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Iran and its Strategic Role in Venezuela: Influence and Implications



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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Iran's interest in Latin America is not a new development. Diplomatic links between the Islamic Republic and South American states such as Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela have been growing for many years.

Tehran has worked to strengthen its relations with the South American continent since the revolution led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the late 1970s. The pace of development of these relationships increased in the past two decades, in particular with Venezuela and especially when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was Iranian president, between 2005 and 2013. The Iranian regime's presence and activity in Latin America intensified as it sought to consolidate its militarized power in the region and counterbalance the international power dynamic.

In an attempt to counter Iran's aspirations,

the international community imposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic, amid concern that its nuclear program poses a threat to international and regional security.

The following report demonstrates how Iranian intelligence activities, and those of its proxies, have been nurtured by the Venezuelan regime. This has helped to create a safe haven in Latin America for members of the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah, from which its members can launch destabilizing activities.

The report will attempt to shed light on Tehran's strategic objectives in Venezuela at the political, economic, cultural and media levels, in an attempt to aid understanding of the nature of Iran's role and influence there, along with its motives and the quality of its presence. It also considers the repercussions of this Iranian influence for both countries, as well as the wider Latin American region and the US.



Tehran has worked to strengthen its relations with the South American continent since the Islamic Revolution



CHAPTER II IRAN'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES IN VENEZUELA

Throughout decades of Iranian-Venezuelan relations, it has been apparent that the nations share a host of interests and world views. In fact, a number of Latin American countries have frequently flirted with Arab rogue states, signing treaties and cooperation accords with Libya, Iran and Syria, and increasingly establishing business interests in those countries.

During meetings of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Venezuela is often one of only two countries that objects to recommendations that Iran be referred to the UN Security Council for its failures to comply with treaty commitments.¹ The mayors of Tehran and Caracas established a sister-city accord in 2002.²

The relationship between the two nations became even closer when a statue of Iranian astronomer, philosopher and poet Omar Khayam was unveiled in Caracas.

Two officials from the Iranian commercial delegation attended the ceremony. An anti-imperialist viewpoint has been used repeatedly by the leaders of both countries as a unifying rallying cry against the US, and Western foreign policies in general.

In 2005, early in Ahmadinejad's presidency, Tehran's relations with Latin America, which focused on mutual opposition to US policies, were highly publicized.³ The focus of Iranian foreign policy shifted from Africa to Latin America to challenge the US. This transformation accelerated after visits by Ahmadinejad in 2007 to Venezuela and several neighboring countries. The Iranian Foreign Ministry announced the opening of embassies in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Uruguay, in addition to a representative office in Bolivia.⁴

Iran's strategic objectives in its relationships with Latin American countries

A worker of the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA waves an Iranian flag as the Iranian-flagged oil tanker Fortune docks at the El Palito refinery in Carabobo, Venezuela. AFP



can be divided into several categories relating to politics, economics, culture and media.

Religious and Cultural Goals

Keen to expand its cultural presence in Latin America, Iran launched Spanish-language satellite-television news channel HispanTV. It broadcasts cultural, political and religious programs that target parts of the Latin American continent in an attempt to expand Iranian influence, as part of the nation's ideological battle to confront what it sees as the hegemony of the West.⁵

In addition, Tehran supports many Spanish-language religious websites, such as the Islam Network and the Islamic Library Magazine in El Salvador, and Islam in Bolivia. The financial support for these channels and websites reflects a high level of Iranian

A mask-clad Iranian woman walks past a mural painting in Palestine Square in Tehran. AFP

interest in the cultural and media landscapes in Latin America. Yet the regime's success in its goal of reaching hearts and minds in the region remains limited as a result of the small number of people who engage with these platforms.⁶

An interview with President Maduro, broadcast by HispanTV on Feb. 21, 2018, in which he discussed internal matters, revealed the depth of his country's relationship with Iran and the extent of Tehran's influence. He warned that the Venezuelan army was ready to defend the independence and sovereignty of the country, as he accused the US of reviving its colonial aspirations against Latin America in an effort to gain control of the region's riches and power. He also condemned media campaigns he said targeted his government and the people of Venezuela.⁷ Maduro's allegations were contradicted by a report from the Atlantic

Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, which specializes in exposing disinformation and fake news. It reviewed more than 7,000 media reports published between May 1 and May 8, 2020 as part of an analysis of content about a failed coup attempt against Maduro on May 3, 2020.

It concluded that media outlets such as HispanTV, Venezuelan state-run Telesur and the pro-Maduro La Iguana — along with Kremlin-funded news channel RT, Russian agency News Front, and the pro-Cuban-regime Cuba Debate — were all actively spreading false claims about US involvement in the plot.⁸ This reflects the degree to which the Iranian media has infiltrated Venezuela to promote and serve Tehran's agenda and its political and cultural interests within Venezuelan society.

Iran and Hezbollah have exploited a historical refugee route from the Levant to Venezuela to build a network of educated Lebanese and Syrian communities in the Latin American country.⁹ Hezbollah has used religious and intellectual infiltration to convert Christians and Sunni Muslims to Shiite Muslims, who believe in Khomeini's Wilayat Al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist). This is similar to its strategy in the Middle East — however it is clear that it did not achieve its desired goals in Latin America.¹⁰

Iran has established more than 36 Shiite cultural centers in 17 countries around the world, many of which are widely used to build spy rings and gather intelligence. In Latin America they act as a hub for recruiting expatriates and building popular support for Iranian policies among the continent's citizens.¹¹

Political and Economic Objectives

After the establishment of OPEC, political and economic relations between Iran and Venezuela initially were based on oil-industry cooperation and maintaining high oil prices. This political relationship developed and expanded to include several Latin American countries through common membership of the so-called Non-Aligned Movement.¹² Founded in 1961, this is a forum with 120 members who do not consider themselves formally aligned with or against any major power bloc, instead preferring to remain



Oil has played a fundamental role in shaping the nature of the economic relationship between Venezuela and Iran

neutral and independent.¹³

The fact that Ahmadinejad and Venezuela's former President Hugo Chavez were close friends strengthened the political and economic partnership between their countries. Between 2005 and 2012, more than 270 bilateral deals were signed, including trade treaties, contracts for development projects, car-manufacturing agreements, energy policies and banking programs.¹⁴

However few of these agreements came to fruition, as a result of regional complexities and the conflicts that Iran had embarked on in the Middle East. As a result, relations stagnated despite efforts to sign additional contracts.¹⁵

Oil has played a fundamental role in shaping the nature of the economic relationship between Venezuela and Iran, not least because it is a major source of income that constitutes nearly half of the budgets of both countries.¹⁶ There is a history of cooperation between Iranian and Venezuelan companies in oil exploration and the petrochemical industries. During Ahmadinejad's time in power, Iran announced an estimated \$4 billion deal to build oil-exploration platforms in eastern Venezuela's Orinoco Delta, in return for investments.¹⁷

Challenging the will of the international community, Venezuela has long implied that it will defy international sanctions and supply Iran with petroleum products, in an attempt to weaken US attempts to isolate the Islamic Republic by exploiting its deep dependence on refined foreign oil.¹⁸

Amid the recent collapse of the Venezuelan economy, Bloomberg reported in December that Iran sent large fleets loaded with gasoline and petroleum components to Venezuela, in defiance of international sanctions.¹⁹ After the US imposed its latest sanctions on Venezuela, in 2019, Iran also supplied the country with tools, supplies and technical expertise to support Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A., the state-run oil and gas company.²⁰

Through its rapprochement and relations with Latin American countries, Iran seeks to project the image of a global power, confront its political and economic isolation, garner diplomatic support for its nuclear program, and respond to the US in what is symbolically considered Washington's backyard.²¹ It is clear that political hostility, as well as ideological motives, was a prime factor in the pursuit of common interests by Venezuela and Iran.

CHAPTER III A SPECIAL KIND OF INFLUENCE IN VENEZUELA

Hezbollah's Lucrative Terrorist Operations

The Lebanese organization Hezbollah has exported its terrorist activities to Latin America, carrying out attacks in countries it judged to be getting too friendly with the West.

In 1994, for example, Iranian-backed terrorists detonated a car bomb outside the Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, killing 87 people and injuring nearly 300.²² Despite pressure from successive Argentinian governments, Iran refused to cooperate with the investigation or extradite suspects in the case.²³

In 1999 the Supreme Court in Argentina indicted Hezbollah military commander Imad Fayezi Mughniyeh over his alleged involvement in the attack.²⁴ He was assassinated in 2008. It is believed that Mohsen Rabbani, thought to be the mastermind of the AMIA bombing, was sending money to Argentina to help spread Shiite beliefs and Islamic revolutionary ideas.²⁵

Given the large Arab community in Latin America, Hezbollah has exploited its presence to build organizational networks that carry out many terrorist operations inside and outside the region.²⁶

Former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez further strengthened his country's ties with Iran during his time in office. In 2003, he appointed Syrian-Venezuelan Tarek El-Aissami to lead the Administrative Service of Identification, Migration and Foreigners, where it is suspected he provided Venezuelan IDs to immigrants.

Venezuelan opposition groups accuse El-Aissami of participating in drug-smuggling operations and supporting Hezbollah. He was also listed by the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control as one of the 10 most-wanted drug traffickers.²⁷ Since April last year, he has served in Venezuela's ministry of Petroleum.²⁸

During a year-long joint investigation, CNN and CNN en Espanol exposed major anomalies in the issuance of Venezuelan



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passports and visas, including allegations that documents were issued to individuals with connections to extremists.²⁹ According to intelligence reports, El-Aissami was involved in the issuing of 173 Venezuelan passports and IDs to persons from the Middle East, including individuals affiliated with Hezbollah.³⁰

In June 2008, the US Treasury Department identified naturalized Venezuelans Ghazi Nasreddin and Faouzi Kanaan as supporters of terrorism.³¹ Nasreddin worked as chargé d'affaires at the Venezuelan embassy in Syria and also held a position at the Venezuelan embassy in Lebanon. He allegedly used his status as a Venezuelan diplomat and head of a Shiite Muslim center in Caracas to provide financial support to Hezbollah and provide donors with details of the organization's bank accounts. According to the US Treasury Department, Kanaan owned a travel agency and organized trips and raised money in Venezuela for Hezbollah members.³² It also stated in its classification that Kanaan met senior Hezbollah officials to discuss kidnappings and potential terrorist attacks.³³

According to a State Department report on terrorism in 2019, Venezuela operates a lenient framework for armed groups, including FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) rebels, the Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN), and members of Lebanese Hezbollah. The report said that financial ties with FARC and ELN rebels helped to enable repression and graft schemes carried out by President Maduro's administration.³⁴

The Iranian regime built a set of tactical bases to allow its intelligence forces and Quds Force to operate from all parts of the country. Latin American military and security forces receive training at these facilities in a variety of skill sets, including asymmetric tactics.

According to a report by Insight Crime, a non-profit journalism and investigative organization that specializes in the study of organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is possible that some "Colectivos" — armed groups that back the Venezuelan government, which in turn condones and supports them — receive instructions from Hezbollah officials, in particular on Margarita Island.³⁵ This might explain an increase in the use of aggressive tactics by the groups on the island, which



is located in the Caribbean Sea north of the Venezuelan mainland and is where Hezbollah has been known to carry out much of its activity. The report indicated that the group largely enjoys the support of the Maduro government.³⁶

Drugs and Money-Laundering Operations

In addition to its publicized and diplomatic activities, the Iranian authority carries out illicit activities in Venezuela, using its proxies — mainly via Hezbollah — to launch cross-border criminal activities. Its activities in the Latin region, including drug smuggling, money laundering, arms

One of the Hezbollah's militants flying the group's flag around the Syrian town of Flita near the border with Lebanon. AFP

smuggling and terrorist training, have been closely monitored by authorities in Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil, according to a 2003 report on terrorism and organized crime in the tri-border area of South America, issued by the Library of Congress.³⁷

Hezbollah has developed close ties with drug-smuggling rings and established a sophisticated money-laundering scheme. An article published by Politico in 2017 said that “Project Cassandra,” an investigation conducted under the leadership of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), found that Hezbollah raised funds amounting to \$1 billion annually from drug-trafficking and weapon-smuggling operations, money-



A fireman and rescue workers search the remains of the Israeli embassy, 17 March 1992. AFP

laundering and other criminal activities.

The DEA hoped to prosecute Hezbollah agents suspected of involvement in cocaine-smuggling and money-laundering operations but the plans were shelved by the Obama administration during the negotiations for the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear deal.³⁸

Iranian involvement in drug smuggling is widespread throughout Venezuela and well documented. Detailed reports from the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reveal an extensive cocaine trade route from eastern Venezuela to western Africa and on to Europe.

It is suspected that the pipeline supply comes from Iranian facilities located in the Orinoco River delta, where vessels are loaded with cocaine. Some shipments end up in west Africa, Europe and the Middle East. The proceeds are laundered in various ways, for example by buying used, American-made cars and exporting them to Africa.³⁹

The money-laundering operations take advantage of the ability of some governments, especially in Bolivarian countries, to launder money in Latin American banks, thus making it available in Western markets.

For example, the International Development Bank uses encrypted communications to move Iranian payments through Venezuelan and Panamanian banks, and then directs those payments wherever is desired. This strategy is partially effective in transferring funds to the international economy.⁴⁰



*Support
for Tehran
in Latin
America has
only grown
over the years*

CHAPTER IV CONCLUSION

Iran has gained considerable influence in Latin America and consolidated its web of allies. The regime in Tehran is involved in active efforts to expand this list of friends in the region, in an attempt to counterbalance the international community's stance against its development of nuclear weapons, which is justifiably regarded as a threat to global peace and security.

The regime in Tehran considers this a promising time, given the changing global dynamics after the US presidential election and the change of administration in Washington. A predominance of anti-US sentiment could also help foster the right circumstances to oppose what is seen as an interventionist stance on the parts of the US and Europe.

Tehran has established many trade and energy enterprises in the past few decades to foster increasingly cunning strategic relationships with key Latin American governments.

The Iranian regime has already publicly stated that, should it believe there is a high risk of an attack on its nuclear-research facilities, it will use suicide bombers to defend its interests. The big problem for the West, and the US in particular, is the scale of the support Iran has in what is symbolically seen as Washington's backyard. Support for Tehran in Latin America has grown, potentially making the region a perfect place from which to launch retaliatory attacks.

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