



NICARAGUA

Quick Facts

Population: 6,203,441 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 130,370 sq km

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

Government Type: Presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$13.81 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated July 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Islam's presence in Nicaragua dates back to the late 19th century, when Muslims from what was then known as Palestine migrated to Central America. According to one estimate, as many as 40 families from Palestine settled in Nicaragua during this period.¹ However, both this first wave of immigration and a subsequent one in the 1960s did little to establish Islam in Nicaragua. The most recent group of Middle Eastern immigrants, however, arrived in the early 1990s and helped establish a small but thriving Islamic community.

Nicaragua's Islamic community consists of Muslim descendants of Arab emigrants from the territories of Palestine and Lebanon. A relatively small number of Nicaraguan nationals have also converted to the Muslim faith.² There are also Shi'a Muslims in Nicaragua, mainly of Iranian origin.³

The first mosque built in Nicaragua was constructed in 1999 with local funding, as well as the assistance of Panamanian Muslims. Construction on a second mosque was subsequently completed in 2009. In keeping with his political leanings, President Daniel Ortega's re-assumption of power in 2006 represented a stark, positive change in the relationship between Nicaragua's government and the country's Muslim community.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Local 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 Shi'a influence in the Muslim community, but no Shi'a leader was identified.⁴ The following year, the State Department's International Religious Freedom report stated that a new Sunni leader from Egypt had been appointed.⁵ 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, a school, and offers the use of its athletic facilities to local residents. Religious seminars are available for men and women and Spanish-language literature is available for the community and visitors.

In 2007, the Nicaraguan Islamic Cultural Center opened in Managua with the purpose of spreading Islamic teachings. Founded by Carlos Arana, a Muslim of Palestinian descent,⁶ the center was set up to organize seminars and to maintain both a library and website. While some said the Iranian embassy in Managua backed construction of the new Center, there is no indication that the cultural center has been used for anything other than non-radical Islamic teaching.

In 2014, Sheikh Suhail Assad, a member of Iranian cleric Mohsen Rabbani's Islamist operative network in Latin America, visited Nicaragua. 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.⁷ His appearance at a Universidad Politécnica de Nicaragua conference in May 2014⁸ denotes an increased openness on the part of Nicaraguan society to accept Islamist discourse.

More recently, an Afghan man with terrorist ties was caught in 2016 after passing through Nicaragua *en route* to the United States.⁹ In June 2019, Nicaraguan armed forces captured four men with suspected ties to the Islamic State terrorist group. Two Iraqis and two Egyptian nationals aged 26 to 41 entered Nicaragua by way of an illegal passage at the Costa Rican border. Three of the men were featured in a U.S. Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) alert as ISIS terrorists who had entered Central America with the intention of heading to the United States. Nicaraguan officials deported the suspects to Costa Rica shortly after their arrest.¹⁰

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Off-and-on throughout Nicaragua's history, Muslim citizens have been the victims of government repression. Muslim immigration to Nicaragua occurred largely in the late 19th century when Palestinian Arab Muslims emigrated during the final decline of the Ottoman Empire.¹¹ This first wave quickly assimilated into the local culture, with some 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, limited the amount of time Arabs already in-country could stay, or restricted their commercial activities.¹²

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. Nicaragua welcomed a wave of Iranian immigrants escaping the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War of 1980. These immigrants established a Shi'a 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 only when they are old so that they can die in their homeland.¹³ This trend suggests a high level of acceptance of Islam within Nicaraguan society. Another indication of Islamic acceptance is Managua's Arabic business district. Along the road known as Casa de los Encajes, in the Ciudad Jardín section of the capital, there is a concentration of stores owned by Arabs, most of which sell Arab rugs, home decoration, clothing, and fabrics.¹⁴

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 official political spheres. The two main instances of Islamism in Nicaragua are the historic connection between the revolutionary Sandinista party and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), as well as Iran's more recent 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 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ In return, Ortega and the Sandinistas granted the PLO full diplomatic status.

From the time it came to power, the Sandinista regime has considered Israel to be an enemy. For its part, the Israeli government shipped weapons to the Contras in 1983, to aid the U.S.-backed resistance in their fight against the Soviet-backed Sandinistas.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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 and 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, a number of holdovers from the Sandinista regime served in Chamorro's 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: sympathizers, 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.¹⁹

The Sandinistas continued to support some radical Islamists throughout the 1990s by providing them government documents and enabling their unfettered local travel. When Saddam Hussein's troops retreated from Kuwait in 1991, they also left a cache of Nicaraguan passports behind. The terrorists who set off a bomb under the World Trade Center in 1993 were found to have five Nicaraguan passports in their possession.²⁰ 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."²¹

The meeting yielded concrete dividends. In August of that year, Iran's Deputy Minister of Energy, Hamid Chitchian, visited Nicaragua with a business delegation. 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.²²

Since then, Iran has moved forward on studies for a \$350 million deep-water port in Nicaragua,²³ but as of this writing construction on the project has yet to begin. Of the six hydroelectric plants, Iran agreed to assist with four, but only had the funding to invest in one. Construction on the \$120 million hydroelectric plant remains delayed.²⁴

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 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."²⁵ 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."²⁶

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, 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."²⁷ However, though Iran saw an infusion of cash since the JCPOA was signed, it did not significantly increase its economic investment with Nicaragua. Nor has it made moves to complete earlier trade and construction commitments that Iranian officials had pledged to Managua.

Earlier rumors of Iran operating the largest embassy in Central America in Managua are untrue²⁸ and a 2012 revelation by Israeli media claims that Iran established a Hezbollah training base close to the Nicaragua-Honduras border is also false.²⁹ However, Nicaragua did open 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ By contrast, Nicaragua's contacts with Lebanon, Libya, and the Palestinian Territories – where most of the country's Muslim population retains some historic connection – are limited. Ortega's administration maintains vociferous support for Palestinian causes,³² even holding an international conference in support of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian diaspora in Managua in early 2017.³³ 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 2010.³⁴

ENDNOTES

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