

American Foreign Policy Council

NICARAGUA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 5,966,798 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 130,370 sq km

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

Religions: Roman Catholic 58.5%, Protestant 23.2% (Evangelical 21.6%, Moravian 1.6%), Jehovah's Witnesses 0.9%, other 1.6%, none 15.7%

Government Type: presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$13.41 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (January 2017)

OVERVIEW

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 emigration destination. According to one estimate, as many as 40 families from Palestine settled in Nicaragua during this period.¹ However, this first wave of Muslim immigration, and a subsequent second wave that took place in the 1960s, did little to establish Islam in Nicaragua. The most recent group of 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 2007 statistics released by the U.S. State Department, there were between 1,200 and 1,500 Muslims, mostly Sunnis, who are either resident aliens or naturalized citizens in Nicaragua. A 2009 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life claimed 1,000

Muslims in the country, while a local Imam placed the number closer to 500. Most Nicaraguan Muslims originated from Palestine, Libya, and Iran, or are natural-born Nicaraguan citizens born into one or more of those groups. While this is a relatively low number, it nonetheless has resulted in notable religious activity, with prayer centers established in private residences around the country, including in Masaya, Leon and Granada.²

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 began in 2009. In January 2007, then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited the country's first mosque, signaling a growing international recognition of Nicaragua's Islamic community. The resumption of power by 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.

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. 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 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.³

In 2007, the Cultural Center of Nicaraguan Islam opened in Managua with the purpose of spreading Islamic teachings.⁴ Founded by Carlos Arana, a Palestinian descendant, the center was set up to organize seminars and to maintain a library and website. There is no indication at this point that the Cultural Center is used for anything other than non-radical Islamic teaching.

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. 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 exceptionally well, especially Palestinian Arabs. 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.⁵ 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 Jardín* section of the capital, there is concentration of Arabic stores, most of them owned by Palestinians who sell Arabic rugs, home decoration, clothing, and fabrics. Mr. Hassan owns a rug store located in this small district, which by 2003 had been in place for "many years."⁶ More recently, historical pressures have all but disappeared as President Daniel Ortega has focused on bringing the Central American country closer to Middle Eastern states, especially Iran. While there has been no significant presence of ISIS or other radical cells reported to be operating in Nicaragua over the past year, an Afghan man with terrorist ties was caught in 2016 after passing through Nicaragua en route to the U.S.⁷

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.⁸ Yasser Arafat, then head of the PLO, visited Managua in 1980. And by 1982, some 70 high-ranking PLO officers were assisting with special infantry training for the Nicaraguan army.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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 ended up allowing a number of Sandinista holdovers to serve 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.¹²

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.¹³

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 welcomed Islam into Nicaragua through increasingly close ties with Iran. 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."¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

Since then, Iran has moved forward on studies for a \$350 million deep-water port in Nicaragua, 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.¹⁶

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 March 2015 congressional hearing on Iran and Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere, it was noted that “the Central America four-border control agreement originally signed in 2006 permits the free movement of citizens from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua without any restrictions, similar to the Schengen agreement in Europe,” signaling a continuing concern among security officials of operatives infiltrating via a permeable southern border.¹⁷

Earlier rumors of Iran operating the largest embassy in Central America in Managua have proven untrue.¹⁸ And while Iran will not pardon Nicaragua's \$160 million dollar debt, the country has indeed followed through with some initial investments.¹⁹ At least 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.²⁰

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. 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.

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.”²¹

Although there was no reported discussion of unfulfilled previous commitments, Zarif stated that: “Cooperation between Iran and Nicaragua can include collabora-

tion 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.”²² 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.²³

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 by 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.”²⁴ 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.

ENDNOTES

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