

## **Iran Challenges the United States in its Backyard, in Latin America**

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"Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad must love the tropics," commented ironically *The Miami Herald*.<sup>1</sup> He has spent more time in Latin America than President Bush. Since his inauguration in 2005, Iran's foreign policy focus has shifted from Africa to Latin America in order to, as Ahmadinejad puts it, "counter lasso" the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

### **Iran's goals in Latin America**

Farideh Farhi argues that while Iran's increased attention to Latin America as a region is a relatively a new development, its bilateral ties with some individual Latin American nations "are long-standing and relatively robust." Iran has shared an ideological relationship with Cuba since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and a political relationship with Venezuela since their co-founding of OPEC in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

The drive behind these long-standing bilateral relationships have been Iran's non-aligned position in foreign policy, the efforts by the United States at keeping Iran in diplomatic and economic isolation and the election of a reformist president in 1997 that made it possible for countries like Brazil "to engage Iran with enough confidence to withstand pressures from the U.S.."

The shift to the left in many Latin American countries since the beginning of 2000 has allowed Iran to be successful in its attempt to improve relations with particular countries. From Ahmadinejad's point of view, "rather than responding passively towards the U.S. attempt to isolate Iran politically and economically and become the dominant player in the Middle East region, Iran's backyard, Iran should move aggressively in the United States' own backyard as a means to rattle it or at least make a point."<sup>4</sup>

What is Ahmadinejad looking for in Latin America?

He is seeking Latin American support to counter U.S. and European pressures to stop Iran from developing nuclear capabilities. Venezuela and Cuba were, alongside Syria,

the only three countries that supported Iran's nuclear program in a February 2006 vote at the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency.<sup>5</sup>

Ahmadinejad wants to strike back at the United States in its own hemisphere and possibly destabilize U.S.-friendly governments, which suggest that he seeks a permanent Iranian presence on the U.S. doorstep.

Ahmadinejad is interested to boost his popularity at home by showing his people he is welcomed as a hero abroad.

Since Ahmadinejad's ascendancy to power, he has made four diplomatic tours to Latin America in search of an alliance of "revolutionary countries". He visited Venezuela in July of 2006; Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Ecuador in January of 2007; Venezuela and Bolivia in September of 2007; Brazil and again Venezuela and Bolivia in November 2009. Ahmadinejad also hosted President Chavez of Venezuela (eight times), President Ortega of Nicaragua, President Morales of Bolivia, and President Correa of Ecuador and is expecting the visit of Brazil's President Lula da Silva in 2010.

The cornerstone of Ahmadinejad's Latin America policy is the formation of an anti-American axis with Venezuela. During a July 2006 visit to Tehran, Chavez told a Tehran University crowd, "We have to save humankind and put an end to the U.S. empire." When Chavez again visited Tehran a year later Ahmadinejad and Chavez used the visit to declare an "Axis of Unity" against the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Commander Kavon Hakimzadeh, a special assistant in U.S. Southern Command's Washington office, considers the relationship between Iran and Venezuela "the result of a convergence of unique geopolitical circumstances. Both countries are seeking out all of the allies they can find in order to avoid isolation. Chavez and Ahmadinejad have similar personalities and seem to like each other, have taken advantage of every opportunity to antagonize the United States, and have been successful in doing so primarily because they are unpredictable."<sup>7</sup> Both leaders use their relationship to overcome international isolation and sanctions and their petrodollar boon to encourage other states in Latin America to confront the United States.<sup>8</sup>

### **Iran's growing presence in Latin America**

During the International Conference on Latin America held in Tehran in February 2007, Iran's Foreign Minister, Mehdi Mostafavi, announced the opening of embassies in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Uruguay and a representative office in Bolivia and that a number of Latin American countries will open their embassies in Iran.<sup>9</sup>

The Iranian political and economic penetration in the continent in a short period of two-three years is indeed impressive.

## Venezuela

Both Hugo Chavez and Ahmadinejad embrace a rhetoric emphasizing autonomy and independence from the great powers, the United States but also Europe, citing unity in the struggle against imperialism and capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

"Here are two brother countries, united like a single fist," Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan leader, was quoted as saying in Tehran. "Iran is an example of struggle, resistance, dignity, revolution, strong faith," he told Al Jazeera. "We are two powerful countries. Iran is a power and Venezuela is becoming one. We want to create a bipolar world. We don't want a single power [that is, the USA]." "Despite the will of the world arrogance [of the United States], we [Iran and Venezuela] will stand by the oppressed and deprived nations of the world," Ahmadinejad said.<sup>11</sup>

Some observers evaluate that Latin America's willingness to embrace Iran indicates the U.S. prestige in the region has significantly dwindled. Chavez has emerged as "the godfather and relationship manager," striving to draw in this embrace other allies such as Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua. He is providing Iran an entree into Latin America, vowing to "unite the Persian Gulf and the Caribbean" and recently gave Iran observer status in his leftist trade-pact group known as the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas.<sup>12</sup>

Iran has become the second largest investor in Venezuela, after the United States. Venezuela is Iran's sixth most important partner in South America in terms of trade volume according to figures released by the European Commission, with an exchange of US\$50 million. The Venezuela-Iran Fund has already 200 million dollars and by the end of 2009 it will receive 200 million more to finance common projects, according to the Venezuelan minister of Finance, Ali Rodriguez.<sup>13</sup>

The first "anti-imperialist cars" from a joint venture reached Venezuela's roads, with the first batch earmarked for army officers. The 4,000 tractors produced annually in Ciudad Bolivar have a symbolic value as agents of "revolutionary change." Universities are teaching Farsi.<sup>14</sup>

Iran is to help build platforms in a \$4 billion development of Orinoco delta oil deposits in exchange for Venezuelan investments. An Iranian company is building thousands of apartments for Venezuela's poor. The public housing project alone has brought more than 400 Iranian engineers and specialists to Venezuela, where many have learned basic Spanish.<sup>15</sup>

Venezuela also could give Iran breathing space as it tries to weather the financial pressure of U.N. and U.S. sanctions over its nuclear program. Venezuela could end up being an outlet for Iran to move money, obtain high-tech equipment and access the world financial system.<sup>16</sup>

Venezuela already has become Iran's gateway for travel to the region. There is now a weekly flight between Caracas and Tehran, with a stopover in Damascus, operated by the Venezuelan state-controlled airline Conviasa and Iran's national carrier, Iran Air.<sup>17</sup>

*Press TV*, the first Iranian international news network, triumphantly announced that Iran and Venezuela have moved to strengthen their cooperation in defense areas, "a move that may ruffle feathers in the United States." During his first visit of an Iranian Defense Minister to Venezuela, Brigadier General Mostafa Mohammed-Najjar pledged Tehran's full military support "to promote the Venezuelan military's defense capabilities in the framework of mutual defensive agreements".

The two sides signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on military cooperation which encompassed "training and mutual exchange of military experiences". Venezuelan Vice President Ramon Carrizalez for his part said, "Venezuela is fully determined to strengthen defense ties with Iran." The prospects of deep defense ties between Iran and Venezuela is not expected to receive warm welcomes in the White House, as the US has on many occasions expressed opposition to Tehran establishing a foothold in its "strategic back yard," commented *Press TV*.<sup>18</sup>

*United Press International* reported in August 2009 that Iranian military advisers have been embedded with Venezuelan troops.<sup>19</sup>

During a visit to the sacred city of Mashhad in northern Iran, Chavez said to his host, President Ahmadinejad, "that Jesus and the Mahdi [the Shi'ite messiah] will arrive soon and establish justice in the world."<sup>20</sup> It seems that the Venezuelan President is buying even the apocalyptic beliefs of his Iranian friend!

Ahmadinejad was received during his latest (fourth) visit in Venezuela, in November 2009, with military honors by Chavez, who called him an "anti-imperialist gladiator". "I am your brother, we will be together until the end," Ahmadinejad replied. The two leaders signed 12 cooperation agreements on electricity, housing, agriculture and tourism.<sup>21</sup> Starting October 2009, Venezuela will export to Iran 20,000 barrels/day of refined oil, at a cost of \$200 million.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the Venezuelan-Iranian alliance is the cooperation in the nuclear field. On November 13, 2008, the two governments further formalized their collaboration in a memorandum of understanding to "cooperate in the field of nuclear technology."

According to reliable reports cited by Roger F. Noriega, a former US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs in an article dedicated mostly to this subject, Venezuela is supplying Iran with uranium. It was reported even that the British authorities confronted Chávez with these reports and warned him of the consequences of this irresponsible behavior.<sup>22</sup>

In his first California visit since he was kicked out of the United States in a diplomatic row last year, the ambassador of Venezuela defended his country's exploration of nuclear energy and said there was nothing secret about it. "We have a lot of oil, but we have to start thinking of when there's a prospect of running out," said Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez. "It's good to explore that potential." Commenting on revelations of the Venezuelan mining minister that the government of Iran was helping to explore uranium deposits in areas of Venezuela, Alvarez said that those comments were misconstrued. "The only thing we're doing with nuclear is what we did with Russia,"

he said, referring to an accord made last year in which Russia will help Venezuela develop a nuclear power plant.<sup>23</sup>

In an interview to the French *Le Figaro* Chavez declared that he and Ahmadinejad, "an ally and a friend," agreed to transfer Iranian nuclear technology to Venezuela after a new agreement was signed in Tehran". Chavez mentioned that preliminary steps have been taken for Venezuela to kick off its plan to establish a "nuclear village" with the help of the Iranians. On this occasion he reiterated that "Iran has the right to develop nuclear energy."<sup>24</sup>

## **Bolivia**

Bolivia, a poor country, is strategically located and represents an important ally that can act as a catalyst in enhancing Iran's growing cooperation with other leftist or populist governments in Latin America.

On September 27, 2007, Ahmadinejad visited for the first time La Paz to meet the President Evo Morales. In the opportunity they signed a program of cooperation of \$1.100 million in Bolivia's underdeveloped oil and gas sector.<sup>25</sup>

In August 2008 the government of Bolivia with support of Iran and Venezuela created the Public National Strategic Company "Cement of Bolivia" with an investment of \$230 million for the implementation of two plants in Potosí and Oruro departments. The same month vice-president of Iran Mojtama Samare Hashemi came to the country to express his support to Evo Morales and to push economic agreements.

Iran decided to open two health clinics in Bolivia, sending Iranian medical teams and offering specialized education and training for Bolivian physicians. Health Minister Tapia said the Iranian clinics will expand medical aid already being provided by Cuba and Venezuela.<sup>26</sup>

Iranian state television agreed to provide Bolivian state television with Spanish-language programming, making it that much easier for every Bolivian to receive Iranian-produced news and documentary shows - i.e. propaganda.

In September 2008, Morales went to Teheran and agreed with Ahmadinejad to accelerate the execution of joint projects to increase economic development and welfare for both nations.

Morales and Ahmadinejad issued a statement that the interference of the United Nations Security Council in Iran's nuclear dossier has no legal or technical justification. Morales' decision to set aside any hesitation and fully support Iran's position in the current nuclear standoff goes a long way in cementing Iran-Bolivia friendship.

The two sides also have pledged to continue their political struggles against imperialism, said the statement. "Nothing and no country can harm our relations with the revolutionary country of Iran," Morales told reporters.

Following his return from Iran President Evo Morales announced he is moving the country's lone Middle Eastern embassy from Egypt to Iran, a clear sign what are his strategic priorities in the Middle East.

During his second visit to Bolivia in November 2009, Ahmadinejad signed an agreement to cooperate in Bolivia's plans to industrialize the Salar de Uyuni, one of the world's largest reserves of lithium in the Andean region of Potosi.

Morales' detractors claimed that Iran wanted to search for uranium in Bolivia for its nuclear program. Both governments signed a memorandum of understanding defending Iran's right to continue nuclear research.<sup>27</sup>

### **Nicaragua**

According to Maradiaga and Meléndez, Nicaragua's foreign policy strongly correlates with Venezuela's, and any Latin American relationship with Iran is conducted through Caracas. President Ortega sees himself as a "revolutionary" who supports Chávez's political-ideological anti-imperialist project called "Socialism of the XXI century."<sup>28</sup>

Iran promised \$1 billion in aid and investment to develop the energy and agricultural sectors, infrastructure, and water purification in Nicaragua. The largest project establishes a deep water port on Nicaragua's eastern shores, which would require an investment of \$350 million. Nicaragua received a \$231 million loan from Iran in 2007 to build a hydroelectric dam. In August of 2008, Nicaraguan-Iranian relations were further consolidated when Ahmadinejad donated \$2 million for the construction of a hospital. Iran will also expand media cooperation with Nicaragua.<sup>29</sup>

However, Maradiaga and Meléndez claimed in mid-2008 that the proposed projects created the appearance of strong economic ties between the two nations but there was little evidence that the aid and investment would materialize. They doubted that the relationship - held together by the anti-Americanism espoused by leaders of both countries - would deepen beyond the ideological and political level.<sup>30</sup>

On the political level indeed Nicaragua is playing down U.S. concerns about Iran's nuclear-weapon ambitions and President Ortega supported publicly Iran's right to "nuclear energy for pacific ends".<sup>31</sup>

### **Ecuador**

Prior to 2007, ties were minimal, and neither country had diplomatic or commercial offices in the capital of the other. In 2000, 2006, and 2007, no Ecuadorian exports reached Iran, and in 2003, the year of highest trade, Ecuador's total exports to Iran valued \$2.5 million.

Ahmadinejad's short and surprising visit to Rafael Correa's presidential inauguration in January 2007 generated a new bilateral relationship between the two countries. The visiting president declared that "deep cooperation between Iran and Ecuador in the international arena will help establish balance in the world equations."<sup>32</sup>

According to César Montúfar, there is little evidence of a growing commercial relationship between Quito and Tehran. The ties between Ecuador and Iran were established because of Ecuador's relationship with Venezuela. Montufar argued that as Venezuela's influence in Ecuador is declining, it has been followed by similar decreases in the Iran-Ecuador relationship.<sup>33</sup>

This evaluation was quickly contradicted by the facts. In the summer of 2008 the two countries opened commercial bureaus in their respective capitals. The Ecuadorian commercial bureau in Tehran was the only one the government of Correa opened since his election. Iran and Ecuador signed an energy cooperation deal in September 2008, including a plan to build a refinery and a petrochemical unit in the south of Ecuador.<sup>34</sup>

President Correa visited Iran in November 2008 and signed 25 bilateral agreements in various fields, including in the oil industry. Correa, who is carrying out the first visit of an Ecuadorian head of State to Iran, traveled accompanied by ministers of foreign relations, oil and mining, agriculture and defense, among other officials and business people.

In December 2008, Ecuador and Iran signed an agreement of cooperation in the field of energy with the participation of Iran in hydro-electrical projects and in the tender for the construction of the important of Coca-Codo-Sinclair dam project.

In December 2008, Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary Saeed Jalili visited Ecuador. During the meeting with Jalili, Correa termed as strategic his country's relations with Iran, and favored expansion of the military ties and custom house cooperation between both nations. "Links between Quito and Teheran are beyond trade relations," Correa said.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, on February 13, 2009, Iran opened a brand new embassy in Quito, an act coinciding with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Islamic revolution in Iran.<sup>36</sup>

## **The Caribbean**

The Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Ralph Gonsalves, visited Iran in April 2009 and said Kingstown is determined to increase relations with Tehran. He then called for Iran to share the knowhow in regard with dam, road and airport building and modern technologies.<sup>37</sup>

The Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki for his part visited Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in January 2010 and declared that Iran is ready to take big steps for cooperation with the Caribbean states. He referred to the visit of Saint Vincent and Grenadines Prime Minister to Iran, saying the visits serve as important steps for expansion of bilateral and regional relations.<sup>38</sup>

In a first visit by a Guyanese head of state to Iran, Guyana's President Bharrat Jagdeo visited Tehran in January 2010 ushering a new phase in Guyana/Iran ties. He was accompanied by several ministers and the President of the Central Islamic Organization of Guyana (CIOG), Al Haj Fazeel Ferouz. The two countries signed two

MoUs concerning facilitation of political and visa services and Iran's development assistance to Guyana. Iran offered Guyana expertise in mining and agriculture.<sup>39</sup>

Jagdeo met Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, who stressed the fact that Guyana, with a Muslim population and already a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) has "prepared the ground for expansion of cooperation between the two countries." President Jagdeo welcomed Iran's active presence in Latin America as well as in the Caribbean region and stressed his country's independent foreign policies despite its geographical proximity to the United States.<sup>40</sup>

## **Brazil**

During President Mohammad Khatami's February 2004 visit to Caracas to attend the summit of non-aligned G-15 he met with the newly elected president Lula da Silva of Brazil and talked about bilateral trade with consequential results. Since then Brazil exports to Iran have doubled and Brazil in fact has been Iran's largest Latin American trade partner for several years, with a trade balance of US\$1.53 billion and its exports to Iran as high as those of neighboring Turkey and India.<sup>41</sup>

However, when in September 2007 Ahmadinejad intended to disembark in Brasilia on an official visit, after speaking at the U.N. General Assembly and visiting Venezuela and Bolivia, the Brazilian diplomacy came out with the classic excuse: the impossibility of reconciling Lula and the Iranian president's schedules.<sup>42</sup>

Still, the hesitance to meet with Ahmadinejad did not prevent President Lula da Silva to publicly give support to Iran's nuclear energy program and suggest that Iran "should not be punished just because of Western suspicions it wants to make an atomic bomb."<sup>43</sup> Actually, Brazilian interest in supporting Iran's nuclear program dates from the early 1990s when it considered selling equipment from its own failed program to Iran until the United States stepped in to prevent the deal.<sup>44</sup>

During the visit of Brazilian foreign minister Celso Amorim to Iran in November 2008, his Iranian colleague Manouchehr Mottaki said that "Iran affords South America major priority in its foreign policy and Brazil enjoys a special position in this respect." Amorim, for his part, described expansion of ties with Iran as a priority in Brazilian foreign policy and referred to his meeting with Mottaki as a "turning point" in Brazil-Iran relations and expected the visits by the two nations' presidents will bring ties to a new level.<sup>45</sup>

On this occasion, President Ahmadinejad said there are no barriers to expansion of ties with Brazil. "The (political) systems in the world are on the decline, and we should help each other and work for establishing a new [political] order."<sup>46</sup>

Is Ahmadinejad winning a new ally on the Latin American front, asked Samuel Logan? The Iranian president prepared to strengthen ties with a visit to Brazil on 5-6 May 2009. Many Latin America watchers expected the Brazil visit to represent the first significant advancement of ties between the two countries in the areas of commerce and energy,<sup>47</sup> in spite of the note issued by the Brazilian government expressing its "concern" over Ahmadinejad's controversial statements on Israel during the April 2009 United Nations anti-racism conference in Geneva.<sup>48</sup> The May 2009

visit was postponed to November 2009, due to Ahmadinejad's personal involvement in the preparations for the disputed elections of June 2009.

According to the Brazilian journalist Claudio Dantas Sequeira, the broad outline of an agreement between Brazil and Iran were laid out at a meeting on March 25, 2009 at the Foreign Ministry, possibly undermining the relationship between Brazil and the United States. Disregarding U.S. sanctions and warnings from the UN Security Council against transactions with Iranian financial institutions, the foreign ministers Mottaki and Amorim signed the terms of cooperation between the Brazilian and Iranian banking systems. In practice, this means helping Tehran to obtain credit and bank guarantees for investment, denied by Europe and the U.S. due to the imposition of sanctions.<sup>49</sup>

According to the Argentinean *Ámbito Financiero*, one of the trade agreements that may be signed during Ahmadinejad's November 2009 visit calls for the export of uranium to Iran. Brazilian Defense Minister Nelson Jobim however told the newspaper that "there is absolutely no possibility that Brazil will sign a nuclear accord of any kind with Iran."<sup>50</sup>

During his November 2009 visit to Brazil, Ahmadinejad was warmly received by President Lula da Silva, in spite of protests and even demonstrations by the Jewish and Arab communities, associations of homosexuals, and religious groups of African origin.<sup>51</sup> José Serra, the Governor of Sao Paulo, and candidate of the opposition to the next presidential elections, in an article published by Folha de Sao Paulo stressed that it is regrettable to receive the head of a dictatorial regime while Brazil has a recent past of fighting dictatorship at home.<sup>52</sup>

President Lula da Silva defended Iran's right to a "pacific" nuclear program and enrichment of uranium for creating energy with due respect to the international accords. Ahmadinejad for his part, supported in their common press conference Brazil's request for a reform of the UN Security Council and Brazil's right to have a permanent seat in the SC. He said that Brazil obtains a new important ally and legitimacy in its favor, from a country which has a growing role in the global politics.<sup>53</sup>

The Brazilian government claimed the improved relations with Iran could help solve the conflicts in the Middle East and mentioned the fact that Lula had also met Israel's President Shimon Peres and the leader of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, during visits they had made to Brazil in the same period. Actually Lula wants to be seen as a defender of developing countries, even if they are dictatorships like Iran. He wants to show the Western powers that their days of telling the rest of the world what to do are over.<sup>54</sup>

## **Paraguay**

Fernando Armindo Lugo Méndez, a former Catholic bishop, was inaugurated as president of Paraguay on August 15, 2008 and began the country's first left-leaning presidency.

Ahmadinejad was one of the first to congratulate Lugo on his victory. Iran's media praised Lugo by calling him "a man of God and an enemy of the Great Satan." The large Muslim population in Paraguay's tri-border region aided Lugo's campaign for presidency through fund-raising drives that have been supported by Iran and Venezuela.<sup>55</sup>

Lugo designated Alejandro Hamed Franco, Paraguay's ambassador to Lebanon, as foreign minister. Hamed has publicly announced that he plans to strengthen ties with the Middle East. His appointment was sure to create tensions with the State Department due to his sympathies with anti-U.S. developments in the Middle East and his acknowledged connections with U.S.-banned groups. He was accused of awarding Paraguayan passports to Lebanese citizens, although he claims this was only for those who were trying to escape Israeli attacks in 2006.<sup>56</sup>

In February 2009 an Iranian government delegation visited Paraguay to seek import and investment opportunities. The Iranian delegation hoped to import soya and meat from Paraguay and showed interest in carrying out bilateral cooperation in technology and agriculture and in making investment in Paraguay's real estate.<sup>57</sup>

### **Uruguay**

In June 2008, Uruguayan Vice-President Rodolfo Nin Novoa called for further expansion of all-out ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran. He announced his readiness to pay a visit to Tehran to discuss expansion of bilateral cooperation with the Iranian authorities and said the President Ahmadinejad has invited his Uruguayan counterpart to visit Tehran in the near future. He also announced Uruguay's nomination of a new ambassador to Tehran and the formation of the Iran-Uruguay Parliamentary Friendship Group.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, in October 2008, Fernando Alberto Arroyo became the ambassador of Uruguay to Tehran.

### **Argentina**

Argentina has an embassy in Tehran and Iran has an embassy in Buenos Aires. Since 1994, the relations between both countries are marred by the involvement of Iran in the AMIA bombing. The efforts to resolve the case came as much of the region is expanding relations with Iran, and several of Argentina's regional allies are pledging support for Ahmadinejad's government.

According to Iranian sources, during the 2004 G-15 summit meeting, despite Argentine president Nestor Kirshner's interest in discussing bilateral economic ties, Khatami refused to meet with him until "Buenos Aires formally apologizes to Tehran for falsely charging Iranian diplomats with involvement in the bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in 1994."<sup>59</sup>

Although Argentina maintains friendly relations with each of Iran's allied leaders, like Chavez, Ortega and Correa, Kirchner's domestic agenda is driving him in a different direction. For example, he canceled plans to attend President Correa's inauguration ceremony after Ahmadinejad announced that he would attend. The continuing U.S. conflict with Iran complicates matters further.<sup>60</sup>

At the 2007 U.N. General Assembly, the Argentine President used his speech to urge Iran to help with the investigation of the terrorist attack. The government of Tehran reacted angrily. The case has also caused tension with Chávez, an ally of the then President Kirchner. The Venezuelan ambassador to Buenos Aires, Roger Capella, was replaced after he criticized the Argentine justice system for seeking the capture of Iranian officials, upsetting the Argentine government. But this was not enough to weaken ties between Argentina and Venezuela.<sup>61</sup>

In February 2007, the Iranian government organized the first International Conference on Latin America at the Institute of International Political Studies at the Foreign Ministry. The title of the conference was 'Development in Latin America: Its Role and Status in the Future International System'. According to press releases, the participants included also members of parliament from Argentina.<sup>62</sup>

### **The subtle ideological/religious penetration**

The Iranian religious and intellectual penetration in Latin America, the attempts to convert Christians and Sunni Muslims to the Shia Islam and thus export the ideology and revolutionary beliefs of Ayatollah Khomeini is similar to the trend seen today in the Middle East, although clearly it doesn't reach the same proportions.

For instance Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradhawi, head of the Sunni International Union for Muslim Scholars and the major Muslim Brotherhood religious authority, warned against the danger posed by the spread of the Shia in Sunni countries, characterizing it as part of Iran's campaign for regional hegemony.<sup>63</sup> Some Sudanese accuse Iran that it "has turned its embassy in Khartoum into a center for spreading... the Shia, aimed at prompting the Sudanese to forsake Sunni [Islam] and embrace Imami Shiism [instead]. To ensure the success of this plan, various Iranian-funded facilities have been established around the capital, including culture centers, libraries, institutions, and schools...missionary centers for spreading the Shi'a."<sup>64</sup>

A recent superficial stroll on the Internet shows Latin America is not immune from this phenomenon.

The pro-Iranian blog *Imperialism and Resistance* at: <http://almusawwir.org/resistance/> is trying to combine the leftist revolutionary rhetoric and messages with the Islamist ones and gives an important space to Latin American news (*almusawwir* is one of 99 names of Allah in the Quran: The Fashioner, The Bestower of Forms, The Shaper).<sup>65</sup>

An Argentinean pro-Iranian blog presents itself as "Islam Indoamericano, a space to develop a revolutionary and indoamerican Islam," a space to be used to propagate opinions on "the political reality" of the continent from an "Islamic revolutionary perspective".<sup>66</sup>

All these websites contain not only legitimate religious or cultural texts and explanations, but also radical political anti-American, anti-Israeli and anti-Western texts.<sup>67</sup> Iranian press agencies like Prensa Islamica and even the Hezbollah TV websites have now Spanish spaces.<sup>68</sup>

On a broader strategic level, Iran planned to open a television station "for all of Latin America" to be based in Bolivia. Morales announced that the station would be "for all of Bolivia, for all of Latin America, recognizing the great struggle of this peasant movement"<sup>69</sup> According to later information, the Iranian government has renounced the installation of the TV channel in Bolivia, probably for financial reasons, although a team of the Iranian TV visited Bolivia to follow the "political and cultural reality".<sup>70</sup>

### **The Middle East strategic bonanza for Iran**

The expansion of economic and political relations and cooperation with Latin America countries is also intended to bring Iran strategic assets in the Middle Eastern arena, its home turf.

As already noted above, the support Iran received on the issue of its nuclear project from Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia and even Brazil, is extremely important for the Tehran regime, especially if the U.N. will impose harsher economic sanctions and more states will abide by them.

On the regional arena, Venezuela and Bolivia strongly supported Hezbollah during the Second Lebanon War in July-August 2006. President Chavez was extremely vociferous during that period.

During Israel's *Operation Cast* against Hamas bombing of Israeli territory and staging continuous terrorist activity against its citizens Presidents Chavez and Morales embraced completely Iran's position and complied with Ahmadinejad's demand to sever Venezuela's and Bolivia's diplomatic relations with Israel.<sup>71</sup>

Foreign policy advisors of Ahmadinejad are openly counting on Iran's new relations with Latin America as one of the net gains of his presidency. In fact, the new level of cooperation between Iran and Latin and Central American countries is a timely, further confirmation of the strategic vision and outlook that they have brought to the government, compared with the Mohammad Khatami government that pushed the arch of detente with the West almost to the exclusion of all else.<sup>72</sup>

### **Iranian sponsorship of Hezbollah terrorism in Latin America**

Iran is still the world's "most active state sponsor of terrorism," according to the U.S. State Department in its most recent study on the subject.<sup>73</sup> It is a label the Iranian regime has won, and worn proudly, since the U.S. government began keeping track of terrorist trends more than a decade-and-a-half ago.

The scope of this support is enormous. According to government officials, Iran "has a nine-digit line item in its budget for support to terrorist organizations." That figure is estimated to include \$10 million or more monthly for its principal terrorist proxy, Hezbollah, \$20 million to \$30 million annually for the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, \$2 million a year for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and – at least until recently – upward of \$30 million a year for Iraqi insurgents.<sup>74</sup>

In 2006, Assistant Secretary of State Thomas A. Shannon expressed worry about the kind of relationship Chavez wants to have with Iran on the intelligence side. "One of

our broader concerns is what Iran is doing elsewhere in this hemisphere and what it could do if we were to find ourselves in some kind of confrontation with Iran," he said. In June 2008 Shannon declared that Iran "has a history of terror in this hemisphere, and its linkages to the bombings in Buenos Aires are pretty well established."<sup>75</sup>

The 1992 suicide bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires is arguably the first Islamist terrorist attack in the Western Hemisphere. A car, driven by a suicide bomber and loaded with explosives, smashed into the front of the embassy and killed 29 and wounded 242 people. On July 18, 1994, the Argentinean Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA) building was bombed, leaving 85 dead and 300 wounded, the deadliest terrorist toll ever in Argentina's history, and resulted in the largest Jewish death toll from terrorism outside Israel since the Second World War.

On October 25, 2006, Dr. Alberto Nisman, Argentina's Attorney General, and Marcelo Martínez Burgos presented the findings of the special team which investigated the terrorist attack which destroyed the AMIA building and unequivocally showed that the decision to blow up the building was taken by the "highest instances of the Iranian government," and that the Iranians had asked Hezbollah, which serves as a tool for its strategies, to carry out the attack.<sup>76</sup>

The report did not ignore the fact that the attack was carried out for reasons connected to the conflict in the Middle East (including the abduction of Mustafa Dirani and the Israeli bombing of the Hezbollah training camp in the Beqa'a Valley). However, based on the evidence collected, it concluded that the fundamental reason was the Argentinean "government's unilateral decision to terminate the nuclear materials and technology supply agreements that had been concluded some years previously between Argentina and Iran."<sup>77</sup>

It has been sufficiently demonstrated that in his capacity as head of Hezbollah's external security apparatus, Imad Mughniyeh was the person who received instructions from the Iranian Ministry of the Interior and that he implemented these instructions by forming an operational group for realization of the actual attack.

On November 9, 2006, Judge Corral issued international arrest warrants for seven Iranians and one senior Hezbollah operative. In March 2007, INTERPOL's Executive Committee issued Red Notices for the following six individuals: Imad Fayeze Mughniyah (assassinated in Damascus in February 2008), Ali Fallahijan, Mohsen Rabbani, Ahmad Reza Asghari, Ahmad Vahidi (the new Defense Minister in Ahmadinejad's government) and Mohsen Rezai.<sup>78</sup>

It is interesting to analyze the Iranian reaction to Mughniyeh's assassination. The honor bestowed upon until then "invisible" Mughniyeh is outstanding: Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei hailed Mughniyeh as a "great man". Ahmadinejad called him a "source of pride for all believers." Heading a high-level Iranian delegation, Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki attended Mughniyeh's funeral in Beirut "to commemorate the great hero" and expressed condolences "on behalf of the Iranian government and people."<sup>79</sup> Iranian leaders uttered harsh statements against Israel and Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, a cofounder of Hezbollah and current secretary general of the International Committee for

Supporting the Palestinian People, claimed Mughniyeh's assassination was a "prelude" to "very dangerous and major events in the next few months".<sup>80</sup>

According to the investigation report of Attorney general Alberto Nisman and District attorney Marcelo Martinez Burgos, Argentina was infiltrated by Iran's intelligence service, which in the mid 1980s began establishing a vast spy network that basically comprised the Iranian embassy and its cultural attaché in Buenos Aires; extremist elements that were associated with the Shiite mosques At-Tauhíd in Floresta, Al Iman in Cañuelas and El Mártir in San Miguel de Tucumán; the businesses referred to as "fronts" – G.T.C. and Imanco; as well as other radicalized members of the Islamic community, who were in Argentina for the sole purpose of gathering the information and making the arrangements that paved the way for realization of the attack on AMIA on the morning of July 18, 1994.<sup>81</sup>

The situation seems to repeat itself today in Venezuela and Bolivia, but this time with the active or passive support of their governments, which are well aware of the past intelligence Iranian activity in the continent.

On the intelligence level, U.S. officials say they are worried about the possibility of terrorists and Iranian intelligence agents arriving on the weekly flight between Caracas and Tehran. The State Department charged in an April terrorism report that "passengers on these flights were not subject to immigration and customs controls."<sup>82</sup>

Bolivia lifted visa restrictions on Iranian citizens with the danger that the country will soon be open to activity of covert officers of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, its Islamic Revolutionary Guard, which the State Department recently declared a terrorist organization, and the Quds Force, an Iranian military group whose mandate is to spread Islamic revolution around the world.<sup>83</sup>

A further danger is if other Latin American countries follow the Bolivian lead and lift visa restrictions. Iran already has proved what it can do in Latin America *with* visa restrictions.

### **Hezbollah presence in Latin America and the threat of terrorism**

The Hezbollah presence and nefarious activity in South America is well documented. It was behind the two deadliest terrorist attacks in the continent's history: the Israeli embassy and Jewish community center bombings in Buenos Aires. Hezbollah also established a significant presence in the "tri-border area" (TBA - where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay converge) using local businesses, drug trafficking, and contraband networks to launder funds for terrorist operations worldwide.<sup>84</sup>

Since 9/11, under U.S. pressure, local governments in the Tri-border area and other countries, like Chile and Colombia, have monitored and discovered part of the wide Hezbollah network active in the continent.<sup>85</sup>

However, in spite of some arrests of important activists in Paraguay, Brazil and Chile, mainly for economic crimes or narcotics trafficking, this large Hezbollah network continues to be active on the continent.<sup>86</sup>

Increased focus on the TBA after Hezbollah-linked bombings in Buenos Aires, and again after the September 11 attacks in the United States, produced an increased understanding of Hezbollah's fundraising operations, but also led Hezbollah to shift its fundraising operations to other Latin American countries - whose location, nature, and extent are largely unknown.<sup>87</sup>

Hezbollah's promotion of radical religious ideology identifies Shia diasporas as strategically valuable to terrorist operations and results in several important policy implications for their treatment by host-nations determined to combat terrorist operations.<sup>88</sup>

**Ecuador.** Evidence appeared linking Hezbollah to the emergence of Islamic mosques in Ecuador that promote radical religious ideology. In June 2005 Ecuadorian police broke up an international cocaine ring led by the Lebanese Rudy Zaiter, who used his Arab food restaurant in northern Quito as a front. The investigation led to related arrests of 19 people in Brazil and the United States.<sup>89</sup>

**Colombia.** In 2001, the Colombian Technical Investigation Corps (CTI) arrested a Lebanese businessman, Mohammed Ali Farhad, with ties to Hezbollah for managing a \$650 million cigarette smuggling and money laundering operation between Ipiales, Colombia and ports in Ecuador. He was connected with a Hezbollah-backed money laundering operation run by Eric and Alexander Mansur, through the Mansur Free Zone Trading Company N.V.<sup>90</sup>

In October 2008 U.S. and Colombian investigators arrested at least 36 suspects, including a Lebanese key player in Bogota, Chekry Harb, accused of laundering hundreds of millions of dollars a year, from Panama to Hong Kong, while paying a percentage to Hezbollah. The suspects allegedly worked with a Colombian cartel and a paramilitary group to smuggle cocaine to the United States, Europe and the Middle East.<sup>91</sup>

**Venezuela.** According to the *Los Angeles Times*, a credible intelligence source claimed that Hezbollah and the Revolutionary Guard of Iran have formed terrorist cells to kidnap Jews in South America and smuggle them to Lebanon. The source alleged that Venezuelans have been recruited at Caracas' airport to provide information about Jewish travelers.<sup>92</sup>

In June 2008, the U.S. Treasury Department froze the assets of two Venezuelans after having designated them as Hezbollah supporters. Ghazi Nasr al Din, a Venezuelan diplomat of Lebanese ancestry, is accused of using his position at embassies in the Middle East to raise funds for Hezbollah and "discuss operational issues with senior officials" of the militia. In late January 2006, he facilitated the travel of two Hezbollah representatives to the Lebanese Parliament to Caracas to solicit donations for Hezbollah and to announce the opening of a Hezbollah-sponsored community center and office in Venezuela. He is currently assigned to Venezuela's embassy in Lebanon. Fawzi Kanan, a Caracas-based travel agent, allegedly facilitated travel for Hezbollah members and discussed "possible kidnappings and terrorist attacks" with senior Hezbollah officials in Lebanon.<sup>93</sup>

Instead of opening an investigation, Chavez said that the world was using the allegations to “make a move” against him.<sup>94</sup>

A Kuwaiti newspaper reported that Hezbollah was training young Venezuelans in military camps in south Lebanon to prepare them for attacking American targets.<sup>95</sup> It was reported a few months later that the Venezuelan minister of the interior, Tayek al-Ayssami, was working with Ghazi Nasr al-Din to recruit young Venezuelans of Arab descent that were supportive of the Chavez regime to train in Lebanon with Hezbollah in order to prepare them for asymmetric warfare against the United States in the event of a confrontation. According to this report, Hezbollah also established training camps inside Venezuela, complete with ammunition and explosives.<sup>96</sup>

Chavez, meanwhile, is perhaps the most open apologist for Hezbollah in the hemisphere. During the Israel-Hezbollah War in 2006, Chavez withdrew the Venezuelan ambassador to Israel. He later accused Israel of conducting its defensive war in “the fascist manner of Hitler.”<sup>97</sup>

It comes as no surprise that Hezbollah's director of international relations, Nawaf Musawi, attended an April 2008 ceremony at Venezuela's embassy in Beirut commemorating the sixth anniversary of the defeat of the anti-Chavez uprising in Venezuela. As an invited speaker, Musawi praised the survival of President Chavez' Bolivarian Revolution while denouncing the United States and “other powers that try to defeat the sovereignty and free will of the combative peoples of the world.”<sup>98</sup>

**Mexico.** In 2001, Mahmoud Youssef Kourani crossed the border from Mexico in a car and traveled to Dearborn, Mich. Kourani was convicted of providing "material support and resources ... to Hezbollah," according to a 2003 indictment. Salim Boughader Mucharraffille, of Lebanese descent, arrested in 2002 for smuggling 200 people into the U.S., said to include Hezbollah supporters, was sentenced in 2008 to 60 years in prison in Mexico.<sup>99</sup>

According to Michael Braun, retired chief of operations at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), confirmed by other U.S. officials, Hezbollah relies on the drug cartels in Mexico to smuggle drugs and people into the United States, reaping money to finance its operations and threatening U.S. national security. The group's growing ties with Mexican drug cartels are worrisome at a time when narco war has killed 7,000 people in the past year and is destabilizing Mexico along the U.S. border.<sup>100</sup>

### ***Hezbollah America Latina***

Probably the most striking and worrying trend has been the appearance in 2006 of a strange group calling itself "Hezbollah America Latina" claiming activity in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico. Actually the backbone of the organization seemed to be Hezbollah Venezuela led by one Teodoro Rafael Darnott, who pretended to lead the Latin American “network”. They presented themselves also as a group of converted Wayuu Indians, Autonomia Islamica Wayuu, and issued a strategic statement titled “The Jihad in America will begin in 2007.”<sup>101</sup>

On October 23, 2006, Jose Miguel Rojas Espinoza, a 26-year-old student of the state-run Bolivarian University, was arrested after the Baruta Municipality police found

two explosive devices near the U.S. Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela. Hezbollah Latin America took responsibility for the attack on their website and promised they would stage other attacks, with the same goal of publicizing the organization.

Several weeks later Theodor Darnott was arrested and in December 2008 he and José Miguel Rojas have been condemned to 10 years imprisonment for their terrorist attack against the U.S. embassy.<sup>102</sup>

What made Hezbollah Venezuela worthy of attention is the timing of their activities, at a moment in which “the strange liaison” between Hugo Chavez and the Iranian President Ahmadinejad had become an item of international interest.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, in spite of the long detention of Darnott and Rojas and the previous information the Venezuelan security authorities had about the group, the government did not give account about who really stands behind this network and what it did to prevent it.

A past analysis of the Hezbollah Argentina showed a striking different picture from that of Hezbollah Venezuela. While the Venezuelan group is based on indigenous Wayuu Indians with a strong leftist background and revolutionary rhetoric, the Argentinean group seems to include radical rightist mixed with leftist populist elements; the two trends with very close relations with the local Arab Shia community and the Iranian regime.<sup>104</sup>

### **Does the United States challenge the Iranian strategy?**

The Bush administration, busy with the Iraq and Afghanistan quagmire, practically ignored Latin America and the Iranian advances in the continent.

An ex-CIA counter-terrorism official claimed that the growing Iranian influence - inconceivable a decade ago - is the result of the decision by the United States to stop paying attention to the region. He asked the new president to reverse the Bush administration's policy of ignoring Latin America and "instead engage those countries in active diplomacy...Political and economic relations must improve to the point at which there is simply no benefit to breaking bread with Iran," he argued.<sup>105</sup>

Brazilian President Lula da Silva was the first Latin American head of state to be received by President Obama at the White House on March 14, 2009. On this occasion President Obama was calling Brazilian President da Silva "my man" and suggested that Brazil could become a leading U.S. partner in the region.

Obama was advised by many observers to mark a clear departure from the policies of the past and. "to seek a close relationship with Brazil and establish a new partnership, one that would bring immediate benefits to both parties (while carrying very low risk and political costs)."<sup>106</sup>

However, already in May 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the US was “disturbed” by Iran’s “gains” in Latin America. The November visit of Iranian President Ahmadinejad to Venezuela, Bolivia, and, most significantly, Brazil coincided with deepening concerns in Washington and the international community about Iran’s nuclear program.<sup>107</sup>

The Democrat Congressman Eliot Engel, President of the sub-commission on the Western Hemisphere Affairs in the Congress warned in a communiqué that it is an "error" to receive the Iranian leader in Brazil.<sup>108</sup>

Just before Ahmadinejad's visit, a worried U.S. Department of State dispatched its Special Envoy for Disarmament and Nuclear Non-Proliferation, Susan Burk, to Brazil. According to the newspaper *Folha de Sao Paulo*, Ms. Burk was unable to persuade Brazil's foreign affairs ministry to change its position – which it shares with Teheran – regarding two changes in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: creation of a world nuclear fuel repository, which would be administered by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and would control the flow of and commercial transactions in respect to nuclear fuel; and accession to the so called additional protocols to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.<sup>109</sup>

The implications of the visit were serious enough that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Latin American countries on December 11 that “if people want to flirt with Iran, they should take a look at what the consequences might well be for them.” These words predictably elicited a response from Chávez about “threats” leveled by the US government.<sup>110</sup>

Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Mehman-Parast qualified such comments as "in contravention of diplomatic norms," pointing to the reaction of those countries in the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) conference, which “unanimously rejected and condemned such comments.” Indeed, in response to Clinton's remarks, the leaders of ALBA pledged to further develop ties with Iran and denounced the US stance toward the Islamic Republic. Chavez qualified Clinton's remarks as “ridiculous” and declared he is not "afraid of her”. Bolivian President Evo Morales said that his country would not back down from holding closer relations with Iran.<sup>111</sup>

It is of note however that just one week before Ahmedinajad's visit to Brazil, the state-run oil firm Petrobras announced that it is considering ending its activities in Iran "because discoveries it had made there were not commercially viable." Petrobras International Director Jorge Zelada claimed the decision to leave "was not motivated by political pressures."<sup>112</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper gives a glimpse at the extensive Iranian and Hezbollah presence and activity in Latin America, which has intensified during 2009 and has been successful in developing closer ties with Brazil, the continent's giant and world player, and the small vulnerable Caribbean states.

The problem with this presence and activity is that it goes beyond the normal political, economic, social and cultural levels and it creeps into the dangerous area of terrorism and subversion, threatening not only outside actors and interests but possibly the very stability of the host countries.

It is evident that Iran's political and strategic standing in Latin America strengthens the Tehran regime and diminishes the possibility of United Nations backed

international diplomatic and economic pressures to convince it to renounce the nuclear project.

Thus, indirectly at least, it enhances the threat of Iran's nuclear hegemonic projection vis-à-vis the moderate Arab states, with all what this means for the stability of the Middle East, the stability of oil prices and the nuclear proliferation to other states in the region.

The proved Iranian and Hezbollah involvement in the worst terrorist attacks on the continent, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, is a bad omen for the future. In case Iran's vital interests, as the survival of the nuclear project, would be threatened by the international community, by the United States alone, or by Israel, Latin America would be a preferred ground for retaliation, directly or with Hezbollah's support.

One of the most worrying aspects of Iran's strategic penetration in Latin America is the cooperation in the nuclear field with countries like Venezuela, Bolivia, and possibly Brazil, just when the international community is trying to convince and press the Tehran regime to renounce the uranium enrichment and the military aspects of the project.

And what if Iran decided to deploy its long-range missiles in Venezuela at the request of President Chavez, if he feels threatened? On the background of Chavez's invitation to Russian navy and military aircraft to visit his country, such a nightmarish scenario seems possible.

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<sup>74</sup> Ilan Berman, "No Diplomatic Relations Until Terrorist Funding Stops," *McClatchy-Tribune News Service*, February 12, 2009.

<sup>75</sup> Chris Kraul and Sebastian Rotella, "US fears Venezuela-Iran ties may be aiding terrorists," *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 2008.

<sup>76</sup> "Report; Request For Arrests in the AMIA case," official translation of the Spanish document, in possession of the author.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> "INTERPOL Executive Committee takes decision on AMIA Red Notice dispute," *INTERPOL media release*, 15 March 2007. In November 2007, delegates at the 76th INTERPOL General Assembly have upheld the unanimous decision made by the organization's Executive Committee to publish six out of nine Red Notices requested in connection with the 1994 bombing of the AMIA building in Buenos Aires. See "INTERPOL General Assembly upholds Executive Committee decision on AMIA Red Notice dispute," *INTERPOL media release*, November 7, 2007.

<sup>79</sup> "Manuchehr Mottaki Speaking At Imad Mughniyeh's Funeral in Beirut," *PressTV*, February 15, 2008.

<sup>80</sup> "OSC Report: Iran -- Tehran Suspects Arab Involvement In Mughniyah Assassination," *NTIS*, US Dept. of Commerce, *March 13, 2008*.

<sup>81</sup> See the paper "Argentina accuses Iran of responsibility for the Hezbollah terrorist attack which destroyed Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, 1994. The Argentinean Attorney General's office announced it had found Iran responsible for the terrorist attack and an Argentinean judge issued arrest warrants for seven senior Iranians and one senior Hezbollah member", Annex 2, p. 9, at [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/pdf/argentina\\_amia\\_e.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/argentina_amia_e.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> James, *Iran raises profile in Latin America*.

<sup>83</sup> Kiriakou, *Iran's Latin America push..*

<sup>84</sup> See for instance Ambassador Francis Taylor, "The Presence of International Terrorist Groups in the Western Hemisphere," testimony before the House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, *Hearing on the Western Hemisphere's Response to the September 11, 2001, Terrorist Attack on the United States*, 107th Cong., 1st sess., October 10, 2001. Available online ([www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/2001/5674.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/2001/5674.htm)); see also Blanca Madani, "Hezbollah's Global Finance Network: The Triple Frontier," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 4, no. 1 (January 2002). Available online ([www.meib.org/articles/0201\\_12.htm](http://www.meib.org/articles/0201_12.htm)).

<sup>85</sup> See for example Fabio Castillo, "The Hizballah Contacts in Colombia," part three of the investigative series "Tracking the Tentacles of the Middle East in South America," *El Espectador* (Bogota), December 9, 2001.

<sup>86</sup> In February 2000, Paraguayan authorities arrested Ali Khalil Mehri, a Lebanese businessman who had allegedly been selling millions of dollars worth of pirated software and funneling the proceeds to Hezbollah. Similarly, businessman Assad Ahmad Barakat, a Lebanese emigrant to Paraguay and the alleged ringleader of Hezbollah's financial network in the tri-border area, was arrested in summer 2002 for allegedly funneling large sums of money to the organization. In an October 2001 raid of one of his businesses, Paraguayan authorities had found numerous items linking him to Hizballah, including a letter from Nasrallah, who wrote that he was "most thankful for the contributions Assad Ahmad Barakat has sent from the Triple Border." In November of that year, Chilean authorities alleged that two businesses owned by Barakat were Hizballah "fronts for money laundering." Seven Lebanese citizens were arrested in connection with that investigation on charges of illegally financing a terrorist group. Similarly, Hizballah cells based in Maicao, Colombia, have used local drug trafficking and contraband networks to launder funds that were later used to finance terrorist operations worldwide. Two clans in the area have been investigated for running combined gun and drug trafficking networks used for the same purpose. See Ely Karmon, *Fight on All Fronts?: Hizballah, the War on Terror, and the War in Iraq* – in *Policy Focus*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, n. 46, December 2003. p. 24.

<sup>87</sup> Howard Vincent Meehan, *Terrorism, Diasporas, and Permissive Threat Environments. A Study of Hizballah's Fundraising Operations in Paraguay and Ecuador*, Master of Arts Thesis in National Security Affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California. December 2004.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>89</sup> "Police link Ecuador drug ring to Hezbollah," *The Associated Press*, June 22, 2005.
- <sup>90</sup> Ibid. The Mansur Free Zone Trading Company N.V. was Phillip Morris' main distributor in Latin America until the U.S. indicted the Mansur brothers for money laundering.
- <sup>91</sup> Kraul and Rotella, *Colombian cocaine ring linked to Hezbollah*.
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>93</sup> "It is extremely troubling to see the Government of Venezuela employing and providing safe harbor to Hezbollah facilitators and fundraisers. We will continue to expose the global nature of Hezbollah's terrorist support network, and we call on responsible governments worldwide to disrupt and dismantle this activity," said Adam J. Szubin, Director of the Office of Foreign Assets Control of the Treasury Department.
- <sup>94</sup> *Associated Press*, June 20, 2008.
- <sup>95</sup> Kuwaiti daily *al-Siasa*, June 29, 2009.
- <sup>96</sup> Alan Levine, "Hugo's Hezbollah," *FrontPageMagazine.com*, November 12, 2008.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>98</sup> Martin Barillas, "Hezbollah Finds Fertile Ground in Latin America Thanks to Iran--Venezuela Axis," *Cutting Edge News*, September 1st 2008
- <sup>99</sup> Sara A. Carter, "Hezbollah uses Mexican drug routes into U.S.," *Washington Times*, March 27, 2009.
- <sup>100</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>101</sup> This "organization" has been analyzed in detail by this author and the Spanish researcher Manuel Torres Soriano. See Ely Karmon, "Hezbollah America Latina: Strange Group or Real Threat?" *Institute for Counter-Terrorism website*, November 14, 2006, at <http://www.instituteforcounterterrorism.org/apage/3539.php>. See also Manuel R. Torres Soriano, "La Fascinación por el éxito: el caso de Hezbollah en América Latina," *Jihad Monitor Occasional Paper No 1*, October 17, 2006, at <http://www.ugr.es/~terris/Hezbollah%20Latino.pdf>
- <sup>102</sup> "Condenan a prisión a venezolanos que colocaron explosivos en embajada de EEUU," *EFE*, December 20, 2008.
- <sup>103</sup> Gustavo Coronel, "The Hezbollah Venezuelan Metastasis," *Venezuela Today*, September 4, 2006, at <http://venenews.net/gUStavo-coronel/hizbula-hezbollah-hizbullah+venezuela+hugochavez.html>
- <sup>104</sup> The more popular leftist trend is present in the cooperation with Quebracho, a small Argentinean militant group. The Patriotic Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Patriótico Revolucionario - MPR) Quebracho affirms to be a political organization fighting for "a socially just, economically independent and politically sovereign country" for the "National Antiimperialist Revolution". Quebracho militants consider themselves "revolutionary patriots" in the framework of the Latin American liberation struggle. Karmon, *Hezbollah America Latina: Strange Group or Real Threat?*
- <sup>105</sup> John Kiriakou, "Iran's Latin America push," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2008.
- <sup>106</sup> Robert Amsterdam, "Why Obama Should Bet on Brazil," March 13, 2009, at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-amsterdam/why-obama-should-bet-on-b\\_b\\_174693.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-amsterdam/why-obama-should-bet-on-b_b_174693.html)
- <sup>107</sup> See Peter Hakim, "A Disappointing First Year: Obama and Latin America," *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, January 20, 2010 and Paul Richter, "U.S. diplomacy stumbles in Latin America," *latimes.com*, January 3, 2010.
- <sup>108</sup> "Presidente de Irán prueba diplomacia brasileña en visita oficial," Mexico *El Informador*, November 23, 2009.
- <sup>109</sup> Igor Gielow, "EUA tentam aparar arestas com Brasil na questão nuclear," *Folha de Sao Paulo*, October 29, 2009.
- <sup>110</sup> Michael Shifter, "Obama and Latin America: New Beginnings, Old Frictions," *Current History*, February 1, 2010.
- <sup>111</sup> "Iran: Clinton's remarks infringe int'l norms," *İslâmi Davet*, December 15, 2009, at <http://www.islamidavet.com/english/2009/12/15/iran-clintons-remarks-infringe-intl-norms/>. İslâmi Davet is an Islamic Politics and Cultural pro-Iranian web site from Turkey.
- <sup>112</sup> "Brazil Petrobras Considers Ending Iran Operations – Estado," *Wall Street Journal*, November 16, 2009.