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Islamic Schools in Brazil: Opportunities and Challenges in Muslim Religious Education

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Abstract: This article investigates the institutional architecture, pedagogical practices, and identity dynamics of Islamic confessional schools in Brazil, analysing how these institutions balance national secular educational guidelines (BNCC/LDB) with the preservation of the Muslim faith and Arab culture. Employing a multi-method qualitative approach, the study combines an empirical mapping of all seven active Islamic schools in the country with an in-depth comparative case study of the two foundational Sunni and Shia institutions in the metropolitan area of São Paulo. Drawing on document analysis, surveys, and qualitative interviews with managers, teachers, pupils, and parents, the findings illustrate how mandatory tracks in Arabic language and Islamic theology are integrated alongside the national core curriculum. The comparative analysis reveals distinct pedagogical and aesthetic choices between Sunni and Shia traditions, alongside shared operational models regarding gender management and community life. Ultimately, the article argues that Islamic confessional schooling transforms ancestral heritage into social capital, fostering community belonging and civic integration within a minority context
Keywords: Islamic education; Confessional schooling; Arab immigration; Religious identity; Brazil

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag untersucht die institutionellen Strukturen, pädagogischen Praktiken und Prozesse der Identitätsbildung muslimischer Bekenntnisschulen in Brasilien. Analysiert wird, wie diese Einrichtungen die nationalen säkularen Bildungsrichtlinien (BNCC/LDB) mit der Bewahrung des muslimischen Glaubens und der arabischen Kultur in Einklang bringen. Die Studie folgt einem qualitativen Mehrmethodenansatz und verbindet eine empirische Erfassung aller sieben derzeit aktiven islamischen Schulen des Landes mit einer vertiefenden vergleichenden Fallstudie der beiden traditionsbildenden sunnitischen und schiitischen Einrichtungen im Großraum São Paulo. Auf der Grundlage von Dokumentenanalysen, Befragungen sowie qualitativen Interviews mit Schulleitungen, Lehrkräften, Schülerinnen und Schülern sowie Eltern zeigen die Ergebnisse, wie verpflichtende Unterrichtsbereiche zur arabischen Sprache und zur islamischen Theologie neben dem nationalen Kerncurriculum integriert werden. Die vergleichende Analyse macht unterschiedliche pädagogische und ästhetische Schwerpunktsetzungen in sunnitischen und schiitischen Traditionen sichtbar, zugleich aber auch gemeinsame Organisationsmodelle im Umgang mit Geschlechterverhältnissen und im gemeinschaftlichen Schulleben. Abschließend vertritt der Beitrag die These, dass islamische Bekenntnisschulen das überlieferte kulturelle und religiöse Erbe in soziales Kapital transformieren und dadurch sowohl die Zugehörigkeit zur Gemeinschaft als auch die gesellschaftliche und staatsbürgerliche Integration im Minderheitenkontext fördern.
Schlagwörter: Muslimische Bildung; Konfessionelles Schulwesen; Arabische Einwanderung; Religiöse Identität; Brasilien

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1. Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, Brazil has been a destination for immigrants of Arab origin—primarily Lebanese, comprising both Sunni and Shia Muslims—a migratory influx that continues to shape the country's social fabric in the twenty-first century. To strengthen identity, preserve culture, foster community life, and maintain ancestral ties, these immigrant groups established a diverse network of institutions—including charitable societies, associations, mosques, social clubs, schools, and cemeteries—designed to transmit the linguistic, cultural, and religious values of their heritage within a majoritarian non-Muslim, Christian society.

Within the Brazilian educational landscape, private confessional schools operate within a distinct legislative and pedagogical context. While the state guarantees religious freedom and grants denominational institutions the autonomy to implement tailored religious curricula, it simultaneously enforces national standards through the *National Common Core Curriculum* (Base Nacional Comum Curricular — BNCC) and the *National Education Guidelines Law* (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação — LDB). This legal framework mandates the integration of standardized secular competencies across all basic educational levels. For a religious minority, this environment presents both a structural opportunity and an operational challenge: schools must navigate the fine line between satisfying state-mandated academic standards—ensuring their students remain competitive in the higher education market—and maintaining an authentic confessional environment that fulfills the cultural and spiritual expectations of families.

Despite the historical depth and growing visibility of the Muslim presence in Brazil, there remains a critical scarcity of consolidated empirical research examining the internal operational models of Islamic educational institutions. Existing literature often treats the Muslim population as a monolithic group or limits its inquiry to historical migratory accounts, frequently overlooking the internal theological nuances and specific pedagogical strategies adopted by different sectarian traditions.

To address this empirical gap, this article investigates the institutional and pedagogical architecture of Islamic religious schools in Brazil. Specifically, the study addresses the following central research question: How do Islamic confessional schools in Brazil structurally balance the secular mandates of national educational guidelines with the internal imperatives of preserving the Muslim faith and Arab cultural heritage? To answer this, the article operationalizes its inquiry by examining how guiding pedagogical principles are translated into daily practice, while identifying the operational similarities and structural variations between the country's primary Sunni and Shia educational institutions.

To address this question, this study employs a multi-method qualitative approach. Following a comprehensive literature review, analysis of institutional digital platforms, and the administration of exploratory questionnaires to school administrators, extensive field research was conducted. Out of the seven Islamic confessional schools currently operating in Brazil, two foundational case studies located in the metropolitan area of São Paulo were selected for in-depth comparative investigation. In addition to administrative surveys, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with school management, teachers, pupils, and parents to evaluate the institutional challenges of maintaining an Islamic school in a secular country and to understand the role of these institutions in the holistic formation of their students.

The article is structured into five main sections following this introduction. The second section, Confessional Education and Religious Instruction in Brazil, examines the legal trajectories and regulatory frameworks governing religious schooling within national educational legislation. The third section, The Muslim Presence in Brazil: Historical Formation, Migration and Institutions, analyses the historical footprint of Islam in the country, tracing the trajectory from Islamised enslaved populations and early Arab immigration to contemporary migratory flows, conversion dynamics, and the institutionalisation

of community spaces. The fourth section, Methodological Framework: Historical Inquiry, Sources, and Case Selection, outlines the qualitative, historical-comparative research design, detailing the case selection criteria, primary sources, and ethical considerations. The fifth section, Teaching the Muslim Faith and Arab Culture: Comparative Analysis and Results, presents the empirical mapping of active schools and provides an in-depth comparative analysis of the Sunni and Shia case studies across four central thematic axes. Finally, the sixth section, Final Considerations: The Institutional Architecture and Future of Islamic Education in Brazil, synthesises the primary findings, offering reflections on the challenges and future perspectives of minority religious schooling in Latin America.

2. Confessional Education and Religious Instruction in Brazil

Understanding the emergence and development of Islamic schools in Brazil requires consideration of the historical evolution of confessional education, the status of Religious Education within the state, and the legal framework governing non-state schools. Together, these elements provide the historical and institutional framework within which Islamic schools have developed their educational projects and negotiated their place within Brazilian society.

2.1 Historical Development of Confessional Education and Religious Instruction

The history of formal education in Brazil is deeply intertwined with Portuguese colonization and the religious dynamics of the Counter-Reformation. Beginning in the mid-16th century, the Portuguese Crown utilized the Society of Jesus to catechize the indigenous population and secure the territory. Consequently, the earliest educational institutions established in colonial Brazil (1500–1822) were intrinsically denominational and Catholic, operating under a virtual monopoly of religious orders that served both evangelical purposes and the education of the colonial ruling classes.

This configuration persisted through the arrival of the Portuguese Court (1808) and the Imperial period (1822–1889). During the 19th century, the slow expansion of free state education enabled confessional schools to retain a central role. The return of the Jesuits triggered institutional competition not only among Catholic orders but also with newly arrived North American Protestant missionary schools (Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and Adventist). These Protestant institutions introduced a liberal perspective, claiming educational superiority over state models while remaining open to students from diverse religious backgrounds.

Although the subsequent Republican era (1889–1930) introduced the ideal of free, secular public primary education, its institutionalization was slow, allowing private confessional institutions to maintain a prominent status. Throughout much of the twentieth century, these schools continued to enjoy considerable prestige, while debates between advocates of secular public education and defenders of confessional education reflected broader ideological disputes over the future of Brazilian education. Legislation introduced during the 1960s sought to reconcile these competing perspectives, although the Military Regime (1964–1985) ultimately favoured the expansion of private education (Ghiraldelli Jr., 2001; Ribeiro, 2003; Vidal & Faria Filho, 2003).

While private religious institutions maintained the freedom to provide denominational education and consolidate their prestige, the presence of Religious Education in Brazilian state schools remained a persistent point of debate. Although the Proclamation of the Republic (1889) introduced the principle of secular public education, religious instruction was reintroduced under Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945) to appease conservative Catholic interests, triggering long-standing conflicts with advocates of secular public schooling (such as the New School Movement). During the Military Regime (1964–1985), Religious Education was officially incorporated into public school timetables, repurposed to foster patriotic and moral alignment with authoritarian state interests. Nevertheless, due to flexible oversight, some

schools exercised autonomy to implement ecumenical and interdenominational programs that accommodated student diversity.

In the redemocratization era, the 1988 Federal Constitution reaffirmed Religious Education as an optional subject within public elementary schools, guaranteeing freedom of belief and prohibiting proselytism under Article 33 of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases LDB – Law No. 9,394/1996) (Brasil. Assembléia Nacional Constituinte, 1988; Brasil. Congresso Nacional, 1996). More recently, the approval of the National Common Curricular Base (Base Nacional Comum Curricular- BNCC) in 2017 sought to shift Religious Education in public schools toward a non-confessional, plural academic discipline grounded in scientific neutrality, intercultural dialogue, and human rights (Brasil. Ministério da Educação, 2017).

However, despite these normative guidelines, a landmark 2017 ruling by the Federal Supreme Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal- STF) authorized the provision of confessional Religious Education in state schools, undermining the historical principle of secularism established since the Proclamation of the Republic. While this judicial decision functionally privileges majoritarian Christian denominations—particularly Catholicism—it provides minimal practical representation for minority faiths, such as Islam, whose historic and contemporary presence in Brazil has evolved through distinct migratory waves, ultimately driving these communities toward private confessional models (Junqueira, 2002).

2.2 The Legal Status and Autonomy of Confessional Schools

The 1988 Federal Constitution guarantees the coexistence of public and private educational institutions. Within this framework, private schools may adopt different organizational models, including confessional schools, which are legally recognized under Article 20 of the LDB (Law No. 9,394/1996) as institutions established by entities that adopt a specific religious orientation and pedagogical philosophy (Brasil. Congresso Nacional, 1996).

In contemporary legislation—including amendments in 2019—the law accommodates both non-profit and for-profit private entities with formal religious affiliations. While these institutions retain considerable pedagogical autonomy to integrate religious values, theological principles, dress codes, and faith-based practices throughout their daily institutional environment, they remain strictly subject to state supervision and national curricular mandates.

Crucially, confessional schools must also comply with the BNCC parameters for Religious Education as a formal area of knowledge, which mandates the equitable study of religious diversity, intercultural dialogue, and the prohibition of proselytism within the mandatory core curriculum (Brasil. Congresso Nacional, 1996; Brasil. Ministério da Educação, 2017). Consequently, these institutions operate in a dual capacity: they must deliver the broad, pluralistic competencies required by the BNCC while simultaneously exercising their legal right to foster a distinct religious ethos and cultural tradition outside the national common core. Furthermore, while seeking to preserve their specific religious identity, Brazilian law ensures that enrolment remains open to students of all backgrounds, provided families accept the school's pedagogical project.

This historical and legal framework provides the institutional basis for Islamic schools in Brazil. While required to comply with national educational standards and the BNCC like all private institutions, their confessional status grants them the pedagogical autonomy needed to integrate Islamic religious traditions, the Arabic language, and cultural heritage into their educational projects.

The following section examines the historical formation of Muslim communities in Brazil, whose institutional development created the conditions for the emergence of the Islamic schools analysed in this

study. This historical background is essential for understanding why Islamic schools emerged relatively late in Brazil and why they developed primarily within immigrant communities.

3. The Muslim Presence in Brazil: Historical Formation, Migration and Institutions

The Muslim presence in Brazil emerged through two distinct yet interconnected historical processes. The first dates back to the colonial period, when enslaved West African Muslims, particularly the Malês, established the earliest Islamic communities in the country. Although severely disrupted after the Malê Revolt of 1835, this experience represents the first organised expression of Islam in Brazilian history. The second process began in the late nineteenth century with the arrival of immigrants from the Ottoman Empire—mainly present-day Lebanon, Syria and Palestine—whose settlement laid the foundations for the institutional consolidation of Islam through mosques, associations, schools and charitable organisations. Contemporary Islam in Brazil reflects the interaction between these two historical trajectories while also encompassing recent migration, religious conversion and the ongoing negotiation of ethnic and religious identities (Osman, 2018; Osman, 2019).

3.1 From Slavery to Immigration: The Formation of the Muslim Presence in Brazil

Nineteenth-century Brazilian history was profoundly shaped by immigration policies designed to serve both economic and ideological objectives. Economically, they sought to replace enslaved African labour with free European wage labour following the gradual abolition of slavery. Ideologically, they formed part of broader eugenic projects that aimed to "whiten" the Brazilian population through European immigration, in accordance with the racial theories then prevalent in Europe and Latin America (Fausto, 1999; Lesser, 2001).

Consequently, the preferred immigrants were white Europeans, particularly Germans and Swiss, who settled mainly in southern and south-eastern Brazil under a system of small family farms known as colonato. Established during the period of the Portuguese court in Brazil (1808–1815), this model also introduced new religious dynamics into a society historically dominated by Catholicism. Protestant immigrants were granted freedom of worship and established churches and schools that preserved their language, culture and religious traditions (Martins, 1979; Holloway, 1984).

Following the prohibition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1850, immigration intensified to satisfy the labour demands of the expanding coffee economy, particularly in the state of São Paulo. Although racial preferences continued to shape official policy, labour shortages gradually broadened the profile of accepted immigrants to include Italians, Japanese and, eventually, migrants from the Ottoman Empire. Arriving without government subsidies, immigrants from present-day Lebanon, Syria and Palestine were officially registered as Turks because they carried Ottoman passports, despite being predominantly Arabic-speaking Arabs (Truzzi, 1997; Lesser, 2001; Osman, 2020). From the late nineteenth century onwards, this migration became continuous, establishing communities that expanded throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

3.2. The Malês and the First Muslim Communities

The history of Islam in Brazil is inseparable from these two major migratory processes: the forced displacement of enslaved Africans and the voluntary migration of Levantine Arabs. Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged the traditional view that associates Islam in Brazil exclusively with Arab immigration by emphasising the pioneering role of African Muslims during the colonial period. The Malês—enslaved Muslims originating from present-day Benin, Nigeria and Senegal and belonging to ethnic groups such as the Hausa, Yoruba (Nagô), Jeje, Tapa and Mandinka—formed the country's earliest organised Muslim communities (Reis, 2003).

Unlike most enslaved Africans, the Malês maintained important elements of Islamic religious life, including the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, Qur'anic recitation, Friday congregational worship and dietary restrictions. Their knowledge of Arabic and relatively high levels of literacy distinguished them not only from other enslaved populations but also from many slave owners. These characteristics fostered a remarkable degree of internal organisation and collective identity, making Islam simultaneously a religious faith, a source of social cohesion and an important form of resistance under slavery.

Centred in Salvador, Bahia—a city whose population at the time comprised a Black majority and a white minority—the Malês transformed Islam into a source of collective identity, social cohesion and resistance to slavery. As urban slaves, many accumulated resources that enabled them to purchase their freedom while maintaining religious practices officially recognised under the 1824 Imperial Constitution. They organised Qur'anic instruction, taught Arabic to younger generations, observed Islamic rituals and attracted new adherents through proselytising activities.

The circulation of written materials—including prayer books, amulets and notebooks used for Arabic writing exercises—reveals the existence of a literate religious environment that distinguished the Malês from most enslaved populations. Their organisational capacity culminated in the Malê Revolt of 1835, when approximately 600 Muslims launched an uprising during Ramadan. Although rapidly suppressed through executions, imprisonment, exile and forced dispersal, the revolt became the most significant expression of organised Muslim resistance in Brazilian history. João José Reis's pioneering study (2003) demonstrated both the political significance of the uprising and the degree of religious organisation achieved by these early Muslim communities.

The continuity of Islam after the revolt is illustrated by the journey of the Ottoman imam Abd al-Rahman al-Baghdadi, who visited Rio de Janeiro, Recife and Salvador between 1866 and 1869. His travel account, *The Foreigner's Delight in All That Is Astonishing and Wonderful* (*Deleite do Estrangeiro em Tudo o que é Espantoso e Maravilhoso*), 2007), documents the existence of Muslim communities that had reorganised themselves despite decades of repression. Received as a religious authority capable of restoring Islamic knowledge, al-Baghdadi organised what may be regarded as Brazil's first documented Qur'anic school, where instruction combined ritual practice—including ablution, prayer, fasting and religious celebrations—with doctrinal teaching centred on the unity of God, the mission of the Prophet and the Arabic language. Concerned with correcting practices that he regarded as the result of religious ignorance, syncretism or concealment under persecution, he also acquired copies of the Qur'an and prepared bilingual Arabic-Portuguese instructional material for his students.

In *The Foreigner's Delight*, al-Baghdadi also recognised the limits of his reformist project. Decades of persecution had transformed local Islamic practice, while the religious traditions maintained by African Muslims had evolved independently from those prevailing in the Ottoman world. The incorporation of elements of Candomblé, the widespread practice of Christian baptism, the relaxation of dietary restrictions and the resistance of many women to prescriptions concerning dress and inheritance reflected forms of adaptation that could not easily be reconciled with the orthodoxy he sought to promote. Although his stay was brief, his visit constituted one of the earliest documented attempts to revitalise Islamic religious education in Brazil.

Although this African Muslim tradition gradually declined over subsequent generations, its historical legacy did not disappear. Nevertheless, the historical memory of the Malês has acquired renewed significance in recent decades, particularly among Black Brazilians who reclaim Muslim ancestry as part of broader processes of identity construction, historical recognition and resistance to racial oppression. While this movement has not generally resulted in widespread re-Islamisation, it has strengthened the symbolic importance of the Malês within contemporary narratives of Islam in Brazil.

3.3. Arab Migration and the Demographics of Brazilian Islam

Levantine Arab migration subsequently formed the demographic and institutional foundation of contemporary Brazilian Islam. Quantifying this population historically has proven methodologically complex. Republican census records systematically recorded immigrants by national origin or citizenship rather than religious affiliation, while official statistical yearbooks traditionally categorised the population under broad Christian denominations or non-Catholic categories.

Official census data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) for the 2000–2010 period recorded approximately 35,000 self-declared Muslims (comprising 29,000 white, 4,300 mixed-race, 1,336 Black, and 268 Asian individuals), predominantly urban and concentrated in the South-East and South of the country (notably the states of São Paulo and Paraná). Conversely, national Islamic organisations argue that official figures drastically underestimate the actual population, estimating the Muslim community to be between 800,000 and 1.5 million. This broader figure adopts a socioreligious definition, encompassing non-practising descendants of Arab immigrants, recent non-Arab Asian and African migrants, Middle Eastern refugees, and native Brazilian converts. International demographic projections, such as those published by the Pew Research Center for 2010–2020, align with this narrative of sustained growth (showing a 6.1% increase across Latin America), driven by continued migration, younger demographic profiles, higher fertility rates, and conversion dynamics.

Arab Muslim immigration to Brazil unfolded across three primary historical waves, each reflecting specific geopolitical realignments and conflicts in the Middle East:

1. First Wave (1860–1940): Driven primarily by economic push factors and the decline of the Ottoman economy. The vast majority of these early arrivals were young, single men who engaged in peddling (mascataria) before establishing fixed commercial enterprises in urban centres like São Paulo.
2. Second Wave (1940–1990): Triggered by major regional conflicts, including the Palestinian displacement following the Nakba (1948), the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, and the protracted Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Census data recorded a rise from 3,000 self-declared Muslims in 1940 to 22,449 by 1990. This phase marked a transition towards chain migration involving women and families, which fostered community stabilization and facilitated the intergenerational transmission of religious traditions.
3. Third Wave (Post-1990s to present): Characterised by forced displacement resulting from the Syrian Civil War (from 2011), instability in Iraq, and recent humanitarian crises in Gaza. During this period, Brazil emerged as a key destination in Latin America due to humanitarian visa policies. (Lesser, 2001; Karam, 2007; Osman, 2019).

Geographically, while early immigrants concentrated in major metropolitan areas like São Paulo, subsequent generations expanded into regional commercial hubs in the Centre-West and strategic border regions. Most notable among these is the Triple Frontier region connecting Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay, where Foz do Iguaçu became one of the most prominent centres of Arab Muslim settlement in Latin America, particularly for the Lebanese diaspora between 1950 and 1970.

This demographic expansion was accompanied by growing internal differentiation. While early twentieth-century Arab immigrants often downplayed sectarian divisions in favour of a shared Arab ethnic or national solidarity ('uruba), post-1980 migratory influxes introduced greater ideological, theological, and geographic crystallization. Lebanese Shi'a communities established robust institutional bases in São Paulo (particularly in the commercial district of Brás), Curitiba, and Foz do Iguaçu. Concurrently, Sunni Palestinians and Syrians consolidated their presence in São Paulo, the southern borderlands (such as the Rio Grande do Sul border with Uruguay), and the Centre-West (Truzzi, 1997; Karam, 2007; Osman, 2020).

This landscape is further complexified by the steady increase of native Brazilian converts (revertidos). The growth of non-Arab Muslim populations has generated meaningful internal debate regarding religious authority and legitimacy. Converts and non-Arab migrants frequently advocate for a "de-ethnicised" and "de-Arabised" expression of Islam, arguing that established Arab-led institutions often conflate universal Islamic tenets with specific Middle Eastern cultural, linguistic, and national heritage. This ongoing dialogue between cultural preservation and religious universalism remains a central feature of contemporary Brazilian Islam (Montenegro, 2000).

3.4. Institutional Consolidation and Educational Entities

The Muslim presence has permanently transformed the Brazilian urban landscape through the institutionalisation of mosques, charitable societies, cultural associations, cemeteries, publishing houses, and educational centres. Major national umbrella organisations—such as the National Association of Islamic Jurists (ANAJI), the Federation of Muslim Associations in Brazil (FAMBRAS), the Higher Council of Theologians and Islamic Affairs, and the Centre for the Dissemination of Islam in Latin America (CDIAL)—reflect this institutional complexity. Today, approximately 170 Islamic institutions operate across Brazil (comprising roughly 130 mosques, prayer rooms, and cultural centres, alongside 33 specialised entities like cemeteries and schools). Out of Brazil's 26 states plus the Federal District, only four (three in the North and one in the North-East) completely lack formal infrastructure. Geographically, these institutions are heavily concentrated in the South-East (76), mostly in São Paulo, followed by the South (62), primarily in Paraná, the Centre-West (19), the North-East (11), and the North (4) (Osman, 2018).

Within this broader institutional network, formal Islamic schools occupy a distinctive position: they function at the intersection of national educational compliance and religious preservation, operating under Brazilian national curricular guidelines while providing instruction in Islamic values, Arabic language, and cultural heritage.

The institutional era of Brazilian Islam formally began with the establishment of the Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana (SBM) in São Paulo in 1929. The SBM spearheaded the construction of the Mesquita Brasil—the first mosque in Latin America—and subsequently founded the country's first formal confessional school, the Escola Islâmica Brasileira, in 1967. For decades, these entities represented a unified Arab-Muslim public identity in São Paulo without overt sectarian divisions.

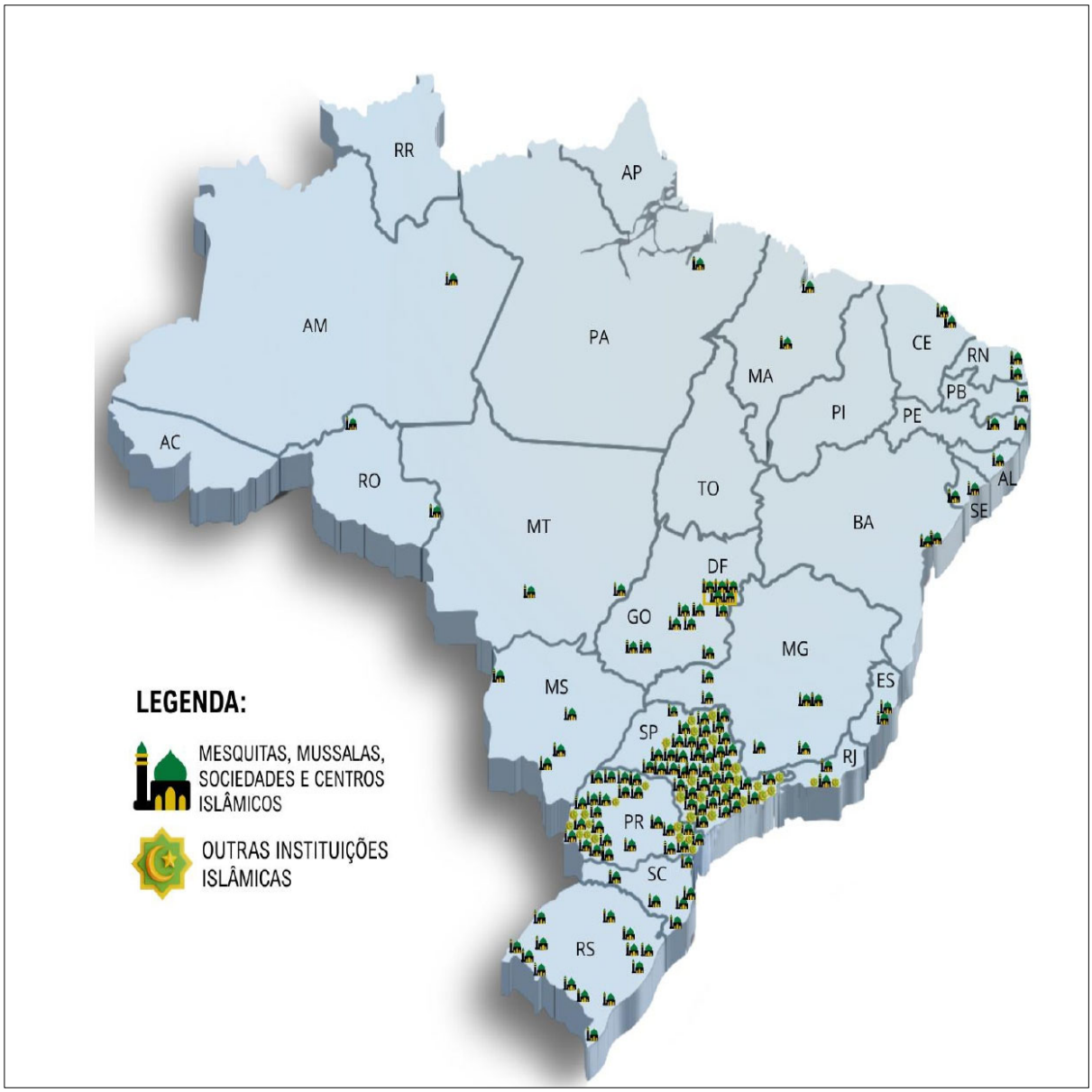
As the community expanded and diversified along sectarian and regional lines, new educational initiatives emerged across the country:

- *São Paulo (Shi'a Initiatives)*: In 1980, Shi'a Lebanese immigrants established the Associação Religiosa Beneficente Islâmica do Brasil (ARBIB), which constructed the Mohammad, Messenger of God Mosque (1987) and later founded the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico in 2010 to serve the educational needs of the local Shi'a population.
- *São Paulo Metropolitan Area (Sunni & Private Enterprises)*: Rapid growth led private entrepreneurs and community societies to establish Sunni-oriented institutions, including the Ibn Sina School (2019) and the Colégio Fonte do Saber (2024). In São Bernardo do Campo—frequently designated as the "Muslim capital of Brazil"—community efforts led to the founding of the Abu Bakr Assadik School (operating between 2007 and 2015) and the Colégio Medina (2009).
- *Paraná & The Triple Frontier*: Educational initiatives in southern Brazil began with the early, short-lived Escola Islâmica do Paraná (1969–1972) in Curitiba. Today, Foz do Iguaçu hosts two major sectarian educational institutions: the Shi'a-oriented Brazilian Lebanese School (Colégio Brasileiro Libanês), established in 2004, and the Sunni-affiliated Escola Árabe Bertoni, founded in 2025.

Collectively, these contemporary institutions constitute the empirical core of this study, serving as primary sites where religious identity, civic integration, and cultural heritage are negotiated within a majoritarian Christian society.

The institutional consolidation of Muslim communities created the conditions for the expansion of Islamic organisations across Brazil. At the same time, the diversification of migration and the increasing number of Brazilian converts reshaped the country's Muslim landscape, giving rise to new forms of religious authority, identity negotiation and community organisation. Contemporary Islam in Brazil should therefore be understood not as a homogeneous religious tradition, but as a plural field shaped by migration, ethnicity, conversion and institutional development. Within this broader institutional landscape, Islamic schools occupy a distinctive position by combining formal education with the transmission of religious, linguistic and cultural heritage. As one of the most significant expressions of this institutional development, they provide the focus of the empirical analysis that follows.

Figure 1
Islamic Organisations in Brazil (extracted from Henrique, 2026, p. 98)



4. Methodological Framework: Historical Inquiry, Sources, and Case Selection

To comprehend how Islamic confessional schools in Brazil function as sites of cultural preservation, religious transmission, and historical continuity, this study adopts a qualitative, historical-comparative research design. Rather than treating these educational spaces as static institutional models, the investigation approaches them as dynamic historical arenas where memory, religious heritage, and civic integration are continuously negotiated within a majoritarian non-Muslim, secular society. Given the relative absence of consolidated archival repositories and secondary literature on minority religious schooling in Latin America, this research relies primarily on original empirical and documentary evidence gathered through immersive fieldwork. Following a comparative historical perspective, the inquiry moves between two distinct analytical scales: a macro-mapping of Islamic educational initiatives across Brazil, and a micro-historical examination of two pioneering confessional schools located in the city of São Paulo, conducted under strict protocols of historical care, institutional consent, and confidentiality.

4.1. Historical Scope and Case Selection

Understanding the contemporary landscape of Islamic education in Brazil required, first, establishing the broader contours of these institutions across the national territory. An exploratory mapping across public registries, institutional archives, official communications, and digital platforms enabled the reconstruction of the historical universe of active Islamic confessional schools in Brazil, identifying seven operational institutions. From this national landscape, the state and capital of São Paulo emerged as the natural focal point for in-depth comparative inquiry. As the historical epicentre of Arab and Muslim settlement in Brazil, São Paulo concentrates the country's oldest, most institutionally structured, and demographically dense Muslim communities.

To explore how distinct theological lineages construct their educational frameworks and negotiate identity, two specific institutions in São Paulo were selected for detailed comparative analysis: the Escola Islâmica Brasileira, representing the Sunni tradition and managed by the pioneering Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana (SBM), and the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico, representing the Shia tradition and managed by the Associação Religiosa Beneficente Islâmica do Brasil (ARBIB). These schools were chosen not to achieve statistical representativeness, but for their historical depth and symbolic weight. As the oldest operating educational institutions of their respective Sunni and Shia traditions in Brazil, both schools offer complete basic education under state regulations while serving as vital custodians of community memory and religious practice.

4.2. Sources, Fieldwork, and Comparative Axes

The empirical fabric of this study was woven through the critical examination and cross-analysis of diverse qualitative sources, allowing for the confrontation of institutional discourses, lived experiences, and material practices. A systematic review was conducted on institutional archives, founding charters, pedagogical proposals, school curricula, textbooks, and internal regulations. These documents were analysed not merely as neutral administrative records, but as deliberate historical narratives reflecting each institution's self-understanding and its positioning towards both the Brazilian state and the broader Islamic world. This textual analysis was complemented by non-participant qualitative observations of the daily rhythms of school life, spatial configurations, dress codes, devotional rituals, and community commemorations, providing insight into the lived, embodied dimension of school culture that formal documents often leave unwritten. Furthermore, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with school founders, directors, and pedagogical coordinators to explore the historical trajectories of the schools, strategic institutional choices, and the nuanced tensions between state curricular mandates and confessional commitments. Finally, to capture the perspectives of families and young

people without imposing intrusive researcher interference on vulnerable populations, open-ended, anonymised qualitative questionnaires were distributed through school administrations, yielding rich narratives regarding family motivations, intergenerational identity transmission, and student experiences.

The comparative analysis of this qualitative material was designed to trace how Sunni and Shia communities translate religious tradition into daily educational practice across four central thematic axes. First, the inquiry examines gender dynamics and spatial modesty, observing how notions of propriety, modesty, dress codes—such as the ḥiğāb (veil)—and gendered spaces are interpreted and lived within the school environment. Second, it investigates the pedagogy of the Arabic language, critically evaluating its dual status as a sacred, liturgical key to Qur'anic literacy versus its role as an academic subject and vehicle for ethnic heritage. Third, the analysis addresses the negotiation with the secular state curriculum, exploring the synthesis between mandatory state guidelines (Base Nacional Comum Curricular — BNCC) and confessional Islamic Religious Education, observing how secular subjects and religious instruction co-exist within daily schedules. Fourth, the study traces lived Islamic traditions and ritual routines, examining the institutional accommodation of daily devotional rhythms (salah), halal dietary practices, spatial sacralisation, and the observance of the Islamic liturgical calendar amidst the temporal rhythms of a secular calendar.

4.3. Ethical Care and Confidentiality

Ethical conduct in historical and qualitative research requires a deep responsibility toward the dignity, privacy, and memory of the communities studied. Institutional data concerning the wider universe of seven mapped schools were retrieved entirely from public domains, ensuring academic rigor and public accountability. For the primary case studies in São Paulo, formal institutional agreement was established with the governing bodies of both schools. In handling the qualitative material gathered from interviews, administration records, and family questionnaires, strict measures of confidentiality were maintained. Personal identifiers and administrative titles were generalized throughout the text to prevent any back-identification, ensuring that participants could share their reflections with candour while remaining fully protected.

5. Teaching the Muslim Faith and Arab Culture: Comparative Analysis and Results

This section presents and evaluates the empirical findings of the study, contrasting the broader institutional landscape of Islamic schooling in Brazil with the internal dynamics of the selected case studies. The analysis begins with a macro-level mapping of all active confessional schools in the country, detailing their foundational contexts, administrative models, and structural alignment with national educational guidelines. Following this national overview, the inquiry focuses on a comparative analysis of the Escola Islâmica Brasileira and the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico in São Paulo, examining how their respective Sunni and Shia traditions operationalize specific pedagogical, linguistic, aesthetic, and liturgical practices within their daily school cultures. Finally, these institutional observations are triangulated with the qualitative perspectives shared by families and students.

5.1. Institutional Mapping and Educational Framework

A consolidated overview of Islamic confessional schooling in Brazil reveals a structural distinction between community-led religious preservation and private educational initiatives (see tab. 1). Notably, only two of the seven active institutions are managed directly by traditional religious bodies and explicitly incorporate the term "Islamic" in their official names: the Escola Islâmica Brasileira (Sunni, founded in 1967 by the Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana) and the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico (Shia,

founded in 2010 by the Associação Religiosa Beneficente Islâmica do Brasil). The remaining five institutions operate as private entities linked to the Islamic faith or Arab community networks. Consequently, their names draw upon ethno-national markers (Arab, Lebanese), sacred geography (Medina), or classical Islamic scholarship and knowledge (Ibn Sina and Fonte do Saber). To serve families of Arab and Muslim heritage effectively, these schools are strategically situated near major mosques or within high-density immigrant neighbourhoods across São Paulo and Foz do Iguaçu.

Table 1:
Islamic Confessional Schools in Brazil: General Data

School	Sponsor	Branch	Foundation	Location
Escola Islâmica Brasileira	Muslim Charitable Society Brazil Mosque	Sunni	1967	São Paulo
Colégio Medina	Members of the Islamic Community Abu Baker Assadik Mosque	Sunni	2009	São Paulo
Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico	Islamic Charitable Religious Association of Brazil Mohammad, Messenger of God Mosque	Shiite	2010	São Paulo
Ibn Sina School	Group of Muslim Businessmen Misericórdia Mosque	Sunni	2019	São Paulo
Colégio Fonte do Saber	Baruk Company	Sunni	2024	São Paulo
Escola Libanesa Brasileira	Businesspeople	Shiite	2001	Paraná
Escola Bertoni Árabe (Escola Árabe Brasileira)	Members of the Islamic Community Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Mosque	Sunni	2025	Paraná

Source: Survey data (2026).

Regardless of their administrative configurations, all seven institutions operate under the legal framework of the Brazilian education and are subject to current legislation regarding their structure and the organisation of teaching (see tab. 2). To satisfy the requirements of the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC), these institutions integrate the five mandatory core areas of knowledge: Languages, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Human Sciences, and Religious Education. While public religious instruction in Brazil is legally required to remain non-confessional, private confessional schools retain the autonomy to implement tailored religious curricula. As a result, all mapped institutions incorporate Arabic language instruction and Islamic Religious Education as mandatory internal curricular components. Furthermore, to maintain academic competitiveness, all mapped schools adopt structured learning workbooks (sistemas de apostilas) from established private educational publishing networks.

Table 2:
Islamic Confessional Schools in Brazil: Educational Structure

Institution	School Level (English)	Brazilian Equivalent	Target Age	Duration
Escola Islâmica Brasileira	• Preschool • Elementary School (Lower) • Middle School (Upper) • High School	• Pré-escola • Ens. Fundamental I • Ens. Fundamental II • Ensino Médio	4 to 5 6 to 10 11 to 14 15 to 17	2 years 5 years 4 years 3 years
Colégio Medina	• Preschool • Elementary School (Lower) • Middle School (Upper)	• Pré-escola • Ens. Fundamental I • Ens. Fundamental II	4 to 5 6 to 10 11 to 14	2 years 5 years 4 years
Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico	• Preschool • Elementary School (Lower) • Middle School (Upper) • High School	• Pré-escola • Ens. Fundamental I • Ens. Fundamental II • Ensino Médio	4 to 5 6 to 10 11 to 14 15 to 17	2 years 5 years 4 years 3 years
Ibn Sina School	• Preschool • Elementary School (Lower) • Middle School (Upper) • High School	• Pré-escola • Ens. Fundamental I • Ens. Fundamental II • Ensino Médio	4 to 5 6 to 10 11 to 14 15 to 17	2 years 5 years 4 years 3 years
Escola Fonte do Saber School	• Preschool	• Pré-escola	4 to 5	2 years
Escola Libanesa Brasileira	• Preschool • Elementary School (Lower) • Middle School (Upper) • High School	• Pré-escola • Ens. Fundamental I • Ens. Fundamental II • Ensino Médio	4 to 5 6 to 10 11 to 14 15 to 17	2 years 5 years 4 years 3 years
Escola Árabe Bertoni (Escola Árabe Brasileira)	• Preschool • Elementary School (Lower) • Middle School (Upper)	• Pré-escola • Ens. Fundamental I • Ens. Fundamental II	4 to 5 6 to 10 11 to 14	2 years 5 years 4 years

Source: Survey data (2026). Age columns reflect the Brazilian basic education structure.

5.2. Gender Dynamics, Demographics, and Faculty Composition

The comparative analysis between the Escola Islâmica Brasileira (Sunni, 474 students) and the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico (Shia, 467 students) demonstrates a shared approach to gender management and community inclusion. Both institutions operate co-educational classrooms where male and female students learn together, mirroring mainstream Brazilian educational practices. Shared spaces—such as courtyards, cafeterias, science laboratories, and sports facilities—are accessed by all students. In alignment with Islamic theological principles, neither school accommodates requests for gender-neutral restrooms, maintaining separate facilities for male and female students.

Spatial and pedagogical separation is applied selectively depending on age and activity. Physical education classes and advanced religious sessions are conducted in single-gender groups. Similarly, sensitive pedagogical topics, such as sex education and reproductive health, are taught in gender-differentiated environments. Rather than enforcing systemic segregation, this approach aims to foster a comfortable setting for adolescent students and faculty while upholding traditional standards of modesty.

Demographically, both student bodies consist predominantly of youth of Arab and Muslim descent—primarily of Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian heritage—alongside a growing representation of Pakistani, Indonesian, African, and native Brazilian convert families. Non-Muslim students are also welcomed (22 enrolled at the Escola Islâmica Brasileira and 5 at the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico), provided they adhere to the school's codes of conduct and modesty. Notably, both institutions are led by Muslim women of Lebanese origin who hold specialized postgraduate qualifications in educational management.

The faculty composition reflects the dual commitment to academic rigor and confessional integrity. Core secular subjects are taught predominantly by non-Muslim Brazilian educators, while religious instruction and Arabic language courses are reserved for specialized teachers of Arab and Muslim origin. At the Escola Islâmica Brasileira, the teaching staff includes 36 Brazilian teachers for general subjects, 11 qualified teachers for the Arabic language, and 5 Muslim educators in the Religious Education department. At the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico, the staff comprises 45 Brazilian teachers for core subjects, 7 Lebanese teachers and 1 Syrian teacher for Arabic instruction, and 1 Lebanese teacher dedicated to Religious Education.

5.3. Trilingualism, Arabic Pedagogy, and Cultural Expressions

The teaching of the Arabic language in both schools is structured as a trilingual project encompassing Portuguese, English, and Arabic, addressing three distinct dimensions: linguistic proficiency, cultural preservation, and theological literacy. The primary distinction between the two case studies lies in their pedagogical orientations and instructional materials.

The Sunni model, implemented at the Escola Islâmica Brasileira, utilizes a curriculum imported from Saudi Arabia that integrates language acquisition directly with theological study. This approach emphasizes classical grammar, literal Qur'anic interpretation, and the memorization of traditional religious literature. Furthermore, the Escola Islâmica Brasileira integrates Arab and Islamic artistic expressions into its broader curriculum, incorporating classical Arabic poetry, traditional folk songs, religious chants (anāšīd), Islamic calligraphy, and architectural design elements into the physical school environment.

Conversely, the Shia model at the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico employs the Lebanese textbook series My Language is My Joy and My Source. This curriculum prioritizes communicative competence and the preservation of Levantine cultural traditions and family heritage, framing Arabic primarily as a living medium of historical identity. In terms of Religious Education, the Escola Islâmica Brasileira translates a structured Saudi curriculum divided into three modules: belief (ʿaqīda), Qur'anic studies, and religious practices (ṣalāh, ṣaum, zakāt, ṣadaqa), whereas the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico concentrates its religious syllabus primarily on Qur'anic reading and Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). For both institutions, however, Arabic instruction provides the linguistic foundation necessary for students to perform daily prayers with semantic understanding rather than mechanical recitation.

5.4. Islamic Practices and Liturgical Integration

The daily routine in both institutions is synchronized with the Islamic calendar. Each school day commences with a collective supplication (duʿāʾ) and the recitation of foundational Qur'anic verses, such as the opening chapter of the Qur'an (Sūrat al-Fātiḥa), invoking blessings, wisdom, and peace.

At the Escola Islâmica Brasileira, a dedicated prayer hall (muṣallā), equipped with gender-segregated partitions and a qibla indicator, enables students to perform the midday prayer (ẓuhr) daily under the guidance of a religious teacher or local sheikh. At the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico, the routine emphasizes structured classes in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) alongside Qur'anic recitation. In both schools, the

holy month of Ramadan serves as a central community event. Campuses are decorated, and schedule breaks are utilized for educational talks on the spiritual and physical dimensions of fasting. To support fasting students during warm weather, both schools reduce academic workloads and adjust the intensity of physical education classes.

Classes are suspended exclusively during the two major global Islamic celebrations: ʿĪd al-Fiṭr (marking the end of Ramadan) and ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā (the Festival of Sacrifice). Notably, the Escola Islâmica Brasileira also includes in its institutional calendar celebrations commemorating the birth dates of Imam Hassan and Sayyida Zainab, as well as an institutional "Festival of the Veil" (ḥiǧāb). In both schools, wearing the ḥiǧāb is defined as a voluntary expression of faith rather than a mandatory administrative rule; it is encouraged and celebrated, but required only during prayer times inside the muṣallā. School uniforms adhere to standard Brazilian private school guidelines, with the general expectation of modest apparel.

5.5. Stakeholder Perspectives: Families and Students

The qualitative accounts gathered from parents and students reveal a strong alignment among family values, the school environment, and community life. For Muslim families living in a predominantly Christian and secular society, enrolling their children in these schools serves both a protective and a proactive purpose. Parents emphasize moral grounding and identity preservation, viewing the school as a safe environment where Islamic dietary requirements (halal), modesty norms, and prayer routines are normalized, protecting students from social exclusion while encouraging civic engagement and holistic development.

This parental perspective corresponds with the views expressed by students, who describe the religious atmosphere not as an administrative imposition, but as a natural source of belonging and community attachment. Furthermore, students demonstrate a practical perspective regarding the curriculum. Rather than viewing trilingualism and Arabic instruction merely as a heritage requirement, students recognize these language skills as valuable academic and professional assets, offering opportunities for future engagement in global, Arabic-speaking contexts and transforming ancestral heritage into contemporary social capital.

In sum, the empirical findings demonstrate that Islamic confessional schools in Brazil function as complex spaces of negotiation, balancing strict adherence to state educational standards with the preservation of minority religious and cultural heritage. Rather than presenting a uniform or monolithic model, the comparative analysis of the Escola Islâmica Brasileira and the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico reveals how distinct Sunni and Shia theological traditions shape unique pedagogical, linguistic, and aesthetic choices within their school environments. Ultimately, both institutions successfully transform traditional heritage into a source of community belonging and social capital, preparing young Muslims to navigate contemporary secular society with confidence in their dual identity as Brazilian citizens and members of a global ummah. These institutional practices and stakeholder perspectives provide the empirical foundation for the overarching conclusions presented in the final section.

6. Final Considerations: The Institutional Architecture and Future of Islamic Education in Brazil

Religious schools with immigrant roots play a fundamental role for the contemporary Muslim community in Brazil by extending the preservation of Islamic faith, culture, and values beyond the domestic sphere and traditional places of worship. In doing so, these institutions function as vital institutional anchor points that strengthen both ethnic pride (being Arab) and religious identity within a majoritarian non-Muslim, Christian society. Working in tandem with mosques, charitable societies, and study centres, Islamic confessional schools serve a crucial structural purpose: they transform the minority status

of the community from a perceived vulnerability into a cohesive, organized, and visible presence, embedding Islamic practices not as occasional events, but as an integral framework of the students' daily academic lives.

Analytically, the capacity of these schools to successfully operate rests upon a dialectical relationship between legal opportunities and systemic challenges, directly addressing the core research questions of this study. On one hand, these institutions successfully capitalize on Brazil's favorable national environment, which is characterized by broad legislative flexibility regarding confessional education (under the LDB framework), high levels of constitutional religious tolerance, and a historical tradition of integrating immigrant populations. This legal structure allows schools to combine conventional secular knowledge, aligned with the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC), with specialized modules in Islamic theology and Arabic literacy, without crossing into unconstitutional proselytization.

This dual mandate is operationalized through a clear structural and pedagogical division of labor: to satisfy the requirements of the BNCC and ensure academic competitiveness, schools rely on non-Muslim Brazilian faculty and adopt structured learning workbooks (sistemas de apostilas) from established private educational publishing networks. Conversely, the preservation of faith and cultural heritage is strictly reserved for specialized teachers of Arab and Muslim origin, who manage mandatory internal curricular tracks in Arabic instruction and Islamic Religious Education.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis reveals that while both major traditions share identical operational frameworks regarding co-educational spaces, selective gender separation (such as in physical education and advanced religious lessons), and strict adherence to halal dietary practices, they diverge significantly in their pedagogical vehicles. The Sunni model, exemplified by the Escola Islâmica Brasileira, exhibits a theological-linguistic alignment by utilising curricula imported from Saudi Arabia that focus on classical grammar, literal Qur'anic interpretation, and structured modules in belief (ʿaqīda), worship (ṣalāh, ṣaum), and moral conduct. In contrast, the Shia model at the Colégio Brasileiro Islâmico prioritizes communicative competence and transnational ties by employing Lebanese textbooks that treat the Arabic language primarily as a living vector of historical and family heritage, alongside a religious syllabus centered on Qur'anic reading and Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh).

On the other hand, the empirical data highlights acute operational and structural challenges that threaten the long-term sustainability of these projects. The primary pedagogical challenge lies in balancing the dense requirements of the national curriculum with the intensive moral and religious formation expected by families. This tension is exacerbated by practical resource limitations, including the financial burden of maintaining competitive school infrastructures and the severe scarcity of specialized educators who are concurrently proficient in contemporary pedagogical methodologies, fluent in Arabic, and trained in Islamic studies. Furthermore, as the community shifts from traditional subsidized charitable associations to private, for-profit entrepreneurial models, navigating market competitiveness while preserving strict confessional values emerges as a critical systemic hurdle.

Finally, this study underscores the sharp numerical limitations of these institutions, which serve only a small fraction of the broader Muslim populace in São Paulo and Brazil. Nevertheless, the Sunni and Shia schools operating in the metropolitan area of São Paulo must be understood not as marginal anomalies, but as a highly significant institutional microcosm of the wider Muslim community. They reflect nearly a century of settlement history, showcasing how transgenerational identity negotiation remains resilient and alive across generations. Ultimately, qualitative feedback indicates a powerful generational convergence: for parents, these schools function as a protective sanctuary against cultural assimilation; for students, the confessional environment is perceived as a natural source of community belonging, while the trilingual curriculum is pragmatically valued as significant career capital for the globalized job market.

By documenting these dynamics, this article expands the scope of migration studies and challenges simplified generalizations regarding the Muslim presence in Latin America. In the broader Latin American context, Brazil represents a unique case study. It holds the highest concentration of formal Islamic confessional schools in the region, providing an unprecedented empirical setting to observe the institutional coexistence of Sunni and Shia educational models within a secular Western framework. It demonstrates that minority religious schooling can successfully negotiate its survival and legitimacy within a secular constitutional framework, transforming ancestral heritage into a modern asset for social integration. Future research should extend this analytical framework to examine the emerging private, for-profit Islamic schools in the triple-border regions, tracking how shifting migratory flows, localized economic realities, and geopolitical dynamics continue to reshape the boundaries of Islamic education in the region.

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