

A beacon of Arab-Islamic civilization in the heart of France

Paris - Nour-eddine Saoudi

Paris, the French capital, distinguishes itself from the other capitals of the world. It is "The City of Lights", "The City of Museums", "and The City of Grand Palaces ", " The City of Beautiful Gardens "and" The City of Culture and Arts". It is not easy to mention all its qualities and characteristics.

If the French capital is rich in monuments and in historic inheritances of exceptional artistic splendor, like the Tower Eiffel, the Arch of Triumph, Notre Dame, the Palace of Luxemburg and Bastille square, it also distinguishes itself from other western capitals because it welcomes numerous institutions concerned with Arab-Islamic culture and civilization.

We can mention among them, the Mosque of Paris, founded in 1922-26, on the architectural style of Andalusia. This mosque has an esplanade with a garden in the center surrounded by pavilions. In the middle of the building, one finds a hall inspired by Alhambra, the most famous Islamic monument of the Spanish city of Grenada. This hall is surrounded by arcades with refined arches. The mosque's prayer room attracts the visitor's attention because of its arches and decorations and the beauty of its carpets. During the years that followed, Paris and other French cities, witnessed the building of numerous mosques, the most important being : the mosque of Omar, the mosque of Abu Bakr, the mosque of Khaled Ben El Walid, the mosque of El Fateh, the Turkish mosque and the Addaawa mosque.



The Great Mosque in Paris

المسجد الكبير في باريس

Istitutes



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Taking notice of the growing weight of the Arab-Moslem community residing in France, the government decided to create an institution which would play the role of a bridge between the Arab-Moslem world and the western world: the Institute of the Arab World (IMA).

It is the fruit of a partnership between France and 22 Arab countries. This institution has been created in 1987 by President Mitterand, who made it one of the big achievements of his term in office. Since its first days, the IMA has worked for the deepening of the understanding of the Arab world and its civilization among the French public. It also encouraged cooperation, communication and cultural exchanges between the Arab world and France, notably in the fields of science and technology. It also aims at developing relations between the Arab world and France.

France, first Islamic country of Europe

To reach these goals, the Institute of the Arab World has a museum containing artifacts from some French national museums, namely the Louvre, Decorative Arts, Arts of Africa and Oceania, as well as from the collections of some Arab countries, such as Tunisia and Syria. These ceramics, dresses, utensils and jewelry give an idea



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about the history of Arab-Islamic civilization. Thus, one finds for example, artifacts from the mosque of Kairawan, the Hafside heritage, jewelry and dresses from the state of Aghlabide and the Ottomans. The IMA also has an audiovisual room that enables visitors to discover the heritage of Arab-Moslem civilization through pictures and sounds.

The institute has a library with more than 50, 000 books and 1200 magazines in Arabic, French, English, German, Spanish and Italian. The IMA also organizes numerous exhibitions and meetings. The IMA Club organizes a monthly meeting on a current topic; a book fair; the Arab film festival and the music festival. It publishes a cultural magazine "Qantara" (The Bridge)

and provides many educational services. On average about a million people visit the IMA annually.

The interest of the French authorities in the Arab-Moslem world is not surprising, especially if one remembers the relations of France with a number of Arab countries during the colonial period and the French Arab-Moslem community of five million. This makes France, in the words of some French journalists, the "first Islamic country in Europe".

The growth of the Arab-Muslim community has promoted the establishment of numerous associations to care for the immigrants. After much deliberation it was decided to create an organization to regroup the Moslem associations and in 1993 the French Council for Moslem Affairs was set up. Its administrative board is composed of 63 members belonging to the two major Muslim organizations: the National Federation of the Moslems of France and the Union of the Islamic Organizations of France. It has been chaired by the Rector of the Paris mosque. It is a positive step, but the Arab-Moslem community thinks that it deserves greater consideration, respect and equal treatment with the other sectors French society that is founded on the motto: "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity".