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# “Uno es Palestino por el orgullo” Palestinian Assimilation and Identity in Nicaragua.

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**“Uno es Palestino por el orgullo”  
Palestinian Assimilation and Identity  
in Nicaragua.**

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International Studies B.A. Spring 2017**

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Managua, Nicaragua**

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## **Abstract**

Palestinians have been immigrating to Nicaragua and throughout Central America since the early 20th-century, and they have formed their own small community in Managua. The first generation of immigrants from Palestine arrived without any support from the Nicaraguan government, and had to rely on the community for survival. However, the second generation has been brought up in a different Nicaragua than their parents faced and now encounters a new set of challenges in preserving their identity and becoming part of mainstream Nicaraguan society. This paper seeks to investigate the outcomes of assimilation of the second generation of Palestinian-Nicaraguans. In addition, it attempts to identify and assess what resources the first and second generations can draw upon in their search for identity in Nicaraguan society.

Keywords: Assimilation, integration, Palestine, culture, youth, community

## **Abstracto**

Palestinos han inmigrado a Nicaragua y todo de centroamérica desde el inicio del siglo veinte, y han formado su propia comunidad en Managua. La primera generación de inmigrantes de Palestina llegaron sin apoyo del gobierno de Nicaragua, y necesitaban depender de la comunidad para sobrevivir. Pero la segunda generación se han creído en un Nicaragua diferente que han enfrentado sus padres y ahora encuentran una colección nueva de desafíos para preservar su identidad y volverse parte de la sociedad Nicaragüense convencional. Este ensayo intenta a investigar los resultados de asimilación de la segunda generación de Palestino-Nicaragüenses. También, trata de identificar y evaluar cuáles recursos tienen la primera y segunda generación para usar en la búsqueda para identidad en la sociedad Nicaragüense.

Palabras claves: asimilacion, integracion, Palestina, cultura, juventud, comunidad

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## Introduction



Figure 1. Graffiti sprayed on a house in Managua.

The Palestinian diaspora has scattered Palestinians across the globe and created communities in the unlikeliest of places. In some cases, Palestinians have settled in distant homes and created new communities for themselves, weaving themselves into the national fabric of a foreign land. In other cases, Palestinians are unable to return to their country of birth, forced to spend the remainder of their lives longing to return to their homeland. The Israeli-Palestine conflict has created refugees across the globe, and in the process has forced the existence of communities of individuals who face the same difficult choice: to settle permanently in a different country and start a new life or to someday return to Palestine and face the consequences of a frequently hostile government and political unrest. The Palestinian people have been a group facing constant conflict since the formation of Israel in 1948, and the adversity that they have faced parallels the long struggle for freedom by the Sandinistas in the 60s and 70s. This

struggle has forged a bond of solidarity between the Palestinian and Nicaraguan people in the form of political support since the dawn of Sandinista Nicaragua in 1979.

While the politics of the Nicaragua-Palestine relationship are an important factor in the assimilation of Palestinian-Nicaraguans, my research will focus mainly on the personal and societal factors that affect Palestinian inclusion into Nicaraguan society. A brief history of Palestinian immigration to Central America will also be provided to contextualize the findings. Using the theory of “Segmented Assimilation” from Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut, this paper will seek to determine to what degree Palestinians have assimilated to Nicaraguan society by analyzing the personal experiences of a number of first and second generation immigrants. Several factors of assimilation were assessed, including the occupational success of Nicaraguans of Palestinian descent, the barriers to Palestinian integration in Nicaragua, and how Palestinians of Nicaraguan descent express a Palestinian identity and maintain cultural/ personal ties with their homeland. The research is conducted through on-site observations and personal interviews in an attempt to give voice to a small but important community in Managua, Nicaragua.

The task of determining how a diverse community of immigrants has integrated to a foreign country is a complex task, and my generalizations may only reflect the reality for a small portion of the population. However, one sentiment that I repeatedly heard stuck with me, and although it was expressed in many different ways, it was explained most succinctly by one of my interviewees Bassel Hassan: “Uno es Palestino por el orgullo.” Translated to English, it simply means “One is Palestinian for their pride,” which I have found to be true again



and again. My research focuses on a variety of factors including language, culture, and societal acceptance, but whether one was born and raised in Palestine or has only heard of Palestine in stories from their family, the common link between this community is that they wear their Palestinian identity with pride.

## **Literature Review**

Assimilation is a complicated process that can be defined by countless factors and measuring this phenomenon can be accomplished in various ways. My assessment of Palestinian assimilation relies on the work of Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut and their work with Gans' theory of *segmented assimilation*. This theory asserts that there is not a singular path to assimilation, but instead that there are several, based on a variety of environmental factors.<sup>1</sup> A highly-educated immigrant population from a developed country will assimilate under different circumstances than an immigrant population comprised primarily of agricultural workers from a poorer country. This theory was originally applied to immigrants living in the United States, however I believe that the same ideas can be applied to Nicaragua as well, with some variation. Portes describes the process of assimilation as a combination and interplay of three broad factors: 1) Human capital of the immigrants, or their education and occupation; 2) Modes of incorporation, which has various parts that I will explain in depth below; and finally 3) Composition of the immigrant family. The interaction of these three factors can lead to different outcomes of assimilation, both upwards and downwards assimilation. And this theory not only relies on studying the

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<sup>1</sup> Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, Haller. "The Adaptation of the Immigrant ...". August 1, 2009. 1078.

immigrants themselves, but also the social, political, and economic environment in which they are received. However, an important factor is often overlooked when one focuses solely on the immigrant population and the host society. The context of return can also affect how an immigrant population decides to settle in a new country, and this seems to be particularly important for the Palestinian community. The Palestinian diaspora is largely made up of refugees, such as the 700,000 that have left Palestine since 1967, and whether or not a Palestinian can return also affects the decisions they make and how they assimilate to a new country. Since the issue of returning to Palestine came up so frequently in my interviews and is a relevant factor to Palestinian assimilation, I will also include a section on the context of return.

The factors of assimilation outlined by Portes and Rumbaut don't function alone, they interact to create a holistic assessment of how an immigrant population is assimilating. Human capital (in the form of education, work experience, and language skills) can affect assimilation in various ways, but generally speaking, immigrants with high human capital lead to a more economically successful second generation.<sup>2</sup> The next factor, modes of incorporation, is made up of three parts: reception by the host society, reception by the government, and the character of the co-ethnic community.<sup>3</sup> These three environmental factors can be barriers or catalysts for assimilation in the host country. Racist attitudes in the host society or discriminatory policies by the government can make assimilation more difficult for an immigrant group, while a

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<sup>2</sup> Portes, Alejandro , and Rubén Rumbaut. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*,. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001). 46.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

strong co-ethnic community can aid assimilation by providing resources for new immigrants. Finally, composition of the immigrant family also affects how modes of incorporation affect immigrant groups and the kind of support structures that a group has.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, after these factors are assessed into expected outcomes, these outcomes are filtered through a set of three challenges to assimilation. However, this is where my own study diverges from Portes and Rumbaut, because the challenges that they list are unique to American society. The first barrier is race, which has a different historical context in Nicaragua than in the United States. I would argue that race is not as important of a factor in Nicaraguan assimilation as it is in American assimilation because of the unique historical context that race has in the United States. The next challenge is a bifurcated labor market, which is a feature of the American economy and has less relevance to my study because Palestinians are generally part of the Nicaraguan middle-class. The last challenge is the consolidation of a marginalized population in the inner-city. The concept of the inner-city doesn't apply to Nicaragua in the same context that it does in the United States, and the Palestinian community is not restricted to the inner-city of Managua. In conclusion, my variation of this model will disregard these three factors because of their irrelevance to my study. Instead, my research seeks to identify the character of modes of incorporation, family structure, human capital, and context of return of the Palestinian community in Nicaragua, and ultimately I will draw my conclusions from the combination and interplay of these various factors.

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<sup>4</sup> Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*. 49.

## **Methodology**

My participants were first and second generation Palestinians that had lived a large portion of their lives in Nicaragua. I completed interviews with a total of eight Nicaraguans of Palestinian descent: four interviews with first generation Palestinians on personal experiences, three interviews with 2nd generation Palestinians on personal experiences, and an interview with Mohammed Amro, the Palestinian ambassador to Nicaragua, that focused mostly on political matters. All of the first generation Palestinians were men, which reflects the history of Palestinian immigration to Nicaragua being almost entirely men seeking work. The second generation participants were a mix of men and women, all aged between 20 and 25 years old.

All of my interviews were held in Managua, and we decided upon a meeting place at the convenience of the participant, often at the place of work of my interviewees or in coffee shops. Before the interview, participants were all told that they had the option to not answer a question at any time, and that recording the interview was optional. None of my first generation interviews were recorded as they all took place in the subjects' place of work. At the end of the interview, they were all given the choice to be anonymous and have the names of people and places changed. In these cases, I changed the names of people and places while attempting to avoid fundamental changes to the actual data. All names mentioned were changed and specific locations that could be identified with the interviewees were changed, such as towns of origin in Palestine. At the end of each interview, participants were also given a description

of the goals of my research and had to give a verbal consent for their interview to be included in my research.

The interviews were made up of questions that touched upon four major themes: family and personal experience, the Nicaraguan host society, the Nicaraguan government, and finally the co-ethnic Palestinian community. Each of these themes highlights a different factor in assimilation and the combination of these factors allowed me to determine holistically how the community has assimilated. The questions asked included but were not limited to:

1. Where do you work?
2. What is your highest level of education and where did you study?
3. Do you speak Arabic and how did you learn the language?
4. Where is your family from?
5. What is your family's immigration story from Palestine?
6. What motivated your family moving to Nicaragua?
7. What faith do you practice and where do you worship?
8. How do you describe your identity?
9. Do you maintain contact with family members in Nicaragua/Palestine?
10. What is your opinion on Nicaraguan-Palestinian relations?
11. Do you practice any Palestinian traditions in Nicaragua?
12. Have you felt targeted by discrimination in Nicaragua?
13. Are there Palestinian or community organizations that you participate in?
14. Do you believe the government has pro-Palestinian policies for immigration to Nicaragua?
15. What is your opinion on the presence of the Star of David throughout

Managua?

Along with interviews, I went to cultural centers in the Palestinian community and observed what the environment was like. Specifically, I visited "la calle de los arabes" in the Mercado Oriental four times, as well as the Mosque of Managua twice, the temporary embassy of Palestine in Nicaragua, and finally a Palestinian-owned restaurant. Four of my interviews took place in the participants' places of work, which also was included in my data. These locations are frequented by Palestinians and my goal wasn't necessarily to observe the

people themselves but rather the resources that they had available to them in maintaining Palestinian culture and being part of a community.

### Limitations

A number of factors limited my ability to research the Palestinian community with the depth that I intended. One obstacle was simply that the Palestinian community in Nicaragua is small; according to three of my sources, it only contains between 800-1,000 people in total between the first and second generation. With a few exceptions, such as the mosque and “la calle de los Arabes” in Mercado Oriental, the Palestinian population isn’t exceptionally visible. Another limitation was that I was given contact information for several potential participants by my advisor Gustavo Salinas, and over half of them did not respond after two or three emails. This was likely due to how infrequently email is used as a means of communication in Nicaragua, with frequent email-users only checking for work purposes. One result of this lack of participation is that my interviewees tended to be from the same social class and many have connections to the other participants. The inter-community connections aren’t completely coincidental, as some of my interviewees gave me contact information for people I later interviewed. While this helped me with finding participants, it meant that my interviews were likely within a specific group in the community. Also, because of the difficulty of locating participants, I would be unable to send out a survey as supplemental material to help support my findings. Through an anonymous survey I may have been able to find information of a broader variety of subjects, but it would have been extremely difficult to locate enough participants to make a survey a credible and useful source of information.

With only seven interviewees, I am unable to describe the diversity of the Palestinian community of Managua, and so my group appears to be fairly homogenous in a couple ways. The majority of my participants had connections to the textile industry in Managua and all of them identified as Muslim. However, I've read that much of the early Palestinian community that immigrated to Nicaragua was comprised of Christians, and while much of that population has likely assimilated more fully due to being in the third or fourth generation, no Christians were represented.<sup>5</sup> There is also a lack of literature on the Palestinian community in Nicaragua in general. Aside from articles in *El Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa*, there is little discussion of the Palestinian community in Managua.

### **Potential Bias**

My own perception of Nicaraguan society and my social standing in it have an effect on my research. As an outsider to both Nicaragua and the Palestinian community, I am unable to fully understand the nuance of some issues such as race, which has a different context in Nicaragua than I am used to in the United States. To combat my own skewed perceptions of the subject matter, I focus on giving voice to the participants that I interviewed and their personal experiences. Also, my privilege as a white American man may have given me access to a lot of information that would be difficult for another researcher without that privilege, but my identity also shapes how participants viewed me. At times I felt that subjects were initially suspicious of me as an outsider as well, which seemed to result in hesitation on the part of my

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<sup>5</sup> Guzmán, Roberto. *A Century of Palestinian Immigration Into Central America...* 1st ed. (San José: Universidad de Costa Rica.), 48.

interviewees. The way I am viewed by my research subjects can bias the research, and in my goal to be as objective as possible, I explicitly explained the goal of my project to participants before interviewing began. While it is impossible to completely rid my paper of bias, I did everything in my power to make my research as objective as possible.

## **Research Findings**

Each factor for determining assimilation as defined by Portes and Rumbaut will be laid out individually and discussed together at the end to determine how they interact. Again, these factors include human capital of Nicaraguans of Palestinian descent, reception by Nicaraguan society, reception by the Nicaraguan government, strength of the Palestinian community, and finally family structure. Before analyzing the factors of assimilation, a brief history of Palestinian immigration to Central America is also necessary.

## **History**

The Palestinian diaspora is a well-documented phenomenon in much of Central America due to the huge populations found in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.<sup>6</sup> Palestinians have become very influential in Central America, particularly in Honduras and El Salvador. Honduras elected a second-generation Palestinian Carlos Flores to be president in 1997 and El Salvador voted a third-generation Palestinian to be president in 2004.<sup>7</sup> Along with these political accomplishments, Palestinians in Central America have achieved astonishing

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<sup>6</sup> Foroohar, Manzar. "Palestinians in Central America..." *Journal Of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



commercial success, particularly in cities like San Pedro Sula in Honduras where a large portion of the manufacturing sector is controlled by a Palestinian elite.<sup>8</sup> Nicaragua contains a significantly smaller Palestinian population than its northern neighbors and accordingly has less scholarship dedicated to it, but Nicaraguan-Palestinians have a similar social status to the Palestinian communities throughout Central America.

Since the early 20th-century, Palestinians have been immigrating to Nicaragua in search of a better life. Many of these immigrants arrived in Nicaragua during the decline of the Ottoman empire and began working in the textile industry, as many Palestinians still do today.<sup>9</sup> While the Palestinian community in Honduras is involved in a more diverse set of businesses, Palestinian-Nicaraguans involved themselves in a competitive textile market based out of the Mercado Oriental. Most Palestinians of Nicaraguan descent are originally from in or around Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Beit Jala.<sup>10</sup> The participants that I talked to confirmed this and the majority of them or their families originated in or around Jerusalem and Ramallah.

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<sup>8</sup> Gutiérrez Rivera, Lirio. "Assimilation or Cultural Difference? Palestinian Immigrants in Honduras." *Revista De Estudios Sociales* no. 48 (January 2014): 59-60

<sup>9</sup> Guzmán, Roberto. *A Century of Palestinian Immigration Into Central America...* 1st ed. (San José: Universidad de Costa Rica.), 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.



Figure 2. The red dots represent the cities that my participants or their families originated from. One of my participants is from a small town that no longer exists, but was 30km from Ramallah..

Nicaraguans of Palestinian descent have played important roles throughout Nicaraguan history outside of commercial practices as guerrilla fighters for the FSLN, and poets, and trained professionals.<sup>11</sup> Following the victory of the Nicaraguan Revolution, the Sandinista party formed a political relationship with the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) and built the first Palestinian embassy in Central America.<sup>12</sup> As well as the embassy, the PLO allegedly sent as many as 70 “high-ranking officers” to help in training the

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<sup>11</sup> Guzmán, Roberto. *A Century of Palestinian Immigration Into Central America... 1st ed.* (San José: Universidad de Costa Rica.), 54-55.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

Nicaraguan army, as well as a \$12 million loan.<sup>13</sup> Although Palestinian influence in Nicaragua was actually quite small, the United States took note. The presence of the PLO, which the United States classified as a terrorist group until 1991, was used in part as justification for funding the Contras. In a speech on March 16th, 1986 Ronald Reagan said the following: “Gathered in Nicaragua already are thousands of Cuban military advisers, contingents of Soviets and East Germans, and all the elements of international terror -- from the PLO to Italy's Red Brigades.”<sup>14</sup> In spite of the political consequences, Nicaragua and Palestine maintain a close political relationship of mutual support to this day. Palestinians are eligible to travel from Palestine to Nicaragua without a visa, which makes the process of immigration easy for Palestinians seeking to live in Nicaragua.<sup>15</sup>

### **Human Capital of Nicaraguans of Palestinian Descent**

Throughout my interviews, it became abundantly clear that first and second generation Palestinians had a large amount of human capital, as demonstrated by their business success and high levels of education. My first generation interviewees tended to be less educated than their children but had the advantage of using family or community ties to start working in a lucrative profession. I spoke with one manager at a large textile store called “Alejandria” in the Mercado Oriental. His name is Raed Farhoud and he moved from Palestine in 1992 to work with his brother, who immigrated to Nicaragua in 1967. Raed completed high school and a semester of college in Palestine, but his family

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<sup>13</sup> American Foreign Policy Council. *The World Almanac of Islamism*: (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.) 71.

<sup>14</sup> National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>15</sup> "Visa-free travel for citizens of the Palestinian Territory."

connections and business savvy have led to him working with his brother in one of the largest, most-successful textile stores in Mercado Oriental. He also was not fluent in Spanish before coming to Nicaragua, but with the support of his family, he is now fluent, as well as being fluent in English from seven years living in the United States. Just down the street from his shop is another clothing and fabric store named “Der Debwan” after the town in Palestine where its former owner was born. The co-founder of the shop passed, but in talking to his widow and their daughter I learned that the former owner Rahib also immigrated to Nicaragua with the help of a brother who had immigrated earlier. I do not know Rahib’s level of education, but he seemed to come to Nicaragua unable to speak Spanish and began working for another prominent Palestinian family in Mercado Oriental selling clothes and cloth door to door. Over time he was able to buy a truck to travel sell cloth more efficiently, and finally he and his wife opened their own large store in Mercado Oriental. Over several years, Rahib accumulated the business acumen to start a successful business, and that was a skill that he could pass on to his children. This situation is not uncommon in immigrant communities and Thomas Faist describes this phenomenon: “immigrant entrepreneurs tend to employ and thus may also offer opportunities for on-the-job training of immigrants. . . immigrant business persons are crucial "gatekeepers" in personnel recruitment.”<sup>16</sup> He also emphasizes that these employment opportunities may not be desirable for second generation immigrants, which also seems to hold true for my participants.

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<sup>16</sup> Faist, Thomas. "States, Markets, and Immigrant Minorities..." *Comparative Politics* 26, no. 4 (1994): 446.

Other first generation Palestinian immigrants had high levels of education, such as one of my interviewees named Fadi Zahran, who graduated from the Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería. However, while levels of education vary among the first generation, the second generation appears to be exceptionally well-educated. All of the second generation participants had or were in the process of earning a college degree and seemed to come from a middle-class background. Raed's own daughter, Layilee Farhoud, is an excellent example of this trend. Layilee is currently studying at a college in New Jersey, and she attended a university in Palestine and one of the best high schools in Managua. She is also fluent in Spanish and English, and speaks Arabic very well. Layilee's lingual ability has given her the freedom to study and work outside of Nicaragua, which is an indispensable skill for climbing the social ladder. In a path more similar to the first generation, my interviewee Bassel Hassan continued working in the family business of textiles and clothes in his store "Hassan Tex." Although he studied to be an engineer, Bassel is the owner of a shop in Mercado Oriental and took over the family business after his father passed. He seems to be a member of the middle class with a successful business, with skills attained not just from school but likely from his upbringing and experience working with his father.

The trend of Nicaraguans of Palestinian descent having high human capital mirrors the experience of Palestinians in Honduras.<sup>17</sup> While the Nicaraguan-Palestinian community didn't dominate manufacturing and textiles like their Honduran counterparts, they embedded themselves in Managua as a

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<sup>17</sup> Gutiérrez Rivera, Lirio. "Assimilation or Cultural Difference? ..." 62.

distinct merchant class. With steady employment and years of experience in their respective trades, many Nicaraguan-Palestinians have maintained high human capital through the generations and in some cases have created family dynasties in the textile business. And while many of the first generation immigrants work in the textile business as well as other entrepreneurial endeavors, the second generation seems to have varied their studies and job interests outside of the family business as Faist suggests. For example, even though Bassel Hassan continued his family's trade, he studied engineering. In addition, his cousins work in trades unrelated to textiles and they all have Palestinian fathers like Bassel. Rahib's daughter also works in the family business, but she studied law in college. Layilee Hassan and her two brothers are studying abroad instead of working in the huge family business with their father and uncle. While the career paths of the second generation vary from their parents, human capital remains high from the first to the second generation, which makes the process of assimilation much easier for the second generation.

### **Modes of Incorporation**

Although human capital is an important factor in successfully integrating to a new country, it doesn't exist in a vacuum. A new immigrant can potentially face numerous obstacles that make their new home an uneven playing field despite abundant human capital, which Portes and Rumbaut call the Modes of Incorporation. These factors can aid or hinder assimilation and as they make up the environment in which new immigrants are introduced.

### **Reception by Nicaraguan Society**

This factor is broad and complex, and originally it was defined as “racism, bifurcated labour markets, and the existence of alternative deviant lifestyles grounded in gangs and the drug trade.”<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of my research, I have simplified this to discrimination by Nicaraguan natives against first and second generation Palestinian immigrants. Discrimination can have a number of serious effects, at times limiting where people can work, study, or even live. Upon first arriving in Managua, I was struck how frequently I saw the Jewish Star of David and the Israeli flag. In addition to questions about discrimination in general, I specifically asked what my interviewees thought of the ubiquitous flag. The flag seemed out of place considering how small the Jewish population of Managua is.

Coming from the United States, I expected to hear stories of racism and discrimination from people all over Nicaragua. Instead, every one of my eight interviewees said that they have either faced very little or no discrimination whatsoever. Between the first generation Palestinians, one of whom has lived in Nicaragua for more than 50 years, and the second generation Palestinians, the consensus was clear: Nicaraguans did not discriminate against Palestinians. In Honduras, Palestinians have faced discrimination in part because of their economic success, with the word *turco* being used as a kind of slur against Palestinians and other Arabs even in recent history.<sup>19</sup> While *turco* has been used in the past to describe Palestinians in Nicaragua, it seems that it mostly has its roots in the history of Palestinian immigration. Mohammed Amro, the

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<sup>18</sup> Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, Haller. "The Adaptation of the Immigrant ...". August 1, 2009. 1080

<sup>19</sup> Gutiérrez, "Assimilation or Cultural Difference?" 60.

ambassador of Palestine in Nicaragua, said that the history of Palestinians immigrating to Nicaragua started in the early 20th-century and that the word *turco* comes from the era where Palestinians coming to Nicaragua all had passports from the Ottoman Empire. As he described it, the word *turco* was not a word used as a means of discrimination as much as it was a label applied to people who had historically been turcos. The ambassador sees the word as harmless, simply an outdated label for a people that have been under the rule of many different foreign powers.

The presence of the Israeli flag does seem to be tied to instances and a culture of discrimination, though my interviewees explained that it was subtle. Bassel Hassan claims that although he hasn't faced explicit discrimination or racism, but he has seen a more "passive" form of discrimination. He says that the Israeli flags are a product of evangelical teachings that Israel is the "pueblo elegido" or "people chosen by God" and so people who attend evangelical churches show their support for Israel by prominently displaying its flag. The result is that these flags are seemingly everywhere, on churches, in marketplaces, in taxis, and in the front of homes. Bassel says that the discrimination comes from the idea that since Israel is the pueblo elegido, Palestinians are the enemies of the people of God. This can lead to a racist, anti-Palestinian rhetoric that some Palestinians perceive as an insult. Other interviewees believe that many Nicaraguans are simply ignorant of the history of Israel and Palestine. When asked how she identifies herself, one of my interviewees Maria Abboud said "I always say I am Palestinian, but it makes me angry when people respond that I am from Israel! My problem isn't with the state of Israel, I'm angry that people say Palestine doesn't exist. "



While some discrimination clearly does exist, it seems that instances of racism are infrequent enough that Nicaraguan society does not strongly discriminate against the Palestinian community. Based on my many visits to the Mercado Oriental, it seemed clear that Palestinian businesses have historically been very successful. Through conversations I've had with Nicaraguan friends and acquaintances, it appears that the Palestinian community is well known and faces little difficulty interacting with Nicaraguan society at large. When asked about discrimination, Fahmi Hassan said that he can do what he wants in Nicaragua with no problem and that "nobody bothers him." Generally, Nicaraguan society is accepting of the Palestinian community and provides few if any barriers to assimilation.

### **Reception by Nicaraguan Government**

Portes and Rumbaut lay out three basic options for governmental response to an immigrant group: exclusion, passive acceptance, or active encouragement.<sup>20</sup> Through my interviews and research, I have determined that the Nicaraguan government has a policy of passive acceptance for Palestinians, which means that the government does not actively encourage Palestinian immigration or facilitate the assimilation of immigrants, but there are also no additional barriers for new immigrants. Palestinians seem to be equal to any other citizen under the law of Nicaragua. In a number of interviews this sentiment was expressed, such as when Fahmi Hassan said that the government does not harm or exclude Palestinians, but it does not provide any additional support either. Fahmi moved to Nicaragua in 1968 during the years of Anastasio Somoza's reign, and he said that although

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<sup>20</sup> Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*. 49.

Palestinian-Nicaraguan relations are better under the Sandinista government, very little has changed for Palestinians other than the economy. Other interviewees seemed to agree. Bassel Hassan said that his father did not receive governmental support upon arriving in Nicaragua and instead relied heavily upon his family that already lived in Nicaragua. Bassel also said that if a Palestinian were to immigrate to Nicaragua today, they might find some help from the community if they searched for it, but the government doesn't help settle Palestinians.

The other side of passive acceptance is that while the government does not provide services to help settle immigrants, it also doesn't provide any barriers. As stated earlier, Palestinians do not need a visa to travel to Nicaragua, which makes Nicaragua one of only thirty-six countries that allows Palestinians visa-free entry. The Palestinian passport is one of the most restricted passports in the world. This is a result of Nicaragua's unique political history with Palestine, which has given Palestine full diplomatic rights since the Nicaraguan Revolution. The Sandinista government also allows for freedom of religion according to Faredeh Sharif Salem, which she is grateful for. As nearly all of the Palestinians that I interviewed were practicing Muslims, Faredeh was not alone in expressing appreciation for this right. This example seems to go along with Fahmi's statement that the government Layilee Farhoud also cited a march that took place in 2009 by Palestinian sympathizers against the U.S. Embassy for the United States' support of Israel following several deaths related to an Israeli military offensive in Palestine.<sup>21</sup> Layilee said that the antagonistic march was planned and

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<sup>21</sup> "Palestinos en Nicaragua derriban símbolo israelí."

able to proceed without government intervention, which demonstrates the government's passive acceptance of Palestinians.

The government also has supported the Palestinian community with symbolic displays of solidarity. Not far from the Mosque of Managua, one of the public parks displays a statue of Yasser Arafat, the first Palestinian president. The statue sits in front of a mural depicting Arafat talking with Daniel Ortega, current Nicaraguan president, as well as listing Nicaraguans of Palestinian descent who died during the Nicaraguan revolution.<sup>22</sup> The Palestinian embassy, in conjunction with the cultural branch of the Nicaraguan government, has also held a celebration for the "National Day of Nicaraguan Culture."<sup>23</sup> While the park and cultural celebration provide little in the way of substantial assistance to the Palestinian community, it clearly demonstrates a large degree of symbolic support by the government for Palestinians living in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan government may not be actively attempting to bring in more Palestinian immigrants, but it certainly values the Palestinian community as a culturally unique group that should be regarded as equal citizens under the law.

### **Co-ethnic Community**

A strong co-ethnic community can provide support for an immigrant group where the host society and government do not. For immigrants moving to Nicaragua without any knowledge of the language or culture, the co-ethnic community can aid the process of assimilation or hinder it with the presence of an isolated ethnic enclave. However, the Palestinian community

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<sup>22</sup> Rizo, Erving Sánchez. "Develan mural de 34 aniversario de relaciones entre Nicaragua y Palestina."

<sup>23</sup> "Celebran en Nicaragua el Día de la Cultura Palestina."

seems exceptionally well-suited to both provide support for new immigrants as well as help the process of assimilation to Nicaragua. For example, Fadi Zahran arrived in Nicaragua in 2002 at the age of 20 with no knowledge of how to speak Spanish, a huge barrier to assimilation. Without ever taking a single Spanish class but solely with the help of his family, he is now fluent in Spanish and has earned a diploma from a Nicaraguan engineering university. He is currently employed in an excellent job and lives with his Nicaraguan wife and their 3-month old daughter, which by all accounts seems to be an assimilation success story. Fadi credits his brothers with helping him learn Spanish quickly, and without his family and community support he may have faced countless difficulties in the process of language acquisition and adapting to his new environment. As Portes and Rumbaut describe, the entrepreneurial network of Palestinians also provides an advantage to new immigrants who through community and/or familial connections can find meaningful employment with fewer skills.<sup>24</sup> This seems to be the case with Rahib Sharif Salem, who immigrated to Nicaragua from Palestine in 1972 and after a short time began working for the Hassan family's textile business. Raed Farhoud also immigrated to Nicaragua and immediately began working in textiles in his brother's store. Bassel Hassan recounted to me how Palestinian families in the past would lend credit to other Palestinians as they started their lives in Nicaragua, which provided some immigrants the opportunity to start their own businesses.

The Palestinian community is small - two of my interviewees estimated around 800-1,000 first and second generation immigrants live in Managua

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<sup>24</sup> Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*. 48.

currently. The ambassador Mohammed Amro estimates that there are 10,000-12,000 Nicaraguans of Palestinian descent throughout the country, however many of them are 3rd and 4th-generation and have assimilated completely to Nicaragua as to become indistinguishable from the average mestizo Nicaraguan. This small community has become more spread out over the years however, and much of the community has left. Bassel Hassan described how the community used to revolve around the neighborhood of Ciudad Jardin, close to the Mercado Oriental. According to Bassel, the Palestinian community used to be much closer because they all lived in Ciudad Jardin and went to the same small mosque which was located in a house of one of the Palestinians. Today, a new, larger mosque has been constructed and most Palestinians have left Ciudad Jardin and spread throughout the city. In Bassel's own words "The community was closer before, in the past we had a small mosque for a small community, but now we have a large mosque for a small community." He explained that he thought that the community had become fractured in part by business competition. The textile trade in Mercado Oriental, dominated by names such as Khatib, Hassan, Farhoud, and Sharif Salem, is made up of shops that are very close together and that may exacerbate the situation as families across the street from each other compete for the same customers.

The Mosque of Managua is a community center for Muslim Palestinians in Managua. While not all of my interviewees were Muslim, almost all of them still occasionally visit the mosque for either religious or social reasons. Raed Farhoud said that although he doesn't visit the mosque often for the religious services, he occasionally visited to spend time with his family. Consequently, Raed also knows Fahmi Hassan who is the head administrator at the mosque,

because as Raed said “It’s a small community, everyone knows each other.” I visited the mosque on three occasions and every time I was there, there were a couple people sitting together and speaking Arabic. The mosque itself is a large, beautiful building sitting adjacent to a covered basketball court and a soccer field. While it functions mostly as a Muslim center for worship, youth often use of the well-maintained athletic facilities after school. The mosque also serves a broader community of Muslims, and on my visits I met men from Lebanon, Libya and Jordan as well. Once a week, the mosque offers basic Arabic classes for its attendees, one of the few ways to learn Arabic in Managua. If the Palestinian community has a cultural center, it is the Mosque of Managua.

Two of my second generation interviewees have also been working to start a Palestinian community group for first and second generation Palestinians, which indicates that there is a desire to form a closer community. Bassel’s comments on the community being fractured, the size of the community, and the few cultural centers demonstrate that a community does exist, particularly for Muslim Palestinians, but also the community is weak and no longer provides a great deal of social support.

### **Composition of the Immigrant Family**

The composition of the immigrant family as defined by Portes and Rumbaut is based primarily on whether both parents are present in the host country. In a similar article, Portes et al writes “Parents who stay together and extended families where grandparents and older siblings play a role at motivating and controlling adolescents have a significant role in promoting upward

assimilation.”<sup>25</sup> Large, connected families tend to assist in assimilating the second generation. The family composition of the Palestinian community is distinct and seems to have little variation. The first generation Palestinians in Nicaragua are mostly men who left Palestine at a young age seeking work or as refugees, and that had either their father or older siblings in Nicaragua. There certainly are exceptions, but the Palestinian community seems to be comprised of Palestinian men who married Nicaraguan women. With the exception of Raed Farhoud’s wife who was born in Palestine and is half-Nicaraguan, the family of every participant that I studied was comprised of a Nicaraguan wife and a Palestinian father. Only one of the participants was a part of a family where the mother and father divorced, and the rest of the families stayed together at least until the children were in college. This pattern has two important effects - the Palestinian second generation tends to assimilate quickly to Nicaraguan culture due to their mothers being Nicaraguan, and Palestinian families generally stay together and have a strong family network in Nicaragua. Both of these factors also aid in the assimilation of the first generation of Palestinian men, who seem to abandon aspects of their Palestinian culture as they are completely immersed in Nicaraguan society.

All participants of the second generation were fluent in Spanish, which is an inevitable result of being raised in Nicaragua with a Spanish-speaking mother. Of that same group, only two of four of them spoke Arabic (Maria and Layilee) and that was due to their time spent living in Palestine. None of the second generation participants learned Arabic in Nicaragua, other than basic Islamic

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<sup>25</sup> Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, Haller. "The Adaptation of the Immigrant ...". August 1, 2009. 1079.

vocabulary. As Bassel Hassan said, “When couples are mixed, their children speak the language of where they live.” The second generation participants were all partially ethnically Nicaraguan because of their Nicaraguan mothers, and their identities reflected that. Bassel Hassan and Faredeh Sharif Salem both described themselves principally as Nicaraguans, but with a Palestinian heritage. Many of the Nicaraguan wives are also Christian, and so some of the second generation participants (Maria Abboud and Faredeh Sharif Salem) went to Christian schools as well. Within the mixed Palestinian families in Nicaragua, the culture of the children favors the mother’s Nicaraguan culture which is a powerful factor in assimilating the children. Families mostly stay together as well, which has the benefit of providing a natural social network through familial ties. Palestinian families can count on both the support of the father’s male relatives that have already immigrated as well as the native families of the Nicaraguan mothers. According to Alejandro Portes, these familial networks can help ensure that second generation children are supervised so that they aren’t “left to their own devices,” which can lead to downward assimilation. Overall, the Palestinian community seems to be made up of stable, mixed-nationality families, which helps guide second generation assimilation.

### **Context of Return**

An important aspect of immigration that Portes and Rumbaut do not mention is the context of return to an immigrant’s native country. Not all immigrant groups leave their native countries by choice, and some who leave don’t have the opportunity to return. A theme in my discussions with first generation participants is that some of them wish to go back to Palestine, but they



are unable to for a number of reasons. Sometimes, the political situation with Israel, often called the “occupation by Israel” by my participants, is a deterrent to returning home. Nobody wants to put themselves or their families in danger and generally my interviewees agreed that the environment in Palestine is unstable and that the Israeli government and their treatment of Palestinians is the cause. Other Palestinians are simply unable to return for legal reasons, such as the inability to obtain a visa. When asked if he would return to Palestine if given the opportunity, Raed Farhoud replied “I would close my shop right now and return to my family if I could, but I am unable to return to Palestine.” The politics of Nicaragua, Palestine, and Israel are complicated, but put simply Nicaragua since the revolution has historically had a good relationship with Palestine and a poor relationship with Israel. One effect of this is that it is difficult for Nicaraguans to obtain a visa to enter Palestinian territories because the process involves the visa being checked by Israeli authorities, according to the ambassador of Palestine in Nicaragua, Mohammed Amro. First generation Palestinians also have Palestinian citizenship and can apply for a visa from neighboring countries, as Raed Farhoud attempted to do. He was unsuccessful and has been unable to visit Palestine since 1992. Raed was explicit in his desire to immigrate back to Palestine, and he was not the only interviewee with this desire. Fahmi Hassan told me that he is also unable to return to Palestine for legal reasons, but in addition to that fact, he has no home to return to. Al Barea, his town of origin, no longer exists. Fahmi explained that it was destroyed by the Israeli government and that all of the former inhabitants are now refugees, as is Fahmi himself. In asking the Palestinian ambassador about this, Mohammed Amro told me that the Israeli government has destroyed 1,568 Palestinian towns by using the excuse of

retaliating against “small acts of resistance by Palestinians.” In addition, Mohammed Amro explained that Palestinian I.D.’s have to be processed for a Palestinian to return to Palestine, and the Israeli government controls the processing. If a Palestinian citizen hasn’t been to Palestine in 12 years, their I.D. expires and they won’t be able to use their Palestinian passport to return home.

While this was an unanticipated finding, it is undeniable that the politics of the Palestine-Israel conflict affect the immigration decisions of the first generation, which has consequences for the second generation. If an immigrant leaves their country of birth with the expectation that they may be unable to return for a long time, logically they will be more likely to settle in the host country and make decisions that will assimilate the family. Conversely, if they expect to return and are unable to, they may settle into the host country because it is their second home and it is the best option given their travel restrictions. The political instability and travel restrictions of Palestine are an additional motivator to settling in Nicaragua and fully assimilating for some families that have no better options. With no promise of a safe return home, some families have to create a new home for themselves.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

From my research, I have determined the how the Palestinian community in Nicaragua fits into six different factors of assimilation. The first generation of Palestinians has high entrepreneurial capital, and the second generation continues to have high human capital through either family business or higher education. Nicaraguan society generally accepts the Palestinian community with little tension or discrimination, and the Nicaraguan government is neutral towards the

community. A co-ethnic community exists, but it seems fractured and centered around the mosque - overall a weak community. Finally, the family structure in the Palestinian community facilitates a rapid assimilation of both the first and second generation and tends to create a more-Nicaraguan second generation. As we will see below, these factors indicate a clear assimilation outcome.

In segmented assimilation theory, there are several possible paths for assimilation for the second generation. The three basic outcomes are dissonant acculturation, consonant acculturation, and selective acculturation.<sup>26</sup> Dissonant acculturation occurs when children assimilate more quickly than their parents, if their parents assimilate at all. Consonant acculturation is the opposite process, where assimilation occurs at the same pace between the first and second generation. Finally, selective acculturation occurs with the presence of a large co-ethnic community that allows for the second generation of immigrants to retain cultural features of the first generation.<sup>27</sup> Below is a chart that summarizes some of the possible outcomes for an immigrant community in the United States.

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<sup>26</sup> Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*. 53.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

TABLE 3.2 TYPES OF ACCULTURATION ACROSS GENERATIONS

Children's Learning of English and American Customs	Parents' Learning of English and American Customs	Children's Insertion into Ethnic Community	Parents' Insertion into Ethnic Community	Type	Expected Outcomes
+	+	-	-	Consonant acculturation	Joint search for integration into American mainstream; rapid shift to English monolingualism among children
-	-	+	+	Consonant resistance to acculturation	Isolation within the ethnic community; likely to return to home country
+	-	-	+	Dissonant acculturation (I)	Rupture of family ties and children's abandonment of ethnic community; limited bilingualism or English monolingualism among children
+	-	-	-	Dissonant acculturation (II)	Loss of parental authority and of parental languages; role reversal and intergenerational conflict
+	+	+	+	Selective acculturation	Preservation of parental authority; little or no intergenerational conflict; fluent bilingualism among children

SOURCE: Adapted from Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America, a Portrait*, 2d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 242.

Within the model that Portes and Rumbaut have developed, I believe that the Palestinian immigrant community in Nicaragua falls into the category of consonant acculturation. As stated previously, the chart above describes the assimilation outcomes of immigrant groups in the United States, but if the categories are changed to “learning of Spanish and Nicaraguan customs,” it seems clear that consonant acculturation is the most accurate label for the Palestinian community. Both the first and second generations of Palestinians have a strong understanding of Nicaraguan culture and Spanish, which has helped the community effectively use its human capital in Nicaraguan society. In combination with a host society that accepts Palestinian culture with little discrimination and a government that passively accepts the Palestinian immigrants as equal citizens under the law, the process of consonant acculturation allows the Palestinian second generation to experience upward assimilation. Upward assimilation can be defined as the process of becoming

more like the mainstream society in terms of employment and social status. Even first generation Palestinians speak fluent Spanish and run successful businesses, and the second generation participates in mainstream society Nicaraguan almost as if they were fully Nicaraguan.

Upward assimilation does have consequences though, like how most of the second generation of Palestinians doesn't speak Arabic. The loss of Palestinian culture seems to be a norm for the second generation. Bassel Hassan and Faredeh Sharif Salem have never been to Palestine and Bassel said he'd like to visit someday to learn more about his Palestinian heritage. Bassel expressed his excitement at even the most mundane topics of Palestinian life, such as learning what kind of fruit grows in Palestine. Part of the reason for this culture loss is that the co-ethnic community is not strong enough to maintain and reinforce Palestinian culture. The community is small and there are few cultural resources available outside of the mosque. The first generation also seems to be settled in Nicaragua for various reasons, including the fact that some people are unable to return home. With return to Palestine being impossible for some, they may adopt the mindset that Nicaragua is their new home by default.

## **Conclusion**

The study of assimilation is not only about what immigrants gain, but also what they leave behind. Palestinians fled war and left behind their families, their friends, and their way of life. The few who ended up in Nicaragua immediately began the great task of working to build a community and a new identity for themselves. Most first generation Palestinians had to learn Spanish without any formal instruction upon arriving in Nicaragua, and with help from family and the

community, they started at entry-level jobs. Through the refining of language and business skills, some Palestinians slowly built up their wealth until they could start businesses of their own, like Rahib Sharif Salem did. Palestinian immigrants got married, often to native Nicaraguans with whom they started families to and introduced the second generation. It is amazing to see a community become assimilated to and accepted in a foreign society in only two generations, especially coming from such a culturally dissimilar location like Palestine. In fact, it appears that the first generation assimilated fairly quickly and the second generation followed suit. Both Fahmi Hassan and Raed Farhoud identified themselves as a mix of Nicaraguan and Palestinian, despite both of them being born in Palestine and living there until they were young adults. But through their time in Nicaragua, they have started to see themselves as partly Nicaraguan as well. This is significant because their attitude demonstrates both a desire to be a part of Nicaraguan society and a feeling of belong to it as well.

Along with the environmental factors that I discussed earlier, the feeling of belonging is important for the process of assimilation. Immigrant communities can resist their host society and reject it altogether, but the Palestinian community wove itself into the fabric of Nicaraguan life, both a part of and separate from the mainstream.

From the data I've gathered, I believe the Palestinian second generation will achieve upward assimilation and be quite successful in Nicaraguan society thanks in part to the work of their parents. Still, this leaves a question for the Palestinian community. As the second generation assimilates to Nicaraguan society, will they lose the cultural memory of Palestine? Already that process seems to be in place, and according to the ambassador, there is very little

immigration from Palestine in the present day, lessening the number of first generation Palestinians. In these circumstances, even more of the Palestinian cultural heritage could be lost by the third generation as families become fully Nicaraguan. However, the curiosity and work that I've witnessed of the second generation in maintaining their Nicaraguan heritage is admirable, and ultimately they define their own identities. The second generation can preserve the culture of their family through language, through food, through religion, or simply through pride in their origins.

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