents wanted their children to renew family ties, improve language skills, and attend Lebanese schools based on a US curriculum, which offered special classes for study abroad students from Brazil and Paraguay.

Arabs folded into this Ummah America in ways that precluded the Argentine side of the border. In 1998, Veja stated that “Arab immigrants of Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este avoided visiting Puerto Iguazú. . . . They know they are not welcome.” The newsweekly pointed out that the Argentine state suspected Arabs of providing “shelter to terrorists of Hizbullah” and “it hopes to blame” them “for the two anti-Jewish attacks [sic] that killed more than 100 persons in Buenos Aires.” A month later, Brazilian diplomats in Asunción made the same observation that Argentine counterparts blamed the border for the violence that the Argentine state failed to prevent and prosecute in Buenos Aires. Veja, reflecting Brazilian government policy, explained that “there is no proof” of Argentine accusations against Arabs, but “the immigrants are suspected because the majority come from the south of Lebanon and belong to the Shia branch of Islam.” Veja qualified that “sympathy for Hizbullah is no secret in the community,” but also that Brazilian and Paraguayan states did not consider Hizbullah (or AMAL) “terrorist organizations.” A Gazeta do Iguaçu more explicitly criticized the Argentine government for having “ceded to the interests of the United States and Israel,” which “demanded energetic actions from the Brazilian and Paraguayan governments to undertake surveillance of Arab communities.” Having helped in the authoritarian rise of Brazil over Paraguay, Arabs at the border became a target of post-authoritarian Argentina and the US.
“Muslim First . . .” in America

The “Muslim First . . .” configuration of identity that anthropologist Nadine Naber studied among Arabs in the US was both imputed to and taken up by counterparts on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border.113 State authorities in the aforementioned “Tripartite Command” referenced the Muslimness of the border especially in relation to unresolved violence against Jews in Argentina.114 Just after the command’s representatives met in Buenos Aires, the Brazilian Federal Police apprehended a Shia shaykh, Seyed Mohsen Tabatabai, for allegedly conspiring in the AMIA bombing.115 Usually characterized as “Islamic,” Tabatabai’s Iranian passport had a Paraguayan residency stamp that apparently dated back to 1984, which had been just renewed. For some two years previously, Tabatabai used legitimate credentials as the religious leader in the Shia-led Islamic Benevolent Society in Foz do Iguaçu and in the Mezquita del Profeta Mohamad in Ciudad del Este. Without this backdrop, ABC Color reported that Tabatabai was one of the “kingpins” of Hizbullah, protecting other “Arab terrorists who participated in the attack” on AMIA, though Brazil’s Federal Police maintained that Tabatabai had not infringed upon any law.116 Tabatabai’s Iranian passport with the necessary visas was confiscated in Foz do Iguaçu and forwarded to Interpol. After a week, Brazil’s Federal Police declared that Tabatabai was innocent. Years later, upon verification from the embassy in Tehran, the Brazilian state extended official Brazilian visas for Tabatabai and his family.117 State authorities detained, defamed, and absolved a Shia religious leader at the border.

Without reference to Arab, Iranian, or other Middle Eastern categories of difference in this Ummah, Muslims came together to represent Shia identity on its own terms. After Tabatabai explained to a journalist that Shia uphold a “more democratic” form of governing, his Sunni counterpart, Mohamad Barakat, then Secretary of Industry and Commerce of the Foz do Iguaçu government, added, “in this system, the way of governing among us is by consultative means, through popular councils, where the members are chosen by the people.” Tabatabai and Barakat stressed that Muslims at the border were “blamed” for the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires.118
With overwhelmingly Sunni and Shia Lebanese by his side, Tabatabai explained, “the first thing that I learned was tolerance amid any false accusation. We always hope that the accuser apologizes. That way, we are obliged to forgive, especially when we are in a position of power.” Indeed, Tabatabai had authority, bearing a distant relation to the prominent scholar of Shia Islam, Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai. He concluded that “false news reports” about alleged ties to the AMIA bombing “committed violence against truth, democracy, humanity, and above all, the security of the peoples of the três fronteiras (three borders).”

Shia Lebanese in Ciudad del Este likewise supported Tabatabai. Ibrahim Hijazi conceded an interview to ABC Color as “the official representative of Lebanon’s AMAL party,” explaining that AMAL was “against violence” and guaranteed that Tabatabai was “guiding, helping, and encouraging the religious customs of his community and has no connection with terrorism.” Without referencing Tabatabai’s Iranian background, or his scholarly pedigree, Hijazi explained that the title of Tabatabai as shaykh meant that he was a “religious” leader in Islam, “respected for his charity work.” Likewise, not commenting on the shaykh’s undeserved association with the unresolved violence perpetrated against Israeli and Jewish institutions in Buenos Aires, Hijazi emphasized that Muslims are against terrorism because the “founder of the AMAL party,” Musa al-Sadr, was kidnapped and killed by terrorists. As a Muslim and self-identified AMAL representative, Hijazi declared that fellow “Lebanese merchants living in Ciudad del Este” sought to escape, not spread, conflict. Lebanese Shia defended Tabatabai and portrayed Muslims not as the perpetrators but rather as victims of violence.

Post-authoritarian Brazilian authorities defended Tabatabai and associated him with the Muslim-majority “Arab community.” The Workers’ Party (PT), the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB), the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB), and the Communist Party of Brazil (PC do B), among others, wrote an open “Statement of Support to the Arab Community of the Triânce Frontiera.” The letter began, “Political parties in Foz do Iguacu publicly denounce the existence” of a “biased and smear campaign”
levied “against the region of the Three Borders and principally against the Arab Community that has lived and worked here for dozens of years.” It continued that “since the attack against AMIA,” mainstream media portrayed the border as a “central base of operations for Arab Terrorists who control all terror in Latin America.” The letter explained that Tabatabai’s ordeal began when an unspecified “Paraguayan newspaper from Asunción” claimed “the Muslim priest and missionary [sic]” was “the leader of a terrorist group in charge of spreading terror in Latin America.” However, “after an investigation through Interpol, the untrue allegations led the local Federal Police chief to challenge the news.” The letter concluded that Muslims and Arabs “always contributed to the construction and development of the tríplice fronteira,” and thus, “should be respected in their dignity and citizenship.” Without taking note of the difference between Tabatabai and the predominantly Arab public at the border, the Foz do Iguaçu city government defended a wrongly detained Islamic religious leader.

Shortly after Tabatabai’s vindication, the Shia-led Islamic Benevolent Society celebrated the end of Ramadan by donating food, toys, and clothing for the needy. In subtle reference to the conspiracy theory spun by big media, Ali Abdallar stated, “it’s important that the press covers this kind of action, so this example can be followed by other persons, independently of nationality or belief.” Abdallar made a “call to fraternity. This border is so rich. If each of us gives a little, we wouldn’t have poor people.” He paraphrased the Quran, “Never will one arrive at the altar of fraternity or goodness, if they don’t give away a little of what they enjoy.” Repeating the gesture in subsequent years, another member, Ali Abdala, made it clear that “Our goal in making donations is to fulfill a religious and humanitarian obligation to help who is near.” Their donations went to the local NGO known by the acronym Provopar (Programa do Voluntariado Paranaense, or Paraná State Volunteer Program). After a Shia shaykh was wrongly detained by law enforcement, the Islamic Benevolent Society where he led prayer carried out an annual donation event for the needy.

Nonetheless, the Argentine state strong-armed its Paraguayan counterpart to produce any Muslim Arab suspect for still unresolved
anti-Semitic violence in Buenos Aires. In 1998, “Paraguayan and Argentine police forces” together issued “an international arrest warrant” for Khaled Taki Eldin, a Sunni religious leader allegedly wanted “in the AMIA case.” The case began when Argentina’s SIDE, navy, and gendarmerie published a report that grupos chiitas (Shia groups) in Ciudad del Este “benefited from the backwardness of the Paraguayan government in the implementation of security measures.” At first, Paraguay’s Foreign Relations Ministry rebuked this Argentine report as an excuse for “failing to investigate the attacks.” Even the stronista strongman of Alto-Paraná, Carlos Barreto Sarubbi, expressed disbelief at the accusations levied against “the Islamic population” because “they are people who all of us know.” His son, just elected as mayor of Ciudad del Este, echoed, “Here, we never had any attacks and never detected terrorist cells.” In the following months, however, Paraguayan authorities carried out what Clarin called an “anti-terrorist dragnet” in Paraguay, detaining Lebanese Muslims with purported “connections” to “the massacres of the Embassy of Israel in 1992 and AMIA in 1994 in Buenos Aires.” When this roundup failed to produce evidence, Argentina’s Interior Minister, Carlos Corach asked for better results from his Paraguayan counterpart, and on the same day, Paraguay’s National Police received a judicial order to search and detain the Egyptian-born Eldin in Ciudad del Este.

But the post-authoritarian Brazilian state pushed back against Paraguay in spite of Argentine pressure. After all, Eldin was a naturalized Brazilian citizen living in Foz do Iguaçu for twelve years with his wife and four Brazilian-born children. Brazilian officials asked Eldin to wait for Paraguayan authorities to follow diplomatic protocol and request Eldin’s testimony at the Brazilian embassy in Asunción, which then would be forwarded to Brazil’s Foreign Ministry. “If the request was approved,” A Gazeta do Iguaçu explained, “Eldin would have the right to be heard in Brazil by a Brazilian judge.” Eldin spoke of his religious duties under Brazilian sovereignty, “I exercise my religious responsibilities in strict obedience to Brazilian law and supported by the constitution, which guarantees freedom of consciousness and religious worship.” Eldin likewise spoke of neither Sunni nor Shia but rather of the “comunidade
árabe-islâmica.” 135 Although Eldin expressed his willingness to meet with Paraguayan authorities alongside Mohamad Barakat, Said Taijen, Atef Manah, and others in the Centro Cultural Beneficente Islâmico, the Brazilian state intervened against Argentine-influenced Paraguay. 136

Sunni and Shia came together against post-authoritarian Argentina’s “diplomatic offensive” that vilified the Ummah as being “responsible for two major anti-Jewish attacks in the country’s capital.” 137 After ABC Color alleged that Eldin had “supposed ties with the terrorist arm of Hizbullah,” 138 Reda Soueid, a Shia from Khiam in South Lebanon, replied that “Khaled Eldin is Sunni, which shows the wrong-headedness of the accusations” that associated him with “Hizbullah and Iran” that are of “the Shia line of Islam.” 139 Soueid lobbied against anti-migrant “dragnets” in Brazil, discussed in the next chapter, delivering to Brazil’s Minister of Justice a report about the “persecution of Arabs” that was exacerbated by baseless accusations of “Islamic terrorist cells in the region.” 140 A one-time member of the Lebanese communist party, Soueid lived in Foz do Iguaçu since 1978, presided over a local branch of the Worker’s Party (PT), and ran a store in the Paraguayan border town. Around this time, Soueid noted, “We have a hidden war here, and we Arabs are on the defensive.” 141 Indeed, Muslim Arabs’ sense of being under collective attack heightened after Paraguay’s National Police claimed that Eldin used the “Sunni mosque of Foz do Iguaçu” as a cover for ties to “Hamas and Al Gamat al Islamiya” [sic]. 142

Arabs again pointed fingers not at Paraguay but rather at Argentina for the anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish violence that the state failed to prevent and prosecute. In Ciudad del Este, Hussein Taijen stated to Clarin that “AMIA is an internal problem of your own” in Argentina. Argentine authorities, he counter-accused, sought “to transfer the problem to the triple frontera because they couldn’t clarify the attack and because there’s a lot of cash moving here.” 143 Taijen even defended Hizbullah. This nominally Sunni Lebanese stressed: “Hizbullah does not exist in Paraguay, but at any rate, this group is a political party that struggles for the liberation of its land, as you, Argentines, struggled for the Falkland Islands.” 144 Taijen likened Hizbullah’s struggle with Israel to Argentina’s past war with
Britain. Taijen dismissed the Argentine Interior Minister’s allegation of Hizbullah support at the border, reflecting “Is it right that we send cash to the Islamic cause? We would have no problem sending money. But it just so happens that Hizbullah has a lot more cash than we do.” But the Clarín newspaper headline read “All of us Arabs here are of Hizbullah.” Taijen criticized Argentina’s scapegoating of Arabs at the border, but his position was glossed as monolithic support for Hizbullah.

Though critical of the Argentine state and media, Taijen’s stance “was not well received” by some Shia Lebanese. Whether misreading the headline or misconstruing his words, some Shia Lebanese thought that their Sunni counterpart had characterized Ciudad del Este as a “cueva de terroristas” (cave of terrorists) or labeled Shia or Hizbullah as terrorists. Viewed as Sunni, Hussein Taijen had a better image beforehand, but he lost some respect among Shia after his remark from the Argentine press circulated on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border. Although Taijen criticized Argentine attempts to blame Muslims and Arabs for unresolved violence in Buenos Aires, Shia Lebanese and others hardly thought of Taijen as defending them. As scapegoats of the Argentine state’s failure to thwart or resolve the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy and the 1994 bombing of AMIA in Buenos Aires, Muslim Arabs at the border likewise failed to shore up the politics of religious difference among themselves.

Such circumstances exacerbated violence against Muslim Arabs at the border, as three leaders were gunned down in the span of a year. In one case, Sheikh Ziad Fahs was shot twice in the head and survived. Fahs ran the Shia-majority Centro Educacional Libanés in Ciudad del Este, brought up earlier. Suspicions were raised that the shooting was an attempt to silence his criticisms of the impunity surrounding the prior shooting of Taijen himself, addressed in the next chapter. In one of Fahs’s sermons, the religious leader “demanded more seriousness on the part of Paraguayan authorities to investigate the assassination.” In fact, the Centro Educacional Libanés pleaded for his case to be investigated as an act of terrorism. But the anti-terrorist division of Paraguay’s National Police alleged that the violence stemmed from Muslims’ internal
“sectarian” divisions. Accordingly, the Paraguayan state side-stepped Fahs’s own request “to investigate my case, which is very grave, because we still don’t know what happened.” Assailants were arrested and charged, but Sunni and Shia were increasingly uncertain of due legal process at the border more than a decade after the formal end of authoritarian rule.

Muslim Arabs were subject to, and not executors of, authoritarian legacies. Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians brought Islam into Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este, and that border into a wider Ummah. Tending to steer clear of authoritarian and post-authoritarian regimes, their Islamic community-organizing accommodated state exceptions. But as the anti-terrorist or counter-terrorist mantras of past authoritarian regimes crept into subsequent post-authoritarian administrations, Muslim Arabs saw themselves as taking the blame for anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish attacks that the Argentine government neither prevented nor prosecuted in a checkered history of state-sponsored violence. Arabs on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the border distanced the Islam they practiced from the exceptional demands made by Argentine and US authorities, but the concomitant rise of liberal economic blocs made matters more uncertain.