

American Foreign Policy Council

NICARAGUA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 5,788,531

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): \$10.51 billion



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2013)

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 immigrants 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 consists of Muslim descendants of Arab emigrants from the territory of Palestine and Lebanon. There are a relatively small number of Nicaraguan nationals who have converted to the Muslim faith. According to one source, there are well over 1,000 Muslims residing in the country, largely

concentrated in the capital city of Managua. However, prayer centers have been established in private residences located around the country, including Masaya, Leon and Granada.²

Granada, Nicaragua, like Granada, Spain, has an historical significance to Muslims, as Granada was the last redoubt of Moorish Spain before the Moors were expelled in the Reconquista. Fouad Ajami, a leading Middle East scholar at Stanford's Hoover Institution, said of the [Spanish] city's significance to Muslims, "Al Andalus—Andalusia—would become a deep wound, a reminder of dominions gained by Islam and then squandered. No wonder Muslim chroniclers added 'May Allah return it to Islam' as they told and retold Granada's fate."³ Muslims taking daw'ah trips to Nicaragua often stop in Granada to proselytize.

The first mosque that was built in Nicaragua was constructed in 1999 with funding from local sources, as well as from a delegation 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 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, 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.⁴

In 2007, the Cultural Center of Nicaraguan Islam opened with the sole purpose of spreading Islamic teachings.⁵ Run by Carlos Arana, a Palestinian descendant, 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 there, 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, of government repression, largely due to its 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.⁶ 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 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."⁷ More recently, historical pressures have all but disappeared as President Daniel Ortega, now in his third 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 that embraced its radical leaders, especially the Palestine Liberation Organization, whose 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 U.S. \$12 million loan. Yasser Arafat, then head of the PLO, is known to have visited Managua in 1980. And by 1982, some 70 high-ranking PLO officers were assisting with special infantry training for the Nicaraguan army.⁸ In return, Ortega and the Sandinistas granted the PLO full diplomatic status.

The beginnings of the tactical relationship between the Sandinistas and Palestinian terrorists began as far back as 1970, when Sandinista leader Oscar Turcios made contact with the Marxist Fourth International in Western Europe to ask for a meeting with other radical guerrillas who could train the Sandinistas in terrorist tactics. The initial contact that the Sandinistas had was with Na'if Hawatmeh's Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP).

A Nicaraguan named Patrick Argüello, who was raised in Los Angeles after his family left Nicaragua to escape persecution after the assassination of President Anastasio Somoza, became noteworthy as a martyr by many Islamist radicals in the 1970s. Argüello had long been intrigued with the Cuban Revolution, and especially by the figure of Che Guevara. It was reported that Argüello claimed to be deeply affected by the August 1967 deaths of several Sandinista friends, and was also very affected by the death of Che in Bolivia shortly thereafter. Argüello had been a Fulbright scholar, and was sent to Chile to study medicine. He went back to Nicaragua in the late 1960s to try to join the fledgling Sandinistas, but was suspected of being an infiltrator because he had grown up in the U.S. Undeterred, Argüello and a group of friendly Sandinistas went on to establish contact in 1970 with George Habbash's PFLP, and negotiated with the PFLP to provide them with terrorist training in exchange for their participation in a future PFLP hijacking.

Argüello put his training to use on September 6, 1970, when he and Palestinian terrorist Leila Khaled used Honduran passports to pose as a married couple to board El Al Flight 219 from Amsterdam to New York. During their attempt to hijack the El Al flight, Khaled was subdued by the passengers and an Israeli sky marshal shot and killed Argüello. In a later terrorist attack carried out by the Japanese Red Army and the PFLP at the Lod Airport in Tel Aviv in 1972, the letter claiming responsibility stated that it had been carried out by the "Squad of the Martyr Patrick Argüello."⁹

The Sandinista regime, from the time it came into power, chose sides in the Middle East by overtly stating that it 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 The Sandinista government's disdain for Israel was further evidenced by the fact that by 1983, most of Nicaragua's Jews had left Nicaragua and emigrated to Israel, a decline from around 50 people in 1976 to only a handful by 1981.¹¹

By 1985, the Reagan administration and many in Washington acknowledged that Nicaragua had become a regional trouble spot, largely due to the coun-

try's close ties to the USSR, as well as its proven links to the PLO, Libya, and Iran. A ten-page study prepared by the U.S. State Department suggested that Libya had sent pilots, military advisors, and millions of dollars in financial assistance to Managua. 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.¹² Ties to Iran were less explicit at the time, but Nicaragua and Iran inked a U.S. \$23 million trade deal in 1984.¹³ By 1985, Iran had entered into an agreement with Nicaragua to supply fuel to the Central American nation. Then Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hussein Moussavi 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 needs averaged 15,000 barrels of oil daily.¹⁴

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 significant financing and aid had been secured for his country, presumably from patrons in the Middle East.¹⁵ 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.

However, Chamorro's acquiescence to entreaties from the international community for "reconciliation" ended up allowing a number of Sandinista hold-overs to serve in her government, which proved to be a bad idea. *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."¹⁶

This support manifested itself throughout the 1990s; when Saddam Hussein's troops retreated from Kuwait in 1991, they also left a cache of Nica-

raguan 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.¹⁷

Chamorro's policy of refocusing Nicaraguan attention on Latin America and the United States continued until Ortega's re-election 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 re-establish 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, 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."¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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

So the situation remains. In the wake of the April 2013 death of Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez, many speculated that Ortega's Nicaragua would attempt to fill the leadership void, including through closer ties to the Iranian regime. Contacts between Managua and Tehran, however, remain largely unchanged, and Iran's presence in the country shows little signs of qualitative improvement, at least as of yet. To that end, rumors of Iran operating the largest embassy in Central America in Managua have been

refuted.²⁰ However, while Iran will not pardon Nicaragua's U.S. \$160 million dollar debt, the country has indeed followed through with some initial investments.²¹ 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.²²

Nicaragua, however, has opened an embassy office in Tehran, and sent Mario Antonio Barquero Baltadano to serve as ambassador. 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.

ENDNOTES

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- [2] United States Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2008.
- [3] Fouad Ajami, “The Moors’ Last Laugh,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2004.
- [4] Edwin Sanchez, “El Ramadan de un musulman en El Oriental,” *El Nuevo Diario*, October 9, 2005, <http://impreso.elnuevodiario.com.ni/2005/10/09/nacionales/2967>.
- [5] Doren Roa, “Inaguran Centro Cultural Islámico,” *El Nuevo Diario*, September 15, 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/yeqmsnu>.
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- [7] Eduardo Tercero Marengo, “La defensa de Irak es obligatoria y necesaria,” *La Prensa*, April 6, 2003, <http://tinyurl.com/yzjhlp3>.
- [8] George Gedda, “Administration Worried About Sandinista Ties to Middle East ‘Radicals,’” *Associated Press*, July 10, 1985.
- [9] Jon B. Perdue, *The War of All the People*, (Washington: Potomac Books, 2012), 50.
- [10] Robert Fisk, “Long link with Middle East / Nicaraguan involvement in US-Iran arms deal,” *Times of London*, November 28, 1986.
- [11] Nicaragua did appear to make an attempt at improving relations in 2003, when Nicaraguan Foreign Minister, Norman Caldera Carrenal, visited Israel that August. 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.
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- [19] Revista Envio, *Nicaragua Briefs* 313, August 2007, <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3628>.
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^[22] Ludwin Loaisiga Lopez, “Iran hace promesas de ayudas millonarias,” *La Prensa*, August 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/yg28z9z>.