



# Latin America & Caribbean Islamic Studies

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[Interview] Covering Islam in Latin America: An Interview with Journalist Eduardo Campos Lima

[Interview by] Ken Chitwood

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**Covering Islam in Latin America:**  
**An Interview with Journalist Eduardo Campos Lima**  
*Interview by Ken Chitwood*

**KC: First, tell us a little more about you and your work.**

ECL: I studied journalism at the University of São Paulo, Brazil (2003-2007) and shortly after began to work for *Folha de S. Paulo*, one of the country's largest newspapers. Those were the years of an important real estate boom in Brazil, and during most of my first years as a reporter I covered construction and real estate companies.

In parallel, for many years, I collaborated with the left-wing press in Brazil, especially with the newspaper *Brasil de Fato*, founded during the World Social Forum in 2003 by major human rights activists like Eduardo Galeano and Noam Chomsky. For them, I would write especially about theater.

In those years, I completed a master's degree (2013) and a Ph.D. (2020) in dramaturgy. During my doctorate, I spent one year in the United States as a Fulbright visiting researcher, initially at the University of New Mexico (Albuquerque) and then at Columbia University in New York. My research was about Chicano and Puerto-Rican theater. In my academic work, one of the major themes was the relevance of popular religiosity for social movements in Latin America. That is how I began to study religion in a more systematic way. I am a practicing Roman Catholic and have always been curious about other traditions; but only recently was I able to study religions more academically.

**KC: You have written numerous articles about Islam and Muslims in Brazil and Latin America, as well as on South-South linkages between Latin America and Muslim-majority nations. How did you start reporting on these storylines?**

ECL: I had been following and covering the Palestinian struggle in Latin America since my years in *Brasil de Fato*. The Palestinian cause has always been a central theme for the Brazilian left-wing. At the same time, Brazil has played a relevant role in welcoming Syrian refugees since 2013. I was curious about their situation in Brazil, especially with

the economic crisis that began after Dilma Rousseff's impeachment and during President Michel Temer's tenure (2016-2018).

I began collaborating with English-language Catholic websites in 2019 and was able to write about several immigrant crises in Latin America, including those involving Muslims. But my goal was to go deeper in the matters involving Arabs and Muslims, so I got in touch with English-language media outlets specializing in the Middle East. That is how I ended up collaborating with Arab News, Middle East Eye, and Al Jazeera.

**KC: What have you learned or taken away from your numerous stories?**

ECL: I learned many things over the years when it comes to my coverage of Arabs and Muslims in Latin America. One of them is that we cannot properly say that there's a "Muslim community" in Latin America. It is vibrant, but changing all the time, with the continuous arrival of Asians and especially of Africans in the region. Unfortunately, those who have been coming more recently are the ones who suffer the most. They do not receive support from anybody – including from their fellow Muslims.

Another thing that I learned is that capitalism is always behind great social phenomena. Brazil became over the past years the major exporter of *halal* protein in the world, so it needs Muslim manpower in its slaughterhouses. That is why we see more and more Muslim Africans coming to Brazil – they plan to save some money and then go to the U.S., but the salaries are ridiculously low and many times they are not able to do so.

An additional lesson is that South-South integration, especially the union of economies between South America and the Gulf Nations, should be something quite easy to achieve and would be enormously positive for both sides. But resistance from the existing world order makes it more difficult. There is a continuous effort from the U.S. and other countries to jeopardize such integration, which is always very fragile. The most remarkable example of that is how Brazilian beef and poultry producers, who became billionaires with their presence in the Gulf, supported the election of President Jair Bolsonaro, a staunch supporter of Israel who had even promised to move the Brazilian

embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. They ideologically identify with imperialist nations, while they make money through South-South integration.

**KC: What do you think people should know about these themes that might be surprising or particularly enlightening?**

ECL: I think most people do not know that part of the roots of Latin America are Muslim. With the deportation of the Moor from Spain and Portugal between the end of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century and the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century, many among the colonizers who came to Brazil, to the Viceroyalty of Peru and the Viceroyalty of New Spain were Moriscos. That is why there are numerous examples of Mudéjar art and architecture across Latin America. Morisco habits were one of the foundations of Latin American culture since the 16<sup>th</sup>-century, with consequences for the arts, language, cuisine, and so on. There is other research that shows how music in places like New Mexico and other traditions in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and southern Brazil have links or even possible origins in the Arab world.

Such historical connections made it easier for Arab migrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries to be assimilated into Latin American societies, something that gave them conditions to thrive like in no other part of the world. In Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, and elsewhere, Arabs and their descendants attained the presidency of the Republic and are among the elite in business, artistic, scholar, and medical sectors.

**KC: Do you work much with scholars when reporting on these articles? What themes might academics interested in these topics better explore based on your perspective as a journalist?**

ECL: I always try to talk to scholars when doing such articles, especially when there are complex matters of politics or international relations involved. But it is not always easy to find an expert. Over the years, I noticed that there are very few experts in the bilateral relations between Central American countries and Arab nations, for example. It is equally

difficult to find scholars who know the general context of the Islam in Latin America and would be willing to give an interview about it.

**KC: Anything else you want to share on these topics?**

ECL: I would like to say that journalists most of the time try to identify the best source for a given article, but they are always running against time. So, it is common that they end up interviewing people who would not be the best option. When it comes to themes involving Islam and Arabs, it is something that can be terribly problematic, given the enormous amount of prejudice involved. So, it would be interesting if a group of experts in Arab and Muslim themes had a very visible social media presence and could be easily consulted when needed.

I would like to say as well that, for journalists, the criterion to classify someone as an expert is not the same as in the scholarly world. On many occasions, I tried to interview someone about Islam in Mexico, for instance, and the person would tell me: "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm not an expert in the whole of Mexico. My dissertation was about female empowerment in the Muslim community of Tijuana." That meant I ended up losing an opportunity to add important expertise and analysis. I think, therefore, that scholars should always be open and prepared to deal with themes that apparently go beyond their area of focus, especially when it comes to Islam and Muslims in Latin America.