

American Foreign Policy Council

NICARAGUA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 5,995,528

Area: 130,370 sq km

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

Religions: Roman Catholic 58.5%, Evangelical 21.6%, Moravian 1.6%, Jehovah's Witness 0.9%, other 1.7%, none 15.7%

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$6.372 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2010)



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 author, as many as 40 families from Palestine settled in Nicaragua during this period.¹ This first wave of Muslim immigration, and a subsequent second wave that took place in the 1960s, did little to establish Islam in Nicaragua, however. The most recent group of emigrants arrived in the early 1990s, and while not a large number, helped establish what is today a small but thriving Islamic community.

Nicaragua's Islamic community, numbering well over 1,000 according to one source, largely resides in the capital city of Mana-

gua, but prayer centers have been established in private residences located around the country, including Granada, Masaya, and Leon.² The community consists of Muslim descendants of Arab emigrants from the Palestine territories and Lebanon. There are a relatively small number of Nicaraguan nationals who have converted.

In 1999, the country's first mosque was constructed with funding from local sources, as well as a delegation of Panamanian Muslims. Construction on a second mosque began in 2009. In January 2007, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited the country's first mosque, signaling a growing international recognition of Nicaragua's Islamic community. The assumption 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 past governments when Muslims were forced into hiding or made to convert to Christianity.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

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. 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

A second mosque was under construction in June 2009, and Mr. Hassan had planned for the mosque to be ready in time for the period of Ramadan, which began on August 20 in 2009. Yusef Mohammed, a Honduran businessman with Pakistani roots, financed over half of the U.S.\$500,000 price tag for the new mosque. Mr. Hassan has plans to purchase land nearby where he would like to construct an athletic center and another library.⁴

At the time, he admitted that there are about 200 committed members in regular attendance at Nicaragua's mosque.⁵

In 2007, the Cultural Center of Nicaraguan Islam opened with the sole purpose of spreading Islamic teachings.⁶ Run by Carlos Arana, a Palestinian descendent, the center organizes seminars, and operates 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. However, given the rising influence of Iran in the country and the growing presence of Iranian diplomats and businessmen, and the fact that most of the Muslims in Nicaragua are Shi'ite, the situation should be watched carefully.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Throughout much of Nicaragua's history, Islam has been a victim off-and-on government repression, largely rejected 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 the Palestinian Arabs.⁷ 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.⁸ 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 *Casa de los Encajes*, in the *Ciudad Jardin* 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."⁹

As of 2009, historical pressures have all but disappeared as President

Daniel Ortega, now in his second term of office, has focused on bringing the Central American country closer to Middle Eastern states, especially Iran.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Nicaragua's first involvement with the Islamic world was perhaps in the 1940s, when the young Somoza dictatorship used a Nicaraguan-flagged vessel to ship weapons to Jewish guerrillas fighting in Palestine. The political tide turned when Daniel Ortega led the Sandinistas to power in 1979, ushering in a new relationship with the Islamic world, one that embraced Islamic countries, and specifically the Palestine Liberation Organization, whose fighters had trained Sandinista guerrillas before 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 U.S. \$12 million loan. And by 1982, some 70 PLO officers with ranks from colonel to major and captain were assisting with special infantry training for the Nicaraguan army.¹⁰ In return, Ortega and the Sandinistas granted the PLO full diplomatic status. Then-PLO leader Yasser Arafat visited Managua in 1980.

Once in power, the Sandinistas viewed Israel as an enemy. In 1983, Israel shipped hundreds of weapons to Nicaraguan Contras, in rebellion against Ortega's Sandinista government. These weapons included 2,000 Kalashnikov AK-4 rifles and well over a hundred RPG 7 anti-tank rockets that the Israelis had recovered from PLO camps during a 1982 invasion.¹¹ Nicaragua's dwindling Jewish community provided further evidence of the Sandinista's disdain for Israel; by 1981, most of Nicaragua's Jews had emigrated to Israel – declining from some 50 members in 1976 to only a few by 1981.¹²

By 1985, the Reagan administration and many in Washington viewed Nicaragua as a regional trouble spot, largely due to the country's close ties to the USSR, as well as proven links to the PLO, Libya, and Iran. A 10-page study prepared by the U.S. State Department suggested that Libya had sent pilots, military advisors, and millions of dollars in financial assistance. Libya also tried to send a shipment of 84 tons of military equipment to Nicaragua in April

1983; it was seized, however, during a refueling stop in Brazil.¹³ Ties to Iran were less explicit at the time, but Nicaragua and Iran inked a U.S. \$23 million trade deal in 1984.¹⁴ By 1985, Iran had entered into an agreement with Nicaragua to supply fuel to the Central American nation. Then Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hussein Mousavi signed the contract during a two-day visit to Managua, where he met with Sandinista leader and president Daniel Ortega. At the time, Iran produced over one million barrels of oil a day, and Nicaragua's need averaged 15,000 barrels of oil daily.¹⁵

In 1989, Ortega visited Europe and the Middle East in search of support, with stops in Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain. During a lay-over in Newfoundland, he announced that significant financing and aid had been secured for his country, presumably from patrons in the Middle East.¹⁶

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 the Chamorro government did was close the Iranian embassy in Managua as well as the Nicaraguan embassy in Tehran. In addition, she renewed relations with Israel and significantly reduced the presence of the PLO and Libya in Nicaragua. This policy of refocusing Nicaraguan attention on Latin America and the United States continued until Ortega's re-election in November 2006.

During his second term as president, Daniel Ortega has welcomed Islam into Nicaragua through increasingly close ties with Iran. Among his first official acts were reestablishing diplomatic ties with Iran, waiving visa requirements for Iranian travelers and authorizing Iran to re-open its embassy in Managua. In a sign of this growing warmth, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad attended Daniel Ortega's inauguration ceremony in January 2007 before visiting the country's mosque. President Ortega himself has also visited Iran, where on June 10, 2007 he met with Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini to mutually criticize American imperialism, and secure Iranian support for a raft of foreign direct investment projects. While in Tehran, Ortega declared the Iranian revolution and Nicaragua's

Sandinista revolution were “practically twins” because they shared not only the same year of triumph (1979) but the same goals of “justice, self-determination and the struggle against imperialism.”¹⁷ The meeting yielded concrete dividends. Later that year, in August, Iran’s Deputy Minister of Energy, Hamid Chitchian, visited Nicaragua with a delegation of 21 businessmen. President Ortega presented the delegation with a long list of discussed projects: a deep-water port, a wharf at Port Corinto and another at 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 in exchange meat, plantains, and coffee exports to Iran.¹⁸

Iran has moved forward on studies for a U.S. \$350 million deep-water port, but 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 U.S. \$120 million hydroelectric plant remains delayed.

Rumors of Iran operating the largest embassy in Central America in Managua have also recently been refuted.¹⁹ And while Iran will not pardon Nicaragua’s U.S. \$160 million dollar debt, the country has followed through with some initial investments.²⁰ 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 Deputy Energy Minister, Hamid Chitchian.²¹

Nicaragua, however, does have plans to open an embassy in Iran, and through President Ortega’s efforts, the Central American country continues to be an international partner for the Middle Eastern nation’s non-aligned regime. Nicaragua’s contact with Lebanon, Libya, and the Palestinian Territories – where most of the country’s Muslim population retains some connection – is limited.

ENDNOTES

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- [2] International Religious Freedom Report, United States Department of State, 2008
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- [4] Mauricio Miranda, “La primera mezquita en Nicaragua,” *El Nuevo Diario*, June 3, 2009, <http://tinyurl.com/ybuoet3>.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Doren Roa, “Inaguran Centro Cultrual Islámico,” *El Nuevo Diario*, September 15, 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/yeqmsnu>.
- [7] Sanchez, “El Ramadan de un musulman en El Oriental,” *supra*.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Eduardo Tercero Marengo, “La defensa de Irak es obligatoria y necesaria,” *La Prensa*, April 6, 2003, <http://tinyurl.com/yzjhlp3>.
- [10] George Gedda, “Administration Worried About Sandinista Ties to Middle East ‘Radicals,’” Associated Press, July 10, 1985.
- [11] Robert Fisk, “Long link with Middle East / Nicaraguan involvement in US-Iran arms deal,” *Times of London*, November 28, 1986.
- [12] Nicaragua did appear to make an attempt at improving relations in 2003, when Nicaraguan Foreign Minister, Norman Caldera Carnenal, visited Israel in August 2003. Minister Caldera did not visit with Yasser Arafat or any other Palestinian Authority leaders. This was the first such state visit between the two countries since 1966.
- [13] George Gedda, “Administration Worried About Sandinista Ties to Middle East ‘Radicals,’” *supra*.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] Reuters, “Iran-Nicaragua Oil Pact Reported,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1985.
- [16] “Nicaragua Ortega on results of Middle East tour,” *Voz de Nicaragua*, October 20, 1989.
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- [19] Anne-Marie O’Connor and Mary Beth Sheridan, “Iran’s Invisible Nicaraguan Embassy,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2009, <http://tinyurl.com/knfpyt>.
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[21] Ludwin Loaisiga Lopez, “Iran have promises de ayudas millonarias,” La Prensa, August 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/yg28z9z>.