



Ben Norton - History of Nicaragua & U.S. Intervention in Iran During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Zain Raza (ZR): Thank you guys for tuning in to another episode of The Source where we interview writers, journalists, policy experts or whistleblowers. My name is Zain Raza. And today we'll be talking to journalist, filmmaker and writer Ben Norton. Ben Norton is also the assistant editor of the Grayzone and the producer of the Moderate Rebels podcast. Ben, thank you so much for your time.

Ben Norton (BN): Thanks for having me. Happy to be here.

ZR: So I just found out that you are based in Nicaragua. You moved there. Could you first update our viewers on the situation there and how you're holding up personally?

BN: Well, of course, politically, the situation has been turbulent for the past few years. I'll get into that in a second. Nicaragua is one of the only remaining countries in Latin America that has a leftist government, a democratically elected socialist government run by the Sandinista front for national liberation. And the U.S. government has been trying to overthrow the democratically elected Nicaraguan government for many years, but especially in 2018, the Trump administration backed a very violent coup attempt. So that is the kind of political background.

And then, of course, the background in terms of the coronavirus, actually, Nicaragua has been the safest country in Central America and really in Latin America for coronavirus. There are very few cases here. There have only been 3 deaths and they have all been elderly people, one of whom had HIV. The government has taken measures, including through its socialized health system, to try to contain the virus. It has not spread much domestically. And I think that's partially because of the response, again, of the robust socialized health system. But also it's partially luck because in Nicaragua, it's extremely hot. The temperature is very hot. It's very sunny. And it also is very humid every day. And in those conditions, scientists say that it's actually quite difficult for the virus to survive. So it doesn't transmit very well. So actually, life here compared to other countries, it's certainly not normal, but it's it's not nearly as strange as many other countries. There's not a quarantine, although many places are closed.

Some people, like college students, are not going to classes. So life is better than in other countries. But we're all suffering, of course.

ZR: You mentioned the U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. I remember reading a lot about it when I used to research Noam Chomsky. Could you give us some historical context of the U.S.'s role in Nicaragua and also talk about what kind of policies they [U.S.] are pursuing at this moment in time to influence the government there?

BN: Nicaragua, for those who don't know, is right in Central America, right south of Mexico. So quite close to the United States and the U.S. has been really torturing this small country of Nicaragua, which only has 6 million people for many years, going back really 200 years to the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine, when the United States said, oh, we're going to telling Latin America we're gonna help you fight European colonialism. But of course, what they really meant is we're going to become the new colonialists. And since then, there have been numerous attempts, for instance, to construct a canal going through Nicaragua.

There have been attempts by the U.S. and by capitalists from the U.S., specifically the Vanderbilt oligarch, Cornelius Vanderbilt. He had a UN operation trying to basically turn Nicaragua into a colony. And there was a period actually where Nicaragua in the 1800's was governed by William Walker, a white American who had nothing to do with Nicaragua, who treated it as his own colonial property, which ignited a domestic war or an internal war, which people call a civil war. But it wasn't really a civil war. It was an anti-colonial war in which there were some Nicaraguans who were paid mercenaries for William Walker, fighting against Nicaraguans who wanted their country to be free. And that's a consistent pattern throughout history.

Of course, all of Latin America, but especially Central America, because this region is so strategically important, because it's not only where North and South America meet, but it's also very strategic as a trade route. If you want to go through the Pacific over to Asia, and that's why the Panama Canal was created. Currently, Panama, which is essentially a U.S. colony was created by carving off part of Latin America off Columbia. And the U.S. created Panama as a project, essentially a colonial project, to create the canal. And similarly, Nicaragua has been seen for many years as another geopolitically strategic location for a future canal, which has led to a lot of fighting. Also, Nicaragua has a lot of natural resources, not not in terms of fossil fuels, but in terms of arable land. It's an agricultural hotspot and actually it's food sovereign and exports food to many other countries, including the United States. Beans, rice. And then, of course, the fresh water. Nicaragua has a lot of very high quality, clean, fresh water.

So this fast forwards to the period of the 1950s and 60s and leading up into the national liberation struggle in the 1970s, Nicaragua was effectively a U.S. colony. And in the 1960s, there was a dictatorship under the military dictator Somoza. And it was very brutal. He

massacred and tortured and disappeared, dissidents and activists and labor organizers. And it's a very similar story with the rest of Latin America. Right? They had these right wing U.S backed military dictatorships throughout the Cold War. What happened in the the 60s and 70s is Nicaraguan socialists created the Sandinista Front for National Liberation. It's called Sandinista because it's named after Sandino, who is a famous anti-colonial liberation leader who fought a war of liberation against the U.S. colonialists in the early 20th century and actually succeeded, although he was later killed after signing a peace agreement with a U.S. backed dictator. The U.S. backed dictator then violated the agreement and killed Somoza [actually meant Sandino] and massacred his supporters. So the Sandinista front was inspired by that history of anti-colonial liberation struggles and they launched their own armed struggle as socialists inspired by Marxism-Leninism, but also infusing elements of traditional indigenous ideas and Nicaraguan nationalism. And the 1970s, they waged this protracted armed struggle and they succeeded. In 1979, the Sandinistas overthrew the U.S. backed dictatorship and declared a revolutionary movement and created a leftist government that the first thing it did was push for universal education because this is a country where many people were illiterate. So they pushed for universal literacy, universal health care. They stressed the importance of women. This is a feminist movement that actually Nicaragua is in the top five countries in the entire world for the representation of women in politics and society. And this is a very poor country. Let's keep in mind. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti. Another country that has been punished again and again for its revolutionary struggles. So the Sandinista front. I mean, I don't have time to get into the rest of the history. That's kind of the basic history. After the Sandinista front succeeded in the 1980s, there was a murderous Contra War. It's called the Contra War because the United States was supporting forces known as the "Contras" who are the counter revolutionaries. That was the name they gave themselves. These are fascist death squads very far right death squads that murdered civilians. They were notorious for torturing people. They would gouge people's eyes out. They would cut off people's genitals and forced them to eat them. I mean, brutal, heinous forms of torture. Backed always by the CIA. Funded by the CIA. Trained by the CIA. The United States used the Contra terror war and a blockade, crippling sanctions that were effectively a blockade of Nicaragua. The U.S. mined the Nicaraguan ports, which is blatantly a crime against humanity and a war crime. And they waged this terror war for a decade and that eventually led to the Sandinistas losing power in a democratic election because the U.S. effectively told the Nicaraguan population, if you vote for the Sandinistas in your election, then we are going to continue this terror war and continue this blockade and you're never going to have peace. You're never going to have a functioning economy. So the population essentially with a gun to their head, they were compelled to vote for a neoliberal right wing government which stayed in power for 17 years from 1990 until 2006, 2007. And then in 2006, the Sandinista front, which became a Democratic Socialist Party, going for the root of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. They won the election in 2006. And since 2007, they have been in power and they are quite popular. The Sandinistas have support from two thirds roughly of the population, overwhelmingly poor, working class, oppressed groups. So they are a model for, you know,

what a lot of people call democratic socialism. Unfortunately, a lot of people believe the U.S. Government propaganda demonizing the Sandinista government and this brings us to this moment now where there have been many coup attempts by the U.S. and by the elite right wing opposition here, which represents about 10 percent of the population. And they are also overwhelmingly the rich oligarchs who ruled before the revolution. And the U.S. has been funding them with millions of dollars through groups like the National Endowment for Democracy and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). But then the U.S. also has been imposing sanctions, trying to use economic warfare to make the country suffer. So that is the situation today.

ZR: Very interesting. I think we'll do an interview on this on another date. I want to switch gears here and talk about Iran. Before I do. Could you provide context before COVID-19 what the U.S. policy towards Iran was before the coronavirus came?

BN: Well, I'm glad you began asking about Nicaragua because the U.S. imperial strategy in Latin America is especially against the few remaining leftist countries here, which John Bolton, the neoconservative war criminal who is the U.S. national security adviser, called the troika of tyranny. It's not a coincidence that the so-called troika of tyranny are the only three remaining leftist socialist governments in Latin America: Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. Nicaragua has been a kind of case study for the same imperial forms of economic warfare, unconventional warfare, information warfare that the U.S. has also been waging against Iran. The same tactics are used against all of these countries Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Iran.

And in Iran, we have seen one of the most brutal, suffocating sanctions regimes ever imposed by any country. The United States unilaterally has been imposing these suffocating sanctions on Iran, which have resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians, which have really crippled the entire economy and which also prevent Iran, a sovereign country with a democratically elected government, from buying medicine, from buying medical equipment. Because even though the U.S. claims falsely that its sanctions provide exemptions for medical equipment and food, the sanctions are effectively an economic blockade which prevent not just Iran, but also Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and other countries from accessing the international market. The international financial system, because it's so dominated by the U.S. And by the U.S. dollar. The Bretton Woods system created by the U.S. after World War 2 through the IMF and the World Bank. This system really maintains a U.S. chokehold on the international financial system. Most international trade is still done in dollars, although that's changing. And Iran can't get access to those dollars and Iran can't get access to the international financial system. I'm under the impression that most of the people who watch this program are European. So Europeans might have heard of the SWIFT system. And that is really how the U.S. maintains its chokehold. But Europeans have been developing this alternative to try to do business agreements and provide aid, actual, you know, medical aid that Iran can't buy to Tehran. And there have been some attempts at doing that, especially recently with the COVID19 pandemic. But unfortunately, many European governments have

been unwilling to speak out and challenge the U.S., even under the far right Donald Trump administration, because they're afraid of the U.S. taking economic measures against their own governments. Specifically, Donald Trump threatened to impose tariffs on European exports from Germany, France and Britain. And these are, of course, the U.S.'s supposed allies. These are the countries that the U.S. calls its allies. But at the end of the day, it shows that if these countries don't follow the U.S.'s unilateral decisions, then they're own domestic economies are going to be hurt. So that is the situation with Iran. And it has led to the deaths not only of thousands of civilians before the COVID19 pandemic, but also now with coronavirus really doing devastating damage to the Iranian society, not just the economy, but society as a whole. This has led to many more thousands of deaths that could have been prevented if Iran was allowed to buy the medical equipment that the U.S. sanctions are preventing it from buying.

ZR: Germany is usually portrayed as a harbinger or one of the nations that respects international law and also takes into account measures against countries that do genocide, given its own history. What do you think about international law at this moment in time? Is the United States effectively violating international law and does this constitute genocide, in your opinion?

BN: There is no question whatsoever that the U.S. is violating international law. I mean, in the U.S., that's really its favorite pastime. All it does is violate international law. But these unilateral sanctions are completely illegal. Really briefly here. Let's remember the brief history of U.S. sanctions on Iran. I mean, they go back many years after the revolution, the war with Iraq, in which, by the way, the U.S. and European countries were supporting Saddam Hussein and his vicious regime as they were committing brutal war crimes against the Iranian civilian population, carrying out gas and chemical attacks with the help of the U.S. and European countries. So let's not forget the history of terrorizing Iran. And then, of course, I would be missing this if I didn't mention the infamous 1953 CIA coup that overthrew Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq. Why? Because he nationalized the oil in Iran. So the U.S. and also Britain, the British intelligence services and MI6 helped the CIA orchestrate a coup that reinstated the Shah, the brutal authoritarian monarchy.

So fast forwarding to the sanctions. The current sanctions we're talking about. I mean, again, there have been many rounds of sanctions under Reagan, under Bush Senior, under Bush Junior. But the really suffocating sanctions we're talking about go back to Bush Junior and Obama. George W Bush and Obama. The Obama administration actually takes a lot of credit for saying they supported diplomacy with Iran, which is true. But the Obama administration also was the one in the first place to ramp up these suffocating sanctions on Iran under the lie, the false pretense that Iran was trying to create nuclear weapons. There is no evidence that Iran had a nuclear weapons program. Iran had a civilian nuclear program. But the nuclear program was for energy. The nuclear program was not for weapons. The Obama administration claimed that Iran was on the verge of creating nuclear weapons, so they

imposed these suffocating sanctions. And then we [agreed], of course, the famous nuclear deal, the JCPOA - the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. So the Obama administration began these or at least rapidly accelerated these sanctions and then lifted them. And after that the nuclear deal and said, oh, you should thank us for lifting the sanctions that we imposed ourselves. And let's not forget that the nuclear deal was not just the U.S. and Iran. The nuclear deal was, first of all, backed by a U.N. Security Council resolution and the official signatories to the JCPOA were the United States, Iran, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany. So all of the permanent members of the Security Council, the P5 plus 1, Germany and the European Union. And then that was further backed up by a U.N. Security Council resolution. So this was a genuinely international agreement which included the largest country in the world, China, and included the European Union. And only the United States has violated its side of the agreement according to the nuclear deal. So that alone shows that the U.S. is violating international law. The Trump administration tore up the nuclear deal and now in response to that, Iran violated some very minor elements of the nuclear deal. But then, of course, the U.S. government used those very small violations as further justification to ramp up further sanctions, even though the U.S. was the one in the first place that violated the agreement and rendered it void by reimposing the sanctions. The whole reason that the Iranian government signed the nuclear deal was to get the sanctions lifted. Under international law Iran has every right as a sovereign country with an internationally, democratically elected republican government with a small "R", Iran has every right to pursue a civilian nuclear program. And that's what it was doing. But the U.S. violated that agreement and now acts as though Iran is the aggressor. And then the U.S. even pressured European countries in a very cowardly act to condemn the Iranian government for these very minor basic violations of the nuclear agreement. What the European governments didn't say, including Germany and France and the UK. What they didn't say in their formal condemnation of Iran is that the U.S. government was the one that rendered the deal void in the first place.

So the U.S. has been absolutely a bad faith actor from day one, even in the years of the Obama administration, you know, compared to Trump Obama looks better. But again, we should stress that Obama and his administration were the ones who began a lot of this process by imposing these suffocating sanctions that have devastated the Iranian economy. Let's keep in mind, not only have they physically killed people, biologically killed people, they've also destroyed people's livelihoods. So you have an entire generation of Iranians whose economic well-being has been completely destroyed because of these sanctions, which are a form of economic warfare. They have hopes and dreams, too, for their future. They wanted to have good jobs. They wanted to have, you know, houses and things to provide for their family. And they have not been able to. They've been struggling to get by with the most basic of livelihoods, the bare necessities, because of this economic warfare. So we need to always keep in mind that the people who are suffering at the end of the day are the civilians in these countries that are targeted by this unilateral, illegal U.S. economic warfare. And unfortunately, Europe, which claims to be independent and claims to care about international

law, has shown itself to be very cowardly. And at most, all it will do is tepidly criticize some of these U.S. actions. But it has not taken tangible steps to actually show that it cares about international law and shows that it cares about helping the people of Iran.

ZR: Many Europeans were watching the U.S. election very closely, especially when you take into account U.S. foreign policy, which, you know, has affected Europe by creating the conditions for the refugee crisis, which is not mentioned in our corporate media as much. The U.S. policy in the Middle East created the conditions for the refugee crisis.

So we know that Bernie Sanders became more and more vocal when it came to the military industrial complex. I believe he even talked about the 1953 CIA coup in a recent talk. So now that Bernie is out of the race, people are now looking at the U.S. election in terms of Biden or Trump. And there we see a split in the left where people are saying, for example, there's one camp which says, wait, Biden is better, because at least under Obama, Biden pushed for the Iran nuclear deal, which you mentioned, the JCPOA, whereas others are saying, look at Donald Trump, he's gonna cause a war he assassinated General Soleimani [from Iran]. So just based on Iran, which could lead to World War 3 if the situation escalates with Iran, we should vote for Biden because he was an adamant supporter or became one [of the Iran deal] - as you mentioned in the beginning, they were [Obama administration] escalating the sanctions - but eventually they did sign a deal [with Iran]. So what do you make of this dilemma and how would you view it?

BN: Effectively, there are no significant political differences between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. I'm sorry for the people who were trying to convince themselves that it would be somehow categorically different. These two political leaders and not just the leaders, but the movements around them, the institutional apparatuses around them and the political parties that they're members of - there are very few political differences between them.

Joe Biden, really quickly let's review his record. He not only strongly supported the criminal Iraq war. He, in fact, whipped votes for Democratic members of Congress. That means inside the Congress he, as a Democrat, was whipping other Democratic votes. He was trying to get their votes in support of George W. Bush's war - of the Republican president's war. He praised George W. Bush, calling George W. Bush, calling him a great leader and supported this war that killed 1 million Iraqis. We can never forget that. He was not just a tepid supporter. It was not just an error he made out of bad judgment. He actively supported this criminal crime against humanity. And that's that was part of a long trajectory even before George W. Bush, even in the years of the 1990s when Bill Clinton was in power. Joe Biden was strongly pushing for U.S. military action against Saddam Hussein and Iraq. And again, I should keep in mind the irony here. We can't forget that Saddam Hussein himself came to power thanks to U.S. intervention in Iraq, thanks to CIA backed coups in Iraq and the CIA actually in the 1960s and 70s and even in through the 80s was supporting Saddam Hussein. They gave Saddam Hussein a list of communists from the Iraqi Communist Party that he

should purge and kill. And he did so in a very brutal bloodletting. And of course, I mentioned the Iran-Iraq war in which the U.S. and European countries helped Saddam Hussein use chemical weapons, including in Halabja, against Kurdish civilians in a brutal, genocidal campaign. The Al-Anfal campaign. So let's never forget the role of the U.S. government in these brutal crimes. And Joe Biden always supported them. Joe Biden supported the war in Libya. Joe Biden supported the NATO war on Yugoslavia. Both of those NATO wars destroyed the countries of Libya and Yugoslavia. And Libya let's keep in mind this war backed by the Obama administration and Joe Biden. This is a country with a total failed state today and with open their slave markets. Another war sold on lies like the Iraq war.

And then, of course, coming back to Iran. OK, sure, Biden did support the nuclear deal, but he also supported putting sanctions on Iran in the first place. So this is a man we cannot trust his judgment. And even if he was in a situation of stable mental health. We could not trust his judgment. And the elephant in the room that we have to simply discuss openly is that Joe Biden is suffering from a very serious case of dementia. He can barely give a speech in public without completely bungling his words. He sounds almost incomprehensible at times and he just says genuinely insane things. And that is a very real problem. It is not egregious to bring it up. And if he is in a debate with Donald Trump, I mean, Donald Trump has his own forms of dementia, but Donald Trump will absolutely demolish Joe Biden. So just remember the perspective of whether or not he can actually win the election. I do not think that Biden really has realistic chances of winning.

And then, of course, there is the economic policy. Joe Biden was a major supporter, a sponsor of the bill that reformed the basically the entire law on bankruptcy known as the "bankruptcy bill" in the U.S. that essentially was written by large corporations and banks. So it is really impossible for individuals to ever get out of their debt bondage. People are trapped in debt bondage for their entire lives, but it's very easy for corporations to declare bankruptcy and write off their own debt. And this is part of a long pattern of Biden basically acting as a voice for Wall Street.

At the end of the day. Sure. Biden is not as overtly racist as Trump, but Biden is also a racist. He's made a lot of racist remarks. He has praised segregationist leaders and said that he was proud of working with them. And also, let's not forget the Obama administration which claimed to be anti-racists and engage in this kind of politics. The Obama administration still deported more people than any other U.S. presidential administration. Even more so far than Trump, even at this point in the Trump administration, with his first term nearly over, the Obama administration at this point in its first term, still deported more people. In all, the Obama administration deported 2.7 million people, nearly 3 million people. I remember going to protests during the Obama years and reporting on some of them organized by Latino Americans, Latino activists who referred to Obama for years as the "deporter in chief". And of course, Joe Biden was part and parcel of that campaign. So, look, people might say that, oh, Biden is so much better than Trump because at least he's not going to go on TV and say

