



NICARAGUA

Quick Facts

Population: 6,025,951

Area: 130,370 sq km

Ethnic Groups: mestizo (mixed Amerindian and white) 69%, white 17%, black 9%, Amerindian 5%

Religions: Roman Catholic 51.6%, Evangelical 33.9%, other 1.5%, unspecified 12.9%, none 0.2%

Government Type: Presidential Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$36.22 billion

Source: CIA World FactBook (January 23, 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Islam has had a presence in Nicaragua since the late 19th century, when Muslims from the territories of what was then known as Palestine placed a particular focus on Central America as an immigration destination. According to one estimate, as many as 40 families from Palestine settled in Nicaragua during this period.¹ However, this first wave of immigration, and a subsequent second wave that took place in the 1960s, did little to establish Islam in Nicaragua. The most recent group of Middle Eastern immigrants arrived in the early 1990s, however, and this group helped establish what is today a small but thriving Islamic community.

Nicaragua's Islamic community consists of Muslim descendants of Arab emigrants from the territory of Palestine and Lebanon. There are likewise a relatively small number of Nicaraguan nationals who have converted to the Muslim faith. According to 2011 statistics released by the U.S. State Department, there were approximately 300 Muslims, mostly Sunnis, who were either resident aliens or naturalized citizens in Nicaragua. Most Nicaraguan Muslims originated from Palestine, Libya, and Iran, or are natural-born Nicaraguan citizens born into one or more of those groups.² There are also Shia Muslims in Nicaragua, mainly of Iranian origin.³ While the Muslim population remains relatively small, it nonetheless has demonstrated notable religious activity, with prayer centers established in private residences around the country, including in Masaya, Leon and Granada.⁴

The first mosque that was built in Nicaragua was constructed in 1999 with local funding, as well as the assistance of Panamanian Muslims. Construction on a second mosque was completed in 2009. The resumption of power by President Daniel Ortega in 2006 brought with it a positive change in the relationship between Nicaragua's Muslim community and the government, including considerably better treatment than under past regimes, when Muslims were forced into hiding or made to convert to Christianity. In January 2007, then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited the country's first mosque, signaling a growing international recognition of Nicaragua's Islamic community.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Native Islamist activity in Nicaragua has been limited. The Muslim community in Nicaragua is small and generally moderate. Nicaragua's Islamic Cultural Association in Managua serves as the focal point of the country's Muslim population. The U.S. Department of State reported that the Sunni leader of the prayer center was dismissed in May of 2007 due to increasing Iranian and Shia influence in the Muslim community, but no Shia leader was identified.⁵ The following year, the State Department's International Religious Freedom report stated that a new Sunni leader from Egypt had been appointed.⁶ Run by Fahmi Hassan and his staff, the center also operates the country's first mosque. Apart from traditional prayer activities, the center maintains an office, a library, a children's area, and a school, and offers the use of its basketball court and soccer field to local residents. Religious seminars are available for men and women and Spanish-language literature is made available for the community and visitors.

Hassan arrived in Nicaragua in 1960 and has remained in the country since, with one exception. During the Sandinista Revolution, he lived in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, but as he explains in an interview, he left for business reasons.⁷

In 2007, the Nicaraguan Islamic Cultural Center opened in Managua with the purpose of spreading Islamic teachings. Founded by Carlos Arana, a Palestinian descendant,⁸ the center was set up to organize seminars and to maintain a library and website. While the establishment of the new Center was said to be backed by the Iranian embassy in Managua, there is no indication at this point that the Cultural Center was used for anything other than non-radical Islamic teaching and, according to Hassan, it closed months later, with both the Sunni majority and Shia minority choosing the already-existing Islamic Cultural Association.⁹

In 2014, Nicaragua was visited by Sheikh Suhail Assad, a member of Iranian cleric Mohsen Rabbani's Islamist operative network in Latin America. Based out of the Center for Iranian-Latin American Cultural Exchange in Caracas, Venezuela, Assad serves as one of Iran's "informal ambassadors" for Islamism in Latin America.¹⁰ His appearance at a conference at the Universidad Politécnica de Nicaragua in May 2014¹¹ denotes an increased openness on the part of Nicaraguan society to accept Islamist discourse. In more recent years, an Afghan man with terrorist ties was caught in 2016 after passing through Nicaragua en route to the U.S.,¹² but no significant presence of ISIS or other radical cells are reported to be operating in Nicaragua in the past year.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Throughout much of Nicaragua's history, Muslim citizens have been victims, off-and-on, of government repression, largely due to rejection by the country's dominant Catholic society. Muslim immigration to Nicaragua occurred largely in the late 19th century, when Palestinian Arab Muslims emigrated during the final decline of the Ottoman Empire.¹³ This first wave quickly assimilated into the local culture, some of them adopting Christianity via intermarriage or due to government pressure. During this time, Nicaragua joined several Latin American countries in establishing laws that restricted the entry of Arabs, forbade the stay of Arabs already arrived in the country, or restricted their commercial activities.¹⁴

The peak of this repression occurred just before the beginning of the Sandinista Revolution in the late 1970s. During the Revolution, however, Nicaragua's government treated the Muslim community, especially Palestinian Arabs, exceptionally well. It was during this time that Nicaragua welcomed a wave of Iranian immigrants escaping the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War of 1980, establishing a Shia minority within the Muslim community as Nicaragua-Iran ties strengthened under President Daniel Ortega.

Most men and women who immigrate to Nicaragua from the Middle East choose to settle in the country, and leave only when they are old because they would prefer to die in their homeland.¹⁵ This trend suggests a high level of acceptance of Islam within Nicaraguan society. Another indication of Islamic acceptance is Managua's Arabic business district. All along a road known as Casa de los Encajes, in the Ciudad Jardin section of the capital, there is a concentration of Arab stores, most of them owned by Palestinians who sell Arab rugs, home decoration, clothing, and fabrics. Hassan owns a rug store located in this small district, which by 2003 had been in place for "many years."¹⁶ Hassan was also quoted in 2003 as saying that Muslims "have lived here for a long time we don't get involved in politics and at no time have we felt threatened or afraid" in response to media reports of tension between the Muslim community and the Bolaños government.¹⁷

More recently, historical pressures have all but disappeared as President Ortega has focused on bringing the Central American country closer to Middle Eastern states, especially Iran.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The Islamist activity that does occur in Nicaragua tends to occur in political spheres, rather than in grassroots organizations or local communities. The two main instances of Islamism in Nicaragua are the connection between the revolutionary Sandinista party and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and Iran's growing interest and interference in Nicaraguan affairs.

Current President Daniel Ortega led the Sandinistas to power in 1979. The relationship between the Sandinistas and the PLO was already well established at that point, as PLO fighters had trained Sandinista guerrillas before the Sandinista Revolution. Once the Sandinistas seized power, the PLO sent a 25-man team to train Sandinista soldiers in the use of Eastern-bloc weapons, and provided a loan of \$12 million.¹⁸ Yasser Arafat, then head of the PLO, visited Managua in 1980. By 1982, some 70 high-ranking PLO officers were assisting with special infantry training for the Nicaraguan army.¹⁹ In return, Ortega and the Sandinistas granted the PLO full diplomatic status. The Sandinista regime, from the time it came into power, has considered Israel an enemy. For its part, the Israeli government shipped weapons to the Contras in 1983, to aid the U.S.-backed resistance fighters in their fight against the Soviet-backed Sandinistas.²⁰

In 1989, Ortega visited Europe and the Middle East in search of support, with stops in Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain. During a layover in Newfoundland, he announced that he had secured significant financing and aid for his country, presumably from patrons in the Middle East.²¹ When Ortega unexpectedly lost the historic elections of 1990 to Violeta Chamorro, the Nicaraguan attitude toward the Islamic world changed dramatically. One of the first things Chamorro's administration did was close the Iranian embassy in Managua as well as the Nicaraguan embassy in Tehran. In addition, Chamorro renewed relations with Israel and significantly reduced the presence of the PLO and Libya in Nicaragua.

However, Chamorro's acquiescence to entreaties from the international community for reconciliation resulted in a number of Sandinista holdovers serving in her government. *The Economist* magazine noted the result of this decision in June 1998:

...One relic of Nicaragua's 11 years under far-left government remains—more exactly, at least 1,000 relics: sympathisers, militants, actual terrorists of half-a-dozen extremist movements who found a welcome and have extended it, despite the election of right-wing governments in 1990 and later. Beside sundry Latin Americans, they include left-overs of Germany's Baader-Meinhof gang, Italy's Red Brigades, Basque separatists, Islamic fundamentalists, Palestinian extremists and others. They have been able to stay because the Sandinistas, in their last weeks of power, gave them Nicaraguan passports.²²

Support in the form of providing government documents and identification to enable unfettered travel to radical Islamists continued throughout the 1990s. When Saddam Hussein's troops retreated from Kuwait in 1991, they also left a cache of Nicaraguan passports behind, and the terrorists who set off a bomb under the World Trade Center in 1993 were found to have five Nicaraguan passports in their possession.²³

Chamorro's policy of refocusing Nicaraguan attention on Latin America and the United States continued until Ortega's reelection in November 2006. During his second tenure as president, Daniel Ortega redirected Nicaragua's attention back on the Middle East. One of Ortega's first official acts was to reestablish diplomatic ties with Iran, waiving visa requirements for Iranian travelers and authorizing Iran to reopen its embassy in Managua. In a sign of this growing warmth, then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad attended Ortega's inauguration ceremony in January 2007 before visiting the country's mosque. President Ortega has also visited Iran, where on June 10, 2007 he met with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to mutually criticize "American imperialism" and secure Iranian support for a raft of foreign direct investment projects. While in Tehran, Ortega declared that the Iranian revolution and Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution were "practically twins" because they shared not only the same birth year (1979) but the same goals of "justice, self-determination and the struggle against imperialism."²⁴

The meeting yielded concrete dividends. In August of that year, Iran's Deputy Minister of Energy, Hamid Chitchian, visited Nicaragua with a delegation of 21 businessmen. Ortega presented the delegation with a long list of discussed projects: a deep-water port, a wharf at Port Corinto and Monkey Point, a 70-kilometer highway on the Caribbean coast, improvements to Managua's drinking water system, six hydraulic plants, a plan for the mechanization of the country's agricultural sector, assembly plants for tractors and other agricultural machinery, five milk processing plants, ten milk storage centers, and a health clinic in Managua. In exchange, Ortega offered meat, plantains, and coffee exports to Iran.²⁵

Since then, Iran has moved forward on studies for a \$350 million deep-water port in Nicaragua,²⁶ but as of this writing construction on the project has yet to begin. And of the six hydroelectric plants, Iran has agreed to assist with four, but had the funding to invest only in one. Construction on

the \$120 million hydroelectric plant remains delayed.²⁷

In the wake of the April 2013 death of Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez, many speculated that Ortega would attempt to fill the resulting regional leadership void, possibly through closer ties to the Iranian regime. Contacts between Managua and Tehran, however, remain largely unchanged, with hardly a mention of unfulfilled agreements between the two nations during subsequent diplomatic visits.

In a December 2014 meeting, the Nicaraguan Foreign Minister and Iranian Energy Minister discussed issues of mutual interest, including the expansion of bilateral industrial and commercial ties. In the years that followed, Nicaragua has reiterated its support for Iran's right to use nuclear energy and supported the Islamic Republic in other public fora such as the United Nations.²⁸ While Iran will not pardon Nicaragua's \$160 million dollar debt, the country has indeed followed through with some initial investments.²⁹ 1,000 of the 10,000 promised "social housing" units have been slated for construction, according to an agreement signed between President Ortega and Iranian Deputy Energy Minister Hamid Chitchian.³⁰

In August 2016, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif made a trip to Nicaragua with a high-ranking "politico-economic delegation" that consisted of 120 businessmen and financial executives from the Iranian government and private sectors. Zarif indicated that Iran "greatly values its relationship with Latin American nations, including Nicaragua."³¹

Although there was no reported discussion of unfulfilled previous commitments, Zarif stated that: "Cooperation between Iran and Nicaragua can include collaboration in the construction of the [Grand] Interoceanic Canal to the areas of agriculture, energy production, petrochemistry, banking, credit, transportation, food and pharmaceutical industries, and science and technology."³² The Interoceanic Canal has long been touted by the Nicaraguan government to compete with the Panama Canal, but it has mostly been promoted in fits and starts. As of December 2014, the government had broken ground on the project, but has since claimed to be awaiting environmental impact studies in order to continue construction. It has issued some ancillary concessions based on where the proposed canal would be placed, though even these have caused controversy, creating growing doubt about the country's ability to see the project through to completion.³³

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or the Iran nuclear deal), signed between the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States—plus Germany) and the European Union in July 2015, has received plaudits from Nicaraguan officials. Edwin Castro, head of the Sandinista bloc and co-chair of the Iran-Nicaragua Friendship group in the Nicaraguan parliament, said that the Nicaraguan government welcomed lifting the "unfair" sanctions imposed on Iran "in contravention of international law."³⁴ However, though Iran has seen an infusion of cash since the JCPOA was signed, it has not significantly increased its economic investment with Nicaragua nor made overtures toward completing earlier trade and construction commitments.

Earlier rumors of Iran operating the largest embassy in Central America in Managua have proven untrue,³⁵ and a 2012 revelation by Israeli media that Iran had established a Hezbollah training base close to the Nicaragua-Honduras border³⁶ has likewise been shown to be unfounded.³⁷ Nicaragua, however, opened an embassy office in Tehran, and sent Mario Antonio Barquero Baltadano to serve as ambassador in 2015. Through President Ortega's efforts, the Central American country continues to be an international partner for the Iranian regime, and has joined the other ALBA nations in supporting Iran's allies in the Middle East, particularly Syria.³⁸ While Saudi Arabia originally ideologically opposed the Sandinista regime, President Ortega's second administration has expressed interest in strengthening bilateral relations with the Middle Eastern country, echoing this sentiment with Kuwait.³⁹ By contrast, Nicaragua's contacts with Lebanon, Libya, and the Palestinian Territories—where most of the country's Muslim population retains some connection—are limited. Ortega's administration has maintained vociferous support for Palestinian causes,⁴⁰ even holding an international conference in support of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian diaspora in Managua in early 2017.⁴¹ A month later, however, the administration announced the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Israel, signifying a change in Nicaragua's stance toward Israel since the two countries broke diplomatic ties in 2010.⁴²

ENDNOTES

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