

ID DOC: 38339

FECHA: 8/10/2005 18:06

ORIGEN: 05SANTIAGO1686

FUENTE: Embassy Santiago

PRIVACIDAD: SECRET//NOFORN,, ""This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available."

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTIAGO 001686

SIPDIS

NOFORN

STATE FOR WHA/BSC, NEA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/10/2015

TAGS: PREL, PGOV, CI

SUBJECT: CHILE'S MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Classified By: Ambassador Craig A. Kelly. Reasons: 1.4 (b and d).

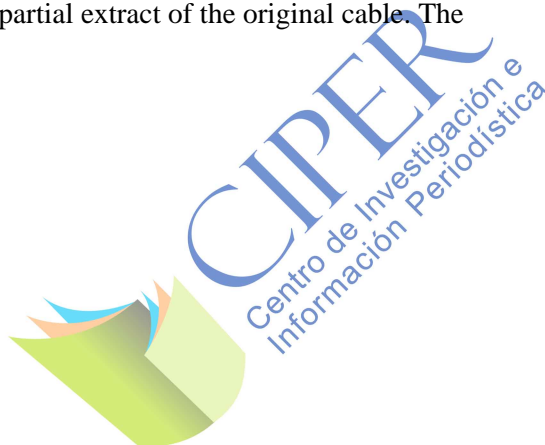
Summary

1. (S) Chile's Muslim community is fractured and comprises less than one half of one percent of the country's population. The Palestinian community is relatively large (estimated at 350,000), mostly Christian, and fully assimilated. The small size of Chile,s Muslim community, together with its apparent balkanization, means there is little information generally available on its dynamics and personalities. Chilean intelligence and police authorities are monitoring some groups. Until recently, however, they have not been particularly aggressive, given Chilean legal strictures on intelligence operations and a general Chilean belief that there is no immediate, serious threat of terrorism from this community. End summary.

Low Numbers and a Slow Start

2. (U) The July transit bombings in London have prompted a few articles in the Chilean press looking at Chile,s Muslim population. According to the 2002 census, there were 2894 persons identified as Muslims in Chile, comprising less than 0.03 percent of the population. A higher estimate, contained in a paper by a Chilean Muslim scholar, estimates there are 5000 Muslims currently in Chile, of whom about 350 are practicing. According to historical census figures, 2002 actually marked Chile,s highest percentage of Muslims since 1907. In that year, 1498 Muslims comprised 0.04 percent of the population. By 1920, registered Muslim numbers had dropped to only 402.

3. (U) In 1926, the Society of United Chilean Muslims was founded in Santiago, followed in 1927 by the Islamic Society of Mutual Aid and Charity in Villa Alemana (approximately 75 miles west of Santiago). Chile saw its first mosque built in 1988-89. It was inaugurated in 1996 under charismatic leader Haji Taufik Rumie, who originally led prayers in his house. He died in 1998. Taufik was succeeded by Usama Abu Gazaleh. In 1997-99, a second mosque was built in the far



northern city of Iquique, to serve Muslims (many Pakistani traders) who arrived with the 1972 establishment of the Iquique Free Trade Zone.

Fractured Community

4. (U) Chile's Muslim community is also fractured, as illustrated by recent polemics over control and direction of the Mohammed VI Cultural Center and mosque (Chile's third mosque) in Coquimbo (approximately 290 miles north of Santiago). The Center, which reportedly cost USD 875,000 and was financed in equal parts by the Government of Morocco and the Coquimbo municipality, is scheduled for completion in August 2005. The Moroccan Embassy in Chile will be responsible for Islamic instruction. While the mayor of Coquimbo ran into some local opposition for approving the mosque, the area's predominantly Christian community appears to be cautiously accepting the new worship center. As noted by one long-term resident, "People here are not frightened when speaking of religion they are frightened by talking about it loudly." The polemics have arisen from within Chile's Muslim community, with differing groups debating whether the Sunnis or the Shias should guide the theoretical orientation of the mosque. Coquimbo's mayor and the Argentine-based Shiites who are advising on the project also have been verbally attacked.

5. (U) In response, Fuad Musa, Shiite president of the Santiago-based Center for Islamic Culture, has called for the Chilean authorities to investigate the self-described Sunni group as a dangerous group, "These people are Wahabis, and one doesn't know what they are capable of doing

6. (U) According to a web-based report by a young Chilean Muslim, a Tabligh faction began to dominate the Santiago mosque in 1998. While of unknown accuracy, this web-based report is interesting in part because it suggests a division between a Chilean Muslim grouping, and others, such as Pakistanis or "Arabs." According to the same web-based report, the Bilal mosque in Iquique (approximately 1150 miles north of Santiago) has problems between its leader, Abdul Ghaffer Qureshim ("of Salafi ideology"), the "Tabligh tendencies" from Santiago, and the "berrelwies" (NFI). The author notes the existence of a Chilean Muslim group (as opposed to Pakistani or Arab), under Muhammad Omar, working in Chile's central region.

Chileans Tolerant but Wary

7. (U) Touching on the Coquimbo mosque and London attacks, an August 1 article in the daily "La Segunda" asked prominent Chilean historian Julio Retamal, and well-known international consultant Daniel Prieto, their opinions on Islamic objectives in Chile. Both agreed that the Coquimbo mosque was part of deliberate Islamic expansion around the world, with Retamal emphasizing a "peaceful penetration, not terrorism." Prieto sounded more cautionary notes in the article, both on the susceptibility of the poor to conversion, and on the historical link between madrasas and extremism. Interestingly, Prieto noted that what Chileans should be asking themselves is why Venezuelan President Chavez is receiving the high-level emissaries of countries like Iran and Syria, but not the leaders of moderate Arab states.

Chile's "Palestinian" Population: Virtually all Christian

8. (U) Chile has a large Palestinian community, with government officials asserting Chile has the largest Palestinian community -- at 350,000 -- in the world, outside of the Middle East. The vast bulk of these Palestinians, however, arrived during the late 1800s and early 1900s exodus of Christians from the collapsing Ottoman empire. They are now into their third and fourth generations, fully assimilated into Chilean society. Many not only are prominent businessmen, but are government officials in the Foreign Ministry and Presidential Palace. The owner of ""La Segunda newspaper,"" which ran the recent article warning of Muslim penetration of Chile, is owned by Alvaro Saieh, a product of this Christian branch of Palestinian immigration.

Comment

9. (S) The Embassy actively works with the GOC to encourage monitoring of Chile's Muslim organizations, particularly groups connected with the Iquique Free Trade Zone. These groups are known to have connections with Muslim organizations in the Tri-Border region of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. There is intelligence information indicating that Iquique groups contribute to fundraising for Islamic charitable organizations and possibly others. Given the Moroccan government,s reported funding and instructional support to the Coquimbo Islamic Center, Post will consult with the Moroccan Embassy here to see if they are willing or able to provide additional insight into local Muslim politics and developments.

10. (S/NF) The small size of Chile's Muslim community, and its apparent balkanization, means there is little information generally available on its dynamics and personalities. While GOC intelligence/police authorities are monitoring some groups, until recently the GOC has not been particularly aggressive, given Chilean legal strictures on intelligence operations and a likely lack of conviction that there is a serious threat. As reported in other channels, recent GOC actions such as the August 7 raid activity against Hizballah target Ali Mohammad Rashid in Iquique and Santiago would seem to presage a change in the historically cautious policy against radical Muslim personalities in Chile. We also intend to talk with the pro-U.S. Lebanese ambassador in Chile about Hizbollah activities here.

KELLY