



ARGENTINA

Quick Facts

Population: 44,293,293 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 2,780,400 sq km

Ethnic Groups: European (mostly Spanish and Italian descent) and mestizo (mixed European and Amerindian ancestry) 97.2%, Amerindian 2.4%, African 0.4% (2010 est.)

Religions: Nominally Roman Catholic 92% (less than 20% practicing), Protestant 2%, Jewish 2%, other 4%

Government Type: Presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$619.9 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated March 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Argentina is home to one of the largest Muslim populations in Latin America. A growing percentage of this community is made up of Argentine converts to Islam, a significant number of whom have been recruited and radicalized by Islamist operatives working throughout the country.

The Argentine Muslim community has gone largely unnoticed since its establishment in the 19th century, but questionable financial investments, such as those from Libya and Saudi Arabia tied to Carlos Menem's administration and bombings in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s—the largest terror attacks in the region at the time—brought it into the national spotlight. Since then, the community has been stigmatized for its connection to radical Islamist networks tied to Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah. Through these networks, Iran has used intelligence operatives to infiltrate Muslim society and recruit members from a community that shows signs of increasing radicalization.

These networks pose a significant danger to Argentina, whose policy toward Iran and other Arab states has often been ambivalent and inconsistent. Moreover, Argentina's failing economy and its strained relationships with Western allies during the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner made it even more vulnerable to Iranian advances and activities in the region.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Radical Islamist activity has been growing throughout Argentina since at least the early 1980s, when the Iranian Revolution was “exported” to the Americas. Iranian interest in the American continent at large dates to the 1850s. Then known as Persia and controlled by the Qajar Dynasty, the nation sought U.S. help in constraining European powers. In later years, Persia fostered diplomatic relationships with a variety of other nations such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. However, Iran's political objectives changed with the 1979 Revolution, resulting in a break in ties with the United States and an eventual shift toward

Latin America, particularly toward countries antagonistic to “American imperialism.” According to Alberto Nisman, the special prosecutor for the AMIA attack, Iran and Hezbollah saw Argentina as a land of opportunity for spreading radical Islam due to the large number of Muslim communities in the region, particularly the Tri-Border Area at the crossroads of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. Nisman cited documents seized from Iranian operatives identifying high-density areas of Muslim population to be used “as centers of penetration of Islam” throughout South America. Since then, Argentina in particular has served as one of the main hubs through which Shi’a radicals have developed an extensive network of terrorists, clergymen and recruiters, money launderers, and other operatives all dedicated to “exporting the revolution” throughout the region.

The result of this growing network was the execution of Latin America’s most notorious Islamist terrorist attack—the July 18, 1994 bombing in Buenos Aires, Argentina of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), which killed 85 civilians and injured hundreds more. Two years earlier, on March 17, 1992, a similar attack had been carried out against Israel’s embassy in Buenos Aires, murdering 29 people and injuring over two hundred. These twin attacks awoke Argentina to the real threat of Islamist activity within and around its borders.

According to Nisman, Iran’s Islamist terrorist network in Argentina was first established in 1983 with the arrival of Iranian operative Mohsen Rabbani. Originally sent to Argentina under the guise of a commercial representative of the Iranian meat industry, Rabbani quickly established himself as a leader within the country’s Shi’ite Muslim community and began leading prayers at the At-Tauhid mosque in the Floresta neighborhood of Buenos Aires. In his role as a prayer leader, Rabbani was able to address believers at will, inserting radical political rhetoric into his sermons and developing relationships with young “disciples” who would later become operatives within his evolving terror network.

The network Rabbani established throughout the Shi’ite Muslim community in Buenos Aires grew to include more than 40 Islamic associations, including schools, media outlets, and charity organizations that are used today as backdoor channels through which the Islamic Republic and Hezbollah perform intelligence and covert operations. It spans across state borders, allowing Iran and its proxies to pursue various terror operations in the region as a part of their political expansion. The most well-known of these operations is the 1994 AMIA attack in Buenos Aires, of which Nisman identified Rabbani as “the mastermind.” Though Rabbani escaped justice in Argentina by leaving the country in 1997, Interpol has since placed him on a “red alert” list, barring his travel to the region. However, the Islamist terror network he established continues to grow under the supervision of his numerous disciples.

According to a recent report by the Center for a Secure Free Society (SFS), Rabbani’s Argentine connections can be broken down into three different types of actors: shadow facilitators, “super fixers,” and “fixers.” While prohibited from entering Argentina, Rabbani still acts as a shadow facilitator from Iran, providing guidance and funding to various Islamist activities in Argentina. His disciples act as “super fixers,” moving across countries throughout Latin America and acting as point persons for the “fixers,” or local Argentine agents who have access to or knowledge of targeted communities in the country. Perhaps the two most infamous Rabbani disciples and “super fixers” are Abdul Karim Paz and Edgardo Ruben “Suhail” Assad. According to Nisman, Karim Paz is Rabbani’s first convert and has been described as his “right-hand man” and immediate successor as the Imam of the At-Tauhid mosque. Similarly, Suhail Assad is known as a prominent leader in the local Shi’a community, with strong connections to the government of former Argentine president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Some of these connections come from Suhail Assad’s cousin, Jorge Alejandro “Yussuf” Khalil, who was accused by Nisman of conspiring with the Fernández de Kirchner regime to cover up Iran’s involvement in the AMIA attack through a controversial agreement signed between both countries in 2013. Yussuf Khalil is currently the General Secretary of the At-Tauhid Mosque.

Together, Yussuf Khalil, Abdul Karim Paz and Suhail Assad serve as Iran’s “informal ambassadors” in

Argentina, continuing to recruit and radicalize Islamic communities to join the revolution. Under their supervision, the radical Islamist network in Argentina grows stronger and more expansive behind its façade of Muslim community and religious centers, cultural associations, and seemingly innocuous development of diplomatic and trade relations with Argentine leaders. So does its influence on the local Muslim population, susceptible to radicalization and recruitment to Islamic extremism through proselytizing in mosques, schools, and cultural events in Argentine society.

Rabbani and his disciples have paved the way for other extremist groups to target Argentina, most notably the Islamic State. In September of 2016, Secretary of National Security Eugenio Burzaco mentioned the possibility of ISIS operatives in Corrientes. While he later announced that national security forces had investigated and found no evidence of an ISIS cell in the region, he nevertheless maintained that the Argentine government remained worried that Argentines who travelled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS might return to form terrorist cells within Argentina. President Mauricio Macri has also received threats from individuals possibly linked to ISIS, implying that Argentina is under threat of imminent attack. In 2017, the Argentine Army's website was briefly hacked by unknown individuals who displayed a pro-ISIS message that claimed the organization was in the country. Argentine World Cup matches and high-profile players have also been the targets of ISIS propaganda.

While these individuals may be acting independently and an organized threat has so far not materialized, they nonetheless reflect an alarming degree of infiltration and activism by Islamist elements—a level of activity influenced and encouraged by the inroads created by Mohsen Rabbani and his network.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The date of Islam's first appearance in Argentina is unknown. Early records remain unreliable since Muslims were listed as "other," along with Jews and Catholics, and did not receive a special category. Some believe the first Muslims to arrive in Argentina were descendants from the Moors who came to the Americas with the Spanish conquistadors, though this theory has not been verified. The first official data possibility mentioning Arabs in Argentina comes from 1887 when 17 "Ottomans" were listed as arrivals at the port of Buenos Aires. Later records indicate a wave of Arab/Islamic migration to Argentina, comprised primarily of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, during the mid- to late-19th century. This population continued to grow through the 20th century to an estimated 700,000 Muslims, mainly of Arab descent. In 2010, the Pew Forum estimated Argentina's Muslim community to have grown to almost 1 million people, or 2.5 percent of the country's population of approximately 41 million. Approximately 70% of this population is Sunni, with the Shi'ite community making up the remaining 30%. However, within the Muslim community itself, the Arab population is starting to shrink as immigration from Arab countries like Syria and Lebanon is replaced by increasing immigration from West Africa. Furthermore, the current growth of Islam in Argentina owes less to immigration from Arab states than to converts from within Argentina itself, thus changing the cultural demographic of the country's Muslim community from primarily Arab to a more diverse group.

Islam's spread to populations beyond the Arab community can be credited to the proliferation of Islamic centers and schools that have been established since the late 20th century. Though the Arab immigrant community originally established organizations and centers focused on preserving cultural rather than religious identity (Jews and Christians of Arab origin also participated in these groups), certain centers devoted to religious instruction. The foundation of the Centro de Estudios Islámicos (Center of Islamic Studies), headed by Imam Mahmoud Hussein, initiated the process of "diffusion of Islam" in 1973 and began to attract converts of non-Arab origin. Since then, several mosques and Islamic centers have emerged throughout Argentina, though the Islamic community remains overwhelmingly concentrated in Buenos Aires.

One such mosque is the King Fahd mosque in Palermo, the largest mosque and Muslim cultural center

in Latin America. Inaugurated in 2000, the mosque is notable for the fact that the approximately \$15 million in building costs were paid for by King Fahd himself, and the land, formerly property of the Argentine state, was donated to King Fahd in the mid-1990s by ex-President Carlos Menem. Despite the presence of multiple mosques and Muslim cultural centers in Buenos Aires, the Argentine Congress passed a bill approving the construction of the mosque, which drew criticism from members of the community who cited it as an example of Menem's tendency to favor pro-Arab or pro-Muslim ventures in Argentina, while failing to support other faiths with donations in cash or land.

Despite its size and international connections, until Menem's election as president in 1989, the Muslim population went largely unnoticed by the rest of Argentine society. Though Menem maintained his identity as a Catholic convert, his Arab background and family's continued ties to Islam brought the Muslim community into the public eye. As Menem raised the Muslim community to political prominence by adding members of the community, including his own family, to high-ranking positions within his cabinet, scandal and controversy also dominated his administration, resulting in a rejection of the Muslim community by certain sectors of Argentine society.

After the bombings in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment within Argentine society intensified. Argentina, which had until then considered itself safe from international terrorism, turned against its Muslim population. Muslims and Arabs were stigmatized for their community's ties to the perpetrators of the AMIA attack, most notably the leader of the Shi'ite Muslim community in Argentina, Mohsen Rabbani. Muslims in Argentina also faced considerable public discrimination following the September 11, 2001 attacks, according to Alexis El-Sayer of the Centro Islámico de la República Argentina (CIRA). At that time, Muslims often hesitated to identify themselves publicly, though by 2012 the community had largely overcome this challenge and continued to practice Islam in peace, despite widespread ignorance about the Islamic faith and community in Argentina.

Though the Islamic community remains a small minority within larger Argentine society, the Arab community continues to grow and is now the third largest community in Argentina, after Italians and Spaniards. Islamic leaders hope that the proliferation of Islamic/Arab cultural centers and increased Islamic influence on society, particularly in Buenos Aires, will help "create a new bond between Islam and Latin America" and help spread a positive, unbiased image of Islam.

The Argentine government also makes an effort to help the Muslim community feel like a part of Argentine society. The Argentine Secretariat of Worship under the Office of Foreign Affairs maintains a close relationship with leaders of the Islamic community and seeks to promote religious harmony by sending government officials to religious celebrations of all faiths. The Islamic community has seen the attendance of government officials, including ex-President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, at Muslim celebrations and events as "recognition... of our existence within Argentine society."

The familiarity with which the Fernández de Kirchner administration treated the Muslim community can be attributed to the influence of a major cultural organization known as the Federación de Entidades Arabes, or FEARAB. Originally founded in 1972 to represent Muslim immigrant communities in Latin America, the organization has offices throughout the region and its leaders maintain strong relationships with local governments. In Argentina especially, FEARAB leadership was successful in developing relationships with the federal government during the Fernández de Kirchner era. This access to high-ranking Argentine officials allowed FEARAB to supersede its original social and cultural spheres and become a political entity. This ascent is cause for concern, because at least some of the leaders of FEARAB, the ranks of which include Abdul Karim Paz and Yussuf Khalil, maintain connections with Mohsen Rabbani's Islamist network. A series of Argentine government wiretaps reveal that these individuals took advantage of the organization's access to top Argentine officials to implement Iran's political agenda and further extend Iranian influence in Argentine politics—resulting in the Kirchner government's introduction of a controversial Memorandum of Understanding in 2013, under which the two countries agreed to work

together to investigate the perpetrators of the 1994 AMIA attack.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Argentina's policy towards Arab or Middle East states has historically been seen as rather ambivalent, particularly on controversial issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet, tacit support for the Arab World among Peronistas can be traced back decades.

Many scholars continue to interpret Argentina's decision to abstain from voting on the UN resolution to partition Palestine in 1947 as an unwillingness to pick a side in the conflict. But the vote actually helped the Palestinian cause, and the Arab World recognized the benefit of the vote. The Syrian-Lebanese Society of Santiago de Estero, the Syrian-Lebanese Club of San Juan, and the Arab-Muslim society in the Cordoba province, among other notable Arab civic organizations, forwarded notes of gratitude to government leaders and the Central Arab Committee for Aid to Palestine expressed their gratitude for a position "before the assembly of the U.N., in defense of the Palestine sovereignty."

Syrian leadership awarded Perón the Grand Order of the Umayyads during an Argentine delegation visit to Syria in 1950 and renamed a main street in Damascus after Argentina, explaining that "when Arabs lost friends in the east and the west, Argentina was the first state to answer the call of duty... by sticking to the Arab side in the United Nations."

Yet neutrality in Middle East issues remained a fairly consistent position after the 1950s, with only intermittent support for Palestinian issues. Argentina enacted policies in favor of the Palestinians in order to avoid oil embargos from OPEC nations, but subsequently adopted a more moderate stance toward Israel after public outcry from the Argentine Jewish community. Since then, Argentina has typically sought to balance support for the Palestinians with its backing of Israel.

This duality of Argentina's stance toward Arab/Muslim and Jewish/Western issues became even more pronounced during the presidency of Carlos Menem, who offered to mediate the Arab-Israeli conflict and extended links to Israel by becoming the first Argentine president to visit the country, despite his ties to the Arab/Muslim community both in Argentina and abroad. Official attitudes toward Arab and Islamic elements were further confused by the revelation that Libyan leader Muammar Ghaddafi had contributed \$4 million to Menem's electoral campaign and of the president's "donation" of state property, valued at \$10 million, to the Saudi Arabian Islamic Affairs Department for the construction of what is today the Fahd center in Buenos Aires. Meanwhile, Menem had terminated Argentina's cooperation with Iran's nuclear program in 1992, the same year that the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires was bombed by a group linked to Iran and Hezbollah and two years before the 1994 AMIA attack that led to a break in diplomatic ties between Argentina and Iran.

Argentina's relationship with Iran is one of the longest-standing in the region, beginning in 1902, but the 1992 and 1994 terror attacks in Buenos Aires resulted in a cooling of diplomatic relations between the two countries as Argentina sought the extradition of the high-ranking Iranian officials linked to the attacks. With the advent of the Kirchner government (2007-2015), however, Argentine policy shifted dramatically, abandoning its traditional pro-Western, pro-United States orientation in favor of warmer ties with anti-U.S. regional governments such as Cuba, Venezuela and other "Bolivarian" states, as well as with Iran.

Energy deficits and mounting debt alienated Argentina from its former Western allies, nudging the Kirchner administration toward "friendlier" governments in Venezuela and Cuba. The Chávez administration in particular served as a new political ally and source of economic support to Argentina and provided further incentive for Fernández de Kirchner to distance herself from the U.S.

Iran took this shift as an opportunity to re-open relations with Argentina. In 2007, then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad allegedly asked Venezuela's Hugo Chávez to reach out to Kirchner with the aim of "changing Argentine policy and allowing Iran access to Argentine nuclear technology." The result was a gradual re-establishment of diplomatic ties between Argentina and Iran, a development that allowed

ENDNOTES

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