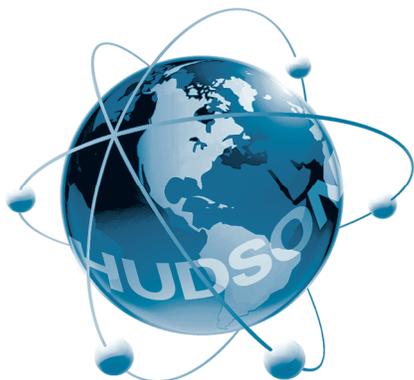


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# Hudson Institute

## Iran and Latin America

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# Iran and Latin America

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I must confess that, after years of closely observing Iran's strategies abroad, I find its growing presence in Latin America to be the most disturbing geopolitical development the region is facing today. Iran's presence is Messianic in its goals and relentless in its tactics. It is intimately related to narcoterrorism, both in its own practice and in the groups and activities it sponsors. The key to its expanding reach has been Hugo Chávez.

Recently, a journalist from an important news outlet in Venezuela questioned the importance I attribute to Iranian embassies in Latin America. "They are just embassies," he told me. To which I answered that our concept of what embassies are, or should be, has little to do with how Iran and its peers conceive of them. For these regimes, an embassy is a platform for terrorism. We need only to remember that two of the most brutal terrorist attacks in recent times in the region were ordered by Tehran and were planned and executed by Iranian agents operating directly from Iran's embassy in Buenos Aires.

With this background, and with solid evidence that Islamic terrorist networks operate in sensitive areas of the continent, the Iranian regime's growing interest and presence in Latin America is deeply troubling.

On his part, Hugo Chávez—Venezuela's autocratic President—is acting as a go-between for Iran's penetration strategy. He opens the doors to leaders of countries under his influence for the Iranians, like the Bolivian Evo Morales, the Ecuadorian Rafael Correa and the Nicaraguan Daniel Ortega. Recently, Chávez made his ninth visit to Tehran. Lately we have learned that Chávez also acts as a front man, facilitating Iranian arms purchases banned by UN sanctions. I refer to the fact, reported in the international press, that while in Moscow recently Chávez publicly announced that he would buy the batteries for the S-300 surface-to-air missiles whose sale to Iran Russia had to cancel in compliance with the new UN rules. This raises suspicion

about the massive arms purchases already made by Chávez, in quantities that go well beyond the conceivable needs of any single country like Venezuela.

Given these circumstances, the reaction to Iranian penetration in Latin America on the part of the most responsible and democratic governments in the region has been amazingly passive. But it is nonetheless clear that such penetration poses serious threats to the peace and security of the peoples of the Americas, and ignoring them will not make these threats disappear. It's time to wake up to the threat represented by the Tehran-Caracas axis and its links to terrorism.

As the close ties that exist between Chávez's regime and the ETA terrorist organization were uncovered in Spain, judicial authorities there issued a timely reminder that these days Caracas is a hotbed of terrorists, where they find refuge, financing, and training. Spanish judges revealed that two ETA terrorists — Besance and Atistrain — confessed that as recently as 2008 they were trained in all the methods of terror along with Chilean radicals in Venezuelan territory.

The person in charge of receiving, protecting, and organizing their terrorist training was Arturo Cubillas, an ETA member closely linked to the Chávez regime. Cubillas not only is a functionary of the government, which assigned him the position of Chief of Security of an entity belonging to the Ministry of Agriculture, but his wife, Goizeder Odriozola, works with none other than the Venezuelan Vice President, Elias Jaua.

The organic links between ETA's Cubillas with the government of Chávez were revealed in a single act. When the Spanish judges asked for Venezuelan collaboration in arresting and extraditing Cubillas, the first reaction from Chavez' ambassador in Madrid was to question the proceedings, even hinting that the confessions were obtained under torture. The resulting scandal forced Chávez to deny his claims and that he was protecting ETA and promote, at the specific request of the then Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs Miguel Angel Moratinos, that he would investigate Cubillas and if it was the case [that he trained ETA terrorists] then he would be tried in Venezuela or extradited to Spain. Immediately after, however, the Venezuelan Attorney General Luisa Ortega was quick to note that in no case would Cubillas be extradited to Spain, as he held Venezuelan citizenship. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that so far Cubillas has not been

arrested or stopped, not even suspended, despite the seriousness of the charges against him and his actions in support of terrorism.

### **Iran's Strategy**

This is the proper context in which we must place Iran's extraordinary efforts to establish beachheads in Latin America with Chávez's help. Those efforts are truly extra-ordinary: they include Iran's investment of billions of dollars in Venezuela, as well as the promise of millions to be invested in Bolivia and Nicaragua.

In addition, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has made numerous visits to several countries in the region in recent years, always with Venezuela as his spearhead. Those same countries have been also frequently visited by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and other senior officials of the Iranian government, most notably including those of Iran's security and intelligence agencies.

A logical, and disquieting, question imposes itself: what justifies such an eagerness toward an area geographically so distant from Iran? This question has been raised even in Tehran, where some have criticized the lack of economic sense in spending astronomical amounts of money in this region. Given the background and present behavior of the Ayatollahs' regime, it would be a good idea for the countries of Latin America to start asking the same question, before it is too late.

It is widely known that the Iranian regime is looking for diplomatic allies all over the world. Its leaders are intent upon shaking off its status as an international pariah, which it first earned for its behavior as a state sponsor of terrorism and later confirmed with its ostensive quest for nuclear armaments, not to mention its virulent anti-Semitism and its stubborn denial of the Holocaust. Iran views any possible allies that are geographically close to the United States as particularly valuable, since they can be presented as challenges to American influence in the States' own backyard, something similar to what Ahmadinejad attempted to do in Lebanon.

We must also remember that Ayatollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic theocracy, always maintained that the Islamic Revolution had to transcend the national level and be exported to other countries, even by imposing it on other Islamic nations with non-theocratic governments. For Khomeini, the constitutional provision “to perpetuate the revolution at home and abroad” implied not only preaching and propagating the Islamic faith, but also engaging in confrontation and armed struggle. It is not surprising then that a regime that is expansionist by definition would, through the years, develop a clear policy of state-sponsored terrorism, directly and indirectly executed through organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas.

### **Chávez’s Expansionism**

Chávez’s regime shares the same expansionist drive, which translates into a strategic identification with Iran’s theocracy. In effect, while autocracy has been, unfortunately, a relatively common phenomenon in Latin America’s turbulent history, the authoritarianism of Chávez is of an aggressively expansionist nature: for him, it is not enough to ruthlessly impose it in Venezuela (as past dictators limited themselves to doing in this and other Latin American countries); it must also be transplanted to other countries and, if possible, to all the countries in the region.

Chávez is well placed to facilitate Iran’s penetration. His rabidly anti-American agenda has greatly benefited the Ayatollahs. Although Chávez doesn’t have a coherent system of beliefs, his brand of radical populism—inspired by that of his mentor Fidel Castro—finds fertile ground in the poverty, inequality, and corruption that are endemic in Latin America. In addition, Chávez has spent and continues to spend huge amounts of money to export his model of government, transforming other populist leaders in Latin America into his “clients” and acting—one could say—as the head of a regional franchise for radical populism.

Now, behind Chávez’s apparent madness there exists a careful method, thanks to the mentorship of the Castro brothers. For example, the strategy to bring about the expansionist vision of the Bolivarian revolution has three different levels:

- The first level is to establish satellite states;

- The second level is to generate “client states” in places where it is not possible to establish a Chávez-like regime, but where there is an important level of sympathy toward the Venezuelan Lieutenant General;
- The third level, complementary to the other two, is to intimidate the countries that don’t follow the guidelines issued in Caracas, in order to make sure that they keep silent about violations of human and democratic rights committed by the Chávez regime.

Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador are the best examples of satellites of Caracas, although each is in a different degree of progress in the process of becoming a “Chávez-like” regime. It is not by pure coincidence that Evo Morales, Daniel Ortega, and Rafael Correa, have all trampled on Congress and the Judiciary and set the abolishing of presidential term limits as their first priority in order to stay in power. All three have also criminalized their political opponents with all kinds of false accusations and have hounded private companies with expropriations, confiscations, and the imposition of ruinous low prices, among other measures that have no place in a democracy.

Honduras was moving in that same direction under Manuel Zelaya who, as soon as he joined the army of followers of the Bolivarian revolution, tried to bring about the first rule in Chávez’s manual: abolish presidential term limits and remain in power at any cost. As we all know, Zelaya did not achieve this goal, which was in open violation of the Honduran Constitution. Chávez and his acolytes have not yet been able to recover from this setback to their progress in Central America, to the point that they continue to engage in all actions possible to block the normalization of international relations with the freely and democratically elected government of Honduras.

Examples of “client states” abound. They go from the purchase of Argentine bonds, in order to keep the Kirchners afloat during their periodic episodes of fiscal insolvency, to the huge flows of oil and money that keep the majority of Caribbean states in a permanent position of support for Chávez’s whim. Thus, Chávez has managed to create significant blocks of open or subtle support for himself and his friends in international *fora* and organizations.

Cuba is a special case in terms of relations to Chávez. On the one hand, to Chávez, Cuba is the motherland of knowledge about and guidance for the construction—I would rather say the destruction—of socialism. In turn, Venezuela is for Cuba a generous udder from which it milks billions of dollars a year, a role not that different from the one played by the Soviet Union until its empire collapsed.

One key element of the services that Cuba offers to Chávez is his personal security. In addition, Cuba already has a leading role in Venezuela's Army, in its police and its intelligence and migration services. There are thousands of Cuban doctors and teachers, infiltrated all throughout the country, who carry out the ideological indoctrination of Venezuelan citizens.

With the unlimited support of Chávez and with his tactics to control countries, earn their support, or silence their criticism, Iran's diplomatic efforts in the region have borne significant results. Nicaragua, for instance, has expressed its support for the Iranian nuclear program. Venezuela and Cuba, in turn, have confirmed on multiple occasions their opposition to any sanctions imposed on Tehran for its non-compliance with resolutions of the UN Security Council and its Nuclear Agency. Furthermore, Iran's diplomatic presence in the region has been continually expanding: it has reopened embassies in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Uruguay, and it has opened a new one in Nicaragua with a disproportionate number of "diplomats," in spite the fact that their ties, commercial or otherwise, are utterly insignificant. It is also worth noting that Iranian nationals no longer need a visa to enter Nicaragua.

The support of Brazil, under Lula da Silva's government, is even more remarkable. Brazil is too too big a country and its economic situation is too solid to be in any way controlled by Chávez. Yet, it is the most glittering trophy in Iran's showcase of diplomatic triumphs in the region. Lula da Silva legitimized Ahmadinejad when he received the Iranian president in Brasilia in November of last year. But Lula has also legitimized Iran's nuclear ambitions, which he insists on characterizing as "peaceful," although it is known beyond any reasonable doubt that Iran's aims are clearly military in nature.

What prompts Lula to provide such useful diplomatic services to Tehran? His motivations are, in part a winning move in the leftist gallery of his political party, and in part sheer ego and

vanity. The tight financial and monetary policies with which Lula governed Brazil have distanced him from the leftist orthodoxy of his party about domestic policy. In order to neutralize intra-party criticism, he resorts to those leftists gestures in foreign policy. Lula also has the ambition to go down in history as the president who earned Brazil international recognition and status as a superpower. This encourages him not only to challenge the United States as much as possible—in order to “show” his independence—but also to assume flamboyant positions that call attention to Brazil on the international scene. In both cases, Lula’s gestures of support for Iran are perfectly consistent with his strategy; they create problems for others at a limited domestic cost to himself.

### **Dangerous Liaisons**

The danger here is that the ties to the Ayatollahs entail much more than what the countries in the region may be expecting. We must remember that Iran is considered “the most active state sponsor of terrorism.” Thanks to Chavez’s ties to Iran, Hamas has opened offices in Caracas, as has the terrorist group Hezbollah, which Tehran finances with over 120 million dollars a year.

As the *Los Angeles Times* has reported, Western government officials fear that Hezbollah “may be using Venezuela as a base for its operations.” An official involved in the fight against terrorism told the *Times* that the relation between Venezuela and Iran “is becoming a strategic association.” How to explain otherwise the regular flights between Caracas and Tehran, for which no tickets are sold and no immigration or customs inspections are required?

We must not forget that Hezbollah has carried out not one, but two horrible terrorist attacks in the region, both in Buenos Aires. The first one, in 1992, against the Embassy of Israel, killed 42 people and wounded 242. The second one, two years later, against the headquarters of the largest Jewish Community Center in the city, left 82 people dead and 300 wounded. The official report from the Argentine authorities confirmed the direct responsibility of Iran and Hezbollah in both attacks. The report pointed out that Hezbollah had “followed orders issued directly by Tehran’s regime.” The Argentine Justice issued arrest warrants against former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, former Foreign Minister Ali Ar Velayati, former Intelligence Chief Ali Fallahijan and four other Iranian nationals, as well as against Imad Mugniyah, head of

Hezbollah's external security apparatus. It is worth noting that, in spite of Iran's strong protests Interpol confirmed Argentina's report and issued international warrants for the arrest of six Iranian suspects.

Besides this bloody record, police authorities know that Hezbollah, Hamas, and Al Qaeda have sought refuge and raise funds in the Triple Frontier area, shared by Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay, as well as in Venezuela's Margarita Island and the Caribbean. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been channeled to parent organizations in the Middle East through their operatives in those areas, extending thus the worldwide network of support for terrorism in the region.

Although it is well known that al Qaeda and Hezbollah come from different, and inimical, branches of Islam, this is not an obstacle for the two organizations to form alliances of convenience seeking to reach common goals against a "common" enemy, the United States. The infamous "tri-border" region has a trait that makes it particularly inviting to Tehran. Most Muslims in the Americas are Sunnis, in line with their proportion in the world's population. But the Shiites constitute almost half of all the Muslim residents of Foz do Iguacu, the Brazilian city with the largest Islamic community in the Triple Frontier, just one bridge away from Ciudad del Este, which has the largest Islamic community in Paraguay with an equal high proportion of Shiites. We should all be concerned that Iran may aim at infiltrating these communities in order to manipulate them.

All this has moved the U.S. Treasury Department to freeze assets belonging to Hezbollah members in the tri-border area as well as prompted Canadian intelligence to point out that its "reports indicate that resources are regularly sent to Middle East groups, including Hamas, by support groups [in the Triple Frontier]." The threat of Islamic terrorism in the Triple Frontier is serious enough to have brought the three countries involved to create, with the support of the United States authorities, a tripartite command center (the 3 + 1 Group) in order to consolidate their police efforts in the area.

There is also evidence that Islamic terrorists have active links with drug traffic and money laundering in several countries in the region, as was revealed in Colombia by the dismantling of

a group composed of Hezbollah operatives and a Colombian drug cartel that had generated hundreds of millions of dollars to finance Hezbollah's terrorist activities.

The drug cartels are expanding their reach in our countries, as has been shown by diverse police operations. The proven links between the Islamic terrorists and the drug cartels significantly increase the security risks in the region. In this respect, several Central American countries suffer the assaults of "maras" (gangs). These "maras" are tightly linked to drug trafficking and all kinds of highly violent criminal acts as well as to gangs in the United States; they are also instrumental in the illegal infiltration of this country. Security experts worry that these gangs' expertise could be put at the service of terrorists who want to enter the United States without being detected.

### **Necessary Actions**

It is time that Latin American countries open their eyes to these risks. In view of the active presence, among others, of Hezbollah, Hamas, and al Qaeda in the region, it is also important to strengthen the institutional capacity of Latin American countries to prevent, research, and prosecute terrorist activities of any kind. There are excellent hemispheric tools available for that purpose, like the Inter American Convention Against Terrorism (CICTE), established by the Organization of American States. In close cooperation with United States authorities and with Spain's support, CICTE works to strengthen the countries anti-terrorism legislation and to train the appropriate officers and personnel. It also promotes the improvement of security and immigration controls and the development of special training programs in the control of financial flows and money laundering, based in actual cases, as well as in matters of cyber-security.

At the same time, the U.S. Southern Command has sustained solid relations of military collaboration with its counterparts in the region in order to fight the threat of terrorism, which reaffirms that hemispheric cooperation is a crucial asset in this area.

An important additional step would be to raise the funds devoted to the program of anti-terrorist cooperation provided to Latin American countries in order to improve their capabilities in areas such as the handling of airport security, bomb detection and deactivation, and the fight against the financing of terrorist activities. In spite of its significance, this State Department program

has been assigned very limited resources, and these have been mostly spent in support, first, of Colombia and, presently, of Mexico. This program is an effort that could and should be considerably strengthened, given the urgency of bolstering the anti-terrorist capabilities of Latin American countries.

Finally, although nothing can replace the countries' determination to pay due attention to the risks of Iranian penetration in the region, it is clear that the Iranians have used to their own advantage the void that the United States has created by dedicating its attention to other regions in the world and markedly neglecting the relations with its neighbors.

I must say in all honesty that the United States does not possess a clear and consistent policy towards Latin America. Some decades ago, a perceptive former Latin American President said that it was hazardous to be a friend of the United States, because it wasn't a trustworthy ally. It is a fundamental responsibility of American politicians from both parties to remedy this situation. In the face of the threat of Iran's penetration in the region and its ties to international terrorism, it is essential for the United States to maintain a fruitful and continued dialogue with the countries of the hemisphere. Whoever ignores this does so at their own peril.

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