Iran In The Western Hemisphere

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Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the issue of Iran in Latin America with you today. I think the growing alliance of Iran with is a significant and under-reported part of the equation that is driving the instability and uncertainty in Latin America, from the crisis in Honduras to the rapidly-closing space for democratic freedoms in Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and elsewhere where the Bolivarian revolution has gained a foothold.

There is considerable debate over the level of threat posed by Iran's expanding diplomatic, trade and military presence in Latin America, and its stated ambition to continue to broaden these ties. These new alliances are causing deep concern not only in the United States, but also in Europe and parts of Latin America. Others portray the relations as an unthreatening and natural outgrowth of a rapidly changing, multi-polar world. There are points of agreement and divergence among different camps, as well as larger issues that must be addressed in order to come as close as possible to obtaining a full picture what Iran's interests and intentions imply.

The Shared Understanding

There is broad agreement that Iran's expanding ties with Venezuela, forged by the personal friendship between presidents Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chávez respectively, anchor the relationships in the region. Iran's relationships with Ecuador's Rafael Correa and Bolivia's Evo Morales clearly pass through Venezuela and are a direct result of the convergent interests of Iran and Venezuela in building these alliances. Iran's relationship with Nicaragua is slightly different, given President Daniel Ortega's long-standing personal relationship with the Iranian revolution, dating back to his first term as president (1979-1990). Nonetheless even Ortega's relationship with Iran is closely tied to his relationship with Chávez, because Nicaragua is far more dependent on Chávez's discounted oil than any of his other regional allies.

A second point of general agreement is that Iran, facing broad international sanctions because of its non-transparent nuclear program, is primarily seeking political support and leverage against the United States, rather than deep economic relationships in

Latin America. The notable exceptions are ventures related to strategic minerals or hydrocarbons.

Related to this is the third point of convergence: Iran's overall dealings on the economic and diplomatic fronts are generally opaque, built on the personal dynamic between Ahmadinejad and Latin American heads of state, as demonstrated by the numerous personal visits conducted by and among Ahmadinejad, Chávez, Ortega, Morales and Correa. These personalized relationships have largely supplanted institutionalized, formal policies guided by input from the respective congresses or ministries of foreign affairs and economic issues.

This stands in contrast to Iran's relationship with some other nations in the region, particularly Brazil, where the ties are institutionalized and largely devoid of the personal diplomacy prevalent in the rest of the region. When institutional, rather than personal relationships, prevail, Iran overtures are often rejected or forced into more transparent plane. It is important to note that the relationship with Brazil has consistently been kept at a cabinet or sub-cabinet level, and the heads of state have not met because of Brazil's unwillingness to commit to such a meeting.

An important result of having such an institutionalized relationship in Brazil is that Brazil refused to help Venezuela with is nuclear program after it became clear that Venezuela was not willing to proceed without the direct involvement of Iran. Ahmadinejad has been unable to visit Brazil, despite various efforts to do so, yet the commercial relationship between Brazil and Iran is robust.

While Iran's nuclear program is often portrayed as primarily a concern of the United States--and Iran's defiant rhetoric almost exclusively aimed at the Bush and then the Obama administrations-- Iran has been sanctioned three times by the United Nations Security Council for its unwillingness to halt its uranium enrichment program.[1] This is important in viewing Iran's actions in Latin America and its attempts to expand its diplomatic reach and avoid international isolation.

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[1] Kay Farley, "U.N. Adds New Set of Iran Sanctions," *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 2008, p. A06. The sanctions include a travel ban on senior Iranian officials, the freezing of assets of companies believed to be involved in the nuclear program, the right to inspect cargo in ports and airports, and the monitoring of Bank Melli and Bank Saderat, believed to be financing the purchase of nuclear technologies.

Venezuela had sought a uranium enrichment technology transfer from Brazil in October 2005. The prospect of Iranian involvement led Brazilian officials to retract any initial enthusiasm for the deal. A spokesman for Brazil's Ministry of Science and Technology stated: "In view of possible Iranian participation, as President Chávez has suggested, such a partnership would be risky for Brazil," adding that, "Brazil is not interested in cooperating with countries that do not follow international treaties and whose programs are not monitored by competent authorities."[2] Argentina took a similar position, based on its long-standing tensions with Iran.[3] Venezuela did, finally, sign an agreement with Russia to build a nuclear power plant, in September 2008. While Iran's participation was not explicitly mentioned, Atomstroyexport, the same company building the Bushehr reactor in Iran, is expected to be the project operator in Venezuela.[4]

A final, and perhaps most important point of agreement is that a primary, and perhaps sole real point of convergence between Ahmadinejad and Chávez in forging their relationship is both of these leaders' openly declared hostility toward the United States and its allies in the region, and, to a lesser degree, the European Union and U.N. backers of the sanctions regime. The meetings between Ahmadinejad and Chávez (as well as with Morales, Correa and Ortega) have become occasions to launch virulent attacks against the United States, globalization, Israel, imperialism and capitalism. The leaders clearly relish the angst their relationship causes Washington and make a point of publicly linking the Bolivarian and Iranian revolutions. Ortega has declared the Iranian and Nicaraguan revolutions are "twin revolutions, with the same objectives of justice, liberty, sovereignty and peace...despite the aggressions of the imperialist policies." Ahmadinejad couched the alliances as part of "a large anti-imperialist movement that has emerged in the region." Morales declared Bolivia and Tehran "two friendly and revolutionary countries."[5]

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[2] Andrei Khalip, "Brazil Wary on Nuclear Cooperation with Venezuela," *Reuters*, May 23, 2005.
[3] Mariela Leon and Marianna Parraga, "Negotiations to Purchase Nuclear Reactor from Argentina Confirmed," *El Universal*, October 11, 2005, http://www.eluniversal.com/2005/10/11/en_pol_art_11A618849.shtml, Media reports noted that discussion over selling Venezuela nuclear technology in Argentina had pitted the "pro-Chávez" camp against the "anti-Chávez" camp. See Natasha Niebieskikwiat, "Venezuela quiere comprarle un reactor nuclear a la Argentina, *Clarín*, October 9, 2005, http://www.clarin.com/diario/2005/10/09/elpais/p-00315.htm
[4] *Russica-Izvestia Information*, September 30, 2008, and *Agence France-Presse*, "Venezuela Wants to Work With Russia on Nuclear Energy: Chávez," September 29, 2008.
[5] BBC, "Bolivia's President Lands in Iran," Sept. 1, 2008.

Indeed, this common desire to build an alternative power structure free of the perceived dominance of the United States is one of the few reasons that populist and self-described revolutionary, staunchly secular governments in Latin America (many who have been directly at odds with the Catholic church, the main religious force in their countries) would make common cause with a reactionary, theocratic Islamist regime.

Trade relations are still minimal, particularly when compared to commercial ties to the United States. There is little shared history or religious heritage, and virtually no cultural bonds. Only a shared platform of deep dislike for a common enemy--and the desire to recruit allies in the cause and develop a common strategy to carry it out--can explain this otherwise improbable alliance. Iran's entry to Latin America has been possible, in part, as an outgrowth of mounting criticism of U.S. foreign policy under the Bush administration, particularly its policy in Iraq. In addition to the strain of U.S. policy in Iraq has caused, there is the perceived lack of interest in the region by the Bush administration. The multiple visits of Ahmadinejad and senior Iranian officials to Latin America and reciprocal state visits from leaders of the Bolivarian axis signal far more high-level interest in the region than the Bush administration is perceived to have had, and likely more than the Obama administration will be able to match, given the press of other international crises .

The Crucial Dichotomy

A key question that must be addressed in any discussion of Iran's relationship to Latin America's radical populist governments is the above-noted yawning chasm between the Bolivarian Revolution's stated goals, publicly embraced by Chávez, Ortega, Correa and Morales, and those of Ahmadinejad's revolutionary Islamist government. The Bolivarian revolution claims as principles equality, secularism, socialism, women's rights, and mass participation in governing. These are directly opposed to the goals of creating a theocracy where women's rights are denied, democratic participation is circumscribed by religious dictates and theologians set social and economic policy based on their interpretation of Koran, rather than the writing of Simón Bolivar. This lack of a more broad-based set of shared values helps explain Iran's behavior in the region. Rather than seek true economic ties, the priority is given to diplomatic representation. Hence

Iran's promised economic aid is almost always undelivered while its promises of diplomatic relations are promptly fulfilled.

Iran has signed billions of dollars in bilateral agreements with Venezuela, although financial accountability and monitoring is almost nonexistent.[6] Iran has also promised hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and investments in Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Because most of the deals are opaque, are not delivered through normal budgetary channels and there are few public records available, it is not clear how much of the promised aid has been delivered. This is clearly the case in Nicaragua, where Iran promised multiple projects, including $350 million deep-water canal and $120 million hydroelectric plant.[7] Yet investigative journalists, national members of congress and academics in the field have been unable to obtain information on the progress and expenditures on any of the major projects or loans and there is no physical evidence they are underway.

Ecuador has made little effort to follow through on the verbal economic agreements between Correa and Ahmadinejad during Ahmadinejad's Jan. 15, 2007 visit to Quito when Correa was sworn in. There is little available information on the fate of the promised $1.1 billion in investment in Bolivia in the next five years.[8]

In contrast, the results of the promised diplomatic expansion are clearly visible. Post revolutionary Iran has had embassies in Cuba, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela.[9] In 2007, Iran reopened its embassies in Colombia[10] and in Nicaragua.[11] (Iran had closed its embassy in Nicaragua following the defeat of Ortega in the 1990 Presidential elections.)[12] Following a February 2007 meeting in Tehran Iranian Foreign

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[6] The figures of the projects are difficult to determine and require further study. Since 2001 the two nations have signed some 180 trade agreements, with the total value, if the investment actually occurs, of $7 billion. See: *Moj News Agency*, "Iran-Venezuela Strengthen Economic-Ideological Ties, October 8, 2008; and Nasser Karimi, "Chavez, Ahmadinejad: US Power on Decline," The *Associated Press*, Tuesday, November 20, 2007, accessed at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/19/AR2007111900400.html

[7] See Todd Bensman, "Iran Making Push Into Nicaragua," *San Antonio Express News*, December 18, 2007; and "Iran Offers Aid to Nicaragua, in a Sign of Deepening Ties," *Reuters* , August 6, 2007.

[8] BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, " Iran Wants to 'Exploit' Bolivian Uranium," September 22, 2008. This is the translated text of what appeared in the Iranian newspaper *Kargozaran* on September 2, 2008.

[9] Statement by Kucinich, op cit.

[10] "Colombia Seeking Energy Cooperation," Iran Daily, op cit.

[11] Todd Bensman, "Iran making push into Nicaragua," *San Antonio Express News*, op cit.

[12] "Irán abrirá embajada en Managua y Nicaragua en Teherán," *El Nuevo Diario*, op cit.

Minister Manoucher Mottaki announced plans to reopen embassies in Chile, Ecuador and Uruguay. A year later Iran opened a large embassy in La Paz, Bolivia.[13] The ties are growing in both directions. In 2007, Ortega announced Nicaragua would open an embassy in Tehran while Morales announced that he is moving Bolivia's only embassy in the Middle East from Cairo to Tehran.[14] The recent report by the Washington Post regarding the size of the Iranian embassy in Managua misses an important point: the physical size of the embassy is far less important than the number people operating with diplomatic immunity, and these numbers are not divulged by the Nicaraguan, Bolivia or Venezuelan governments.[15]

The expanding diplomatic ties clearly give Iran a broader platform for pressing its international agenda, primarily the avoidance of international sanctions for its nuclear program and blunting efforts at international condemnation in the United Nations and other international forums. What is more difficult to calculate, but must be included in assessing Iran's goals, is Iran's history of using its embassies to support activities of the Quds Force (the special forces branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, formed as the main security force in Iran following the 1979 revolution) and Hezbollah (the Party of God) operatives.[16] The Quds Force and Hezbollah, which often operate cooperatively, are jointly implicated in the AMIA case in Argentina, while also outlining the flawed police work and judicial handling in the case.

This worry is compounded by a serious change in military doctrine and tactics now being adopted across the nations that are part of the Bolivarian bloc, imparted by

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[13] Remarks by Ambassador Jaime Daremblum, Hudson Institute, at the Conference on "Creating an Environment for Trans- America Security Cooperation," Florida International University, Miami, May 3-4, 2007.

[14] *Associated Press*, "Bolivia Moving Mideast Embassy to Iran from Egypt, " September 5, 2008.

[15] Ann-Marie O'Connor and Mary Beth Sheridan, "Iran's Invisible Nicaragua Embassy," *Washington Post,* July 13, 2009.

[16] For a more complete look at the relationship between the IRGC, the Quds Force, international intelligence gathering and ties to Hezbollah and other designated terrorist groups, see: Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the al Quds Force, and other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces (Working Draft)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 16, 2007. Cordesman notes that "The Quds are also believed to play a continuing role in training, arming, and funding Hezbollah in Lebanon and to have begun to support Shi'ite militia and Taliban activities in Afghanistan." (p. 8). He also notes that: "The Quds has offices or 'sections' in many Iranian embassies, which are closed to most embassy staff. It is not clear whether these are integrated with Iranian intelligence operations or if the ambassador in each embassy has control of, or detailed knowledge of, operations by the Quds staff. However, there are indications that most operations are coordinated between the IRGC and offices within the Iranian Foreign Ministry and MOIS." (page 9).

Venezuela along with its expanding military aid program. It is a military doctrine that is fully compatible with the strategies Hezbollah and other radical Islamist groups are already practicing, and one embraced to a significant degree by Iran, the primary state sponsor of those groups. The embracing of this doctrine provides an important link in understanding the ties of both Venezuela and its allies to Iran, and the growing military relationships.

Since 2005 Chávez has rewritten Venezuela's security doctrine to scrub it of all outside, "imperialist" influences. To replace the old doctrine, Chávez and the Venezuelan military leadership have focused on developing a doctrine centered on asymmetrical warfare, in the belief that the primary threat to Venezuelan security is a U.S. invasion.[17]

One of the main books he has adopted is Peripheral Warfare and Revolutionary Islam: Origins, Rules and Ethics of Asymmetrical Warfare (*Guerra Periferica y el Islam Revolucionario: Orígenes, Reglas y Ética de la Guerra Asimétrica*) by the Spanish politician and ideologue Jorge Verstrynge.[18] Although he is not a Muslim and the book was not written directly in relation to the Venezuelan experience, Verstrynge's book lauds radical Islam (as well as past terrorists like Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, better known as Carlos the Jackal)[19] for helping to expand the parameters of what irregular warfare should encompass, including the use of biological and nuclear weapons, along with the correlated civilian casualties among the enemy.

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[17] For a more complete discussion of how Verstrynge's concepts fit into Chávez's concept of the Bolivarian revolution see: Mariáno César Bartolomé, "Las Guerras Asimétricas y de Cuarta Generación Dentro Del Pensamiento Venezolano en Materia de Seguridad y Defensa, (Asymmetrical and Fourth Generation Warfare In Venezuelan Security and Defense Thinking), Military Review, January-February 2008, pp. 51-62.

[18] Verstrynge, born in Morocco to Belgian and Spanish parents, began his political career on the far right of the Spanish political spectrum as a disciple of Manuel Fraga, and served as a national and several senior party posts with the Alianza Popular. By his own admission he then migrated to the Socialist Party, but never rose through the ranks. He is widely associated with radical anti-globalization views and anti-U.S. rhetoric, repeatedly stating that the United States is creating a new global empire and must be defeated. Although he has no military training or experience, he has written extensively on asymmetrical warfare.

[19] It is worth noting that Chávez wrote to Ramírez Sánchez in 1999, expressing his admiration for the terrorist, signing off, "with profound faith in the cause and in the mission--now and forever." The letter set of in international furor. See: "Troops Get Provocative Book," Miami Herald, Nov. 11, 2005.

Central to Verstrynge's idealized view of terrorists is the belief in the nobleness of their actions because they are willing to sacrifice their lives in pursuit of their goals. Before writing extensively on how to make chemical weapons and listing helpful places to find information on the manufacture of rudimentary nuclear bombs that "someone with a high school education could make," Verstrynge writes:

> *We already know it is incorrect to limit asymmetrical warfare to guerrilla warfare, but it is important. However, it is not a mistake to also use things that are classified as terrorism and use them in asymmetrical warfare. And we have super terrorism, divided into chemical terrorism, bioterrorism (which uses biological and bacteriological methods), and nuclear terrorism, which means "the type of terrorism uses the threat of nuclear attack to achieve its goals."*[20]

[20] Verstrynge, op cit., pp. 56-57.

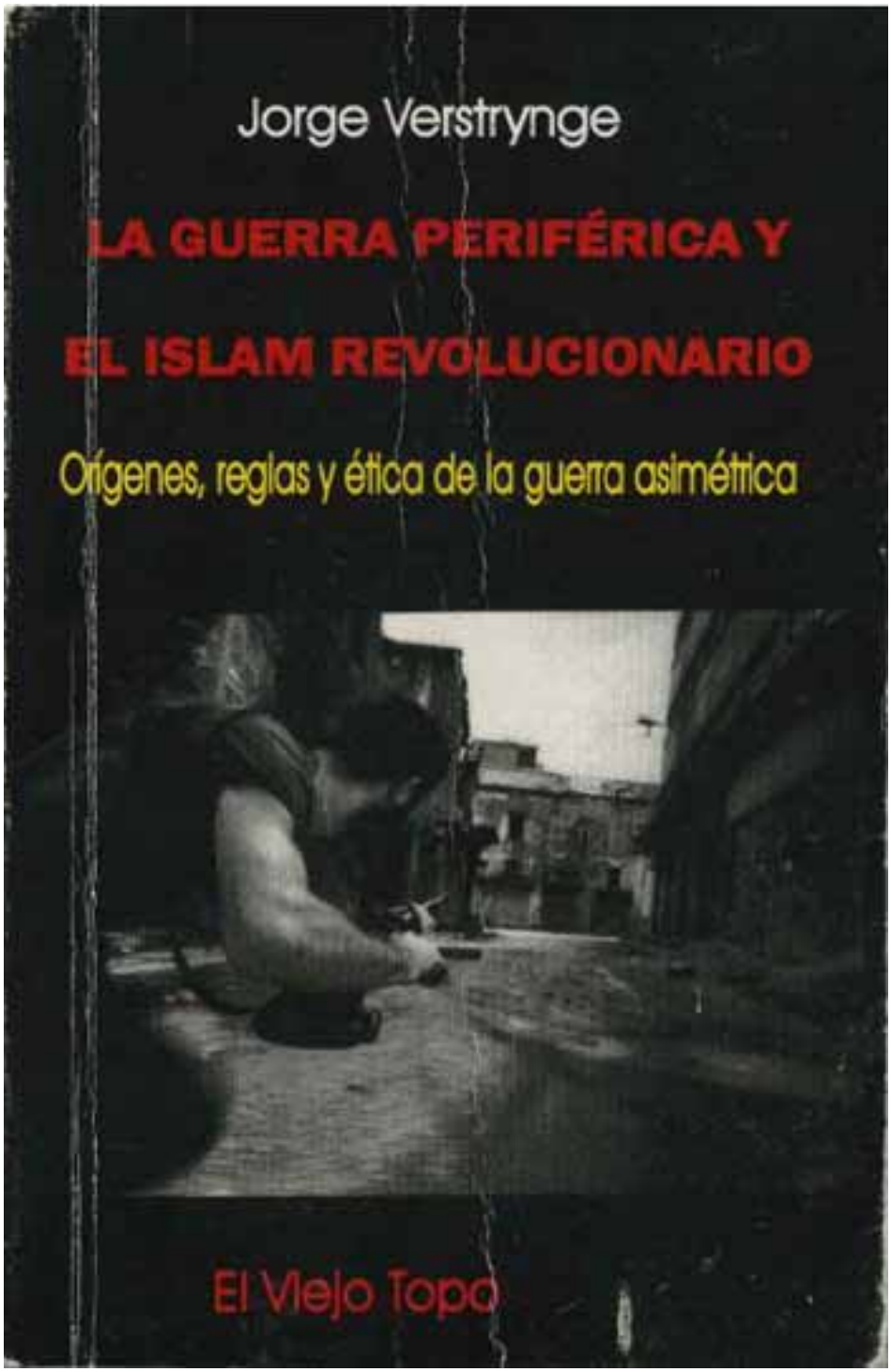

Figure 1: **Book by Jorge Verstrynge on irregular warfare**

Based on this book, Verstrynge was invited by Chávez to give keynote address to military leaders in a 2005 conference titled "First Military Forum on Fourth

Generation Warfare and Asymmetric Conflict" held at the military academy. Following the conference Gen. Raúl Baduel, the army commander and Chávez confidant ordered a special pocket size edition of the book to be printed up and distributed throughout the officer corps with explicit orders that it be studied cover to cover.

Figure 2:A copy of the pocket-sized special edition version of Verstrynge's work, distributed to the Venezuelan officer corps.

In a December 12, 2008 interview with Venezuelan state television lauded Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda for creating a new type of warfare that is "de-territorialized, de-stateized and de-nationalized," a war where suicide bombers act as "atomic bombs for the poor."[21]

Given the level of training Venezuelan military institutions are giving their regional counterparts and the level of on the ground Venezuelan leadership and advising in Bolivia, Ecuador and elsewhere, it is highly likely that this doctrine is being transmitted from one military to the other.

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[21] Bartolomé, op cit. See also: John Sweeny, "Jorge Verstrynge: The Guru of Bolivarian Asymmetric Warfare," www.vcrisis.com, Sept. 9, 2005; and "Troops Get Provocative Book," op cit.

Another opaque aspect of Iran's activities in Latin America is the selective recruitment of government cadres and students by the Iranian government in the countries where they have strong ties. The classes, lasting from 30 to 90 days, are described as "diplomatic training," not something that Iran is particularly suited to teach to countries in the West. The classes, given in and around Tehran, include intelligence training, crowd control techniques, and counterintelligence. So far the training has involved several hundred people from Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador and the Communist Party of El Salvador.[22] Given Iran's apparent lack of true "diplomatic" classes in these courses, one has to ask what the ultimate training is for, and whom it benefits.

Ties That Merit Further Examination

Because of the personalized nature and opaque relationships between Ahmadinejad and his Latin American allies there exists the potential, at least, for these alliances to be considered more than just annoyance. Venezuela is of particular concern because Chávez has taken several steps that point to a calculation that allowing Iran to evade the international sanctions regime is in his own interest. Such activity lies beyond the normal scope of relations between two nations with little in common except oil production and aspirations to form an anti-U.S. coalition.

Among the least explored elements is the Iranian financial presence in Venezuela and its possible use to help Iran avoid the international sanctions on its banking institutions. The primary Iranian banking vehicle is Venezuela Banco Internacional de Desarrollo (BID), established in September 2007. The Toseyeh Saderat Iran bank owns all the 40 million shares of the bank, and each share is valued at 1,000 bolivars, the currency of Venezuela. All seven of the bank directors, as well as their seven alternates, are Iranian citizens.[23] The Saderat bank group was designated by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Controls (OFAC) in October 2007 as a financial

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[22] The information is derived from author interviews with people in Nicaragua (FSLN) and El Salvador (FMLN-PC) who separately attended different types of training in Tehran, and described, separately, different types of training given. The FMLN-PC is the sector of the FMLN that maintains close ties to Chávez and Iran, while other sectors of the FMLN are opposed to such close ties.

[23] Founding BID documents in possession of the author. The Treasury Department's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) issued a warning against several Iranian banks, including BID, viewable at: http://www.fincen.gov/statutes_regs/guidance/pdf/fin-2008-a002.pdf;

vehicle for the government of Iran to fund Hezbollah, Hamas and other terrorist groups and helping Iran evade the international financial sanctions put in place by the international community.[24] The Saderat group is also under U.N. sanction, as part of the effort to cut off Iran's access to international banking institutions to fund its nuclear program. The irregular circumstances surrounding the formation of the bank, the unusual speed with which its charter was approved and its entirely foreign leadership makes it worthy of further study.

A second financial vehicle is the Banco Binacional Iraní-Venezolano, established May 19, 2008, with an initial capitalization of $1.2 billion, half put in by each country. The stated purpose of the bank is to finance activities in the areas of industry, trade, infrastructure, housing, energy, capital markets and technology. The bank will also issue bonds to be placed on the international capital markets and execute cooperation and technical assistance agreements with third parties."[25] Yet I was unable to find any public record of any project being financed by these funds.

Another unusual feature of the Iran-Venezuela relationship is the March 2008 inauguration of direct flights between Caracas and Tehran, returning via Damascus Syria. Either Boeing 747s or Airbus 340s, operated under a code share agreement between Venezuela's state-controlled Conviasa airlines and Iran's national carrier, Air Iran, carry out the weekly flights. This is unusual given the almost total absence of tourism and relative paucity of commercial ties between the two countries. Iran's ambassador in Venezuela said such large aircraft were necessary for the flight because Chávez is "much loved in our country, and our people want to come and get to know this land."[26] No known records of the passengers and cargo on the flights are maintained, and visas are not required.[27]

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[24] http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/hp644.htm.
An OFAC designation allows the U.S. government to seize any U.S.-based assets of the designated entity, as well as making it illegal for that entity to do any business in the United States, or for any U.S. company or person to do business with the designated entity. The list is widely used by international financial institutions as part of their "know your customer" due diligence research.

[25] "Iranian-Venezuelan Bank Organized by Law," *El Universal*, May 21, 2008, accessed at: http://english.eluniversal.com/2008/05/21/imp_en_eco_art_iranian-venezuelan-b_21A1594761.shtml

[26] Simon Romero, "Venezuela and Iran Strengthen Ties With Caracas-to-Tehran Flight," *New York Time*s, March 3, 2007.

[27] United States Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism, March 2008, Chapter 2.

The concerns about these and unusual activities, cloaked in official secrecy, would be more easily dismissed if not for a longstanding and complex web of relationships between state and non-state actors that carry across Iran's relationships with its Latin American allies.

Iran is the primary sponsor of Hezbollah, a designated terrorist organization by the United States, and one that has carried out numerous attacks against American citizens, as well being a likely participant in the attacks a decade ago in Argentina. Iran, in turn, has a cordial relationship with Chávez, who, in turn has developed a deep relationship with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-FARC) in neighboring Colombia.[28] The FARC is also a designated terrorist organization by the United States[29] and the European Union.[30] In September 2008 the Treasury Department's OFAC sanctioned three of Chávez's closest associates, including two intelligence chiefs, for aiding the FARC in the purchase of weapons and drug trafficking.[31] The FARC has a long history of making alliances with other terrorist organizations across ideological and geographic boundaries, including the Provisional Irish Republican Army (P-IRA) and ETA separatists in Spain.[32] Another

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[28] The most compelling primary source evidence of this relationship comes from the computer of Raúl Reyes, the FARC's deputy commander killed March 1, 2008 when Colombian troops raided his command center in neighboring Ecuador. Colombian troops recovered some 600 gigabytes of information from several computers and memory sticks found in the camp. Interpol, after conducting an independent analysis, concluded the data had not been tampered with when For a more complete analysis of what the documents show, see: Douglas Farah, "What the FARC Papers Show Us About Latin American Terrorism," The NEFA Foundation, April 1, 2008, accessible at: http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefafarc0408.pdf

[29] "FARC Terrorist Indicted for 2003 Grenade Attack on Americans in Colombia," Department of Justice Press Release, September 7, 2004. accessed at: http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2004/September/04_crm_599.htm.

[30] Official Journal of the European Union, Council Decision of Dec. 21, 2005, accessed at: http://europa.eu.int/eurlex/

[31] The three are Hugo Armando Cavajál, director of military intelligence, described as providing weapons to the FARC; Henry de Jesus Rangél, director of the civilian Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services, described as protecting FARC drug shipments; and Ramón Emilio Rodriguez Chacín, who, until a few days before the designation was Venezuela's minster of interior and justice. He is described as the "Venezuelan government's main weapons contact for the FARC." The role of the three in closely collaborating with the FARC is described in some detail in the documents captured in the Reyes documents. See: "Treasury Targets Venezuelan Government Officials Supporting the FARC," Press Room, Department of Treasury, September 12, 2008, viewed at: http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/hp1132.htm.

[32] For a more detailed look at the relationship between the FARC and other terrorist organizations, see: Douglas Farah, "The FARC's International Relations: A Network of Deception," The NEFA Foundation,

prominent regional player, Ortega in Nicaragua, has maintained a close relationship with both the FARC and Iran for more than two decades. The common denominators among the state protagonists are a strongly anti-U.S. platform and sponsorship of non-state armed groups operating outside their national borders. It is therefore necessary to ask whether the non-state actors, protected by their state sponsors, will themselves form alliances that will threaten the stability of the region, as well as that of the United States. Of primary concern is a possible Hezbollah-FARC alliance, centered on training of armed groups and drug trafficking.

There are public and credible allegations of Chávez's direct support for Hezbollah, among them the June 18, 2008 OFAC designations of two Venezuelan citizens, including a senior diplomat, as terrorist supporters for working with the armed group. Several businesses were also sanctioned. Among the things the two are alleged to have been doing on behalf of Hezbollah were coordinating possible terrorist attacks and building Hezbollah-sponsored community centers in Venezuela.[33]

There is a long history of outside terrorist actors operating in Latin America, in addition to those in Argentina discussed earlier. These include, in addition to ETA and the P-IRA in Colombia, the documented visits in the late 1990s to the Tri-Border Area of Hezbollah's chief of logistics Immad Mugnyiah (now deceased) and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the architect of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington and currently held in Guantanamo. [34] There is the possible presence of Osama bin Laden in the region

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September 22, 2008, accessed at:
http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefafarcirnetworkdeception0908.pdf

[33] One of those designated, Ghazi Nasr al Din, who served as the charge d'affaires of Venezuelan embassy in Damascus, and then served in the Venezuelan embassy in London. The OFAC statement said that in late January 2006, al Din facilitated the travel of two Hezbollah representatives of the Lebanese parliament to solicit donation and announce the opening of a Hezbollah-sponsored community center and office in Venezuela. The second individual, Fawzi Kan'an is described as a Venezuela-based Hezbollah supporter and a "significant provider of financial support to Hizbollah." He met with senior Hezbollah officials in Lebanon to discuss operational issues, including possible kidnapping and terrorist attacks. The OFAC statement can be accessed at: http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/hp1036.htm

[34] For a comprehensive look at possible radical Islamist activities in the region, see: Rex Hudson, "Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border (TBA) of South America," Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, July 2003. For more recent Hezbollah ties, as related by Colombia authorities, see: "Colombia Ties Drug Ring to Hezbollah," *Reuters* News Agency, as appeared in the *New York Times*, Oct. 22, 2008.

in 1995, as reported by the Brazilian, French and U.S. media.[35] Given the security with which these senior operatives would have to move it is unlikely they would visit the region unless there were adequate security arrangements and infrastructure to allow them to operate. It is also unlikely they would travel there if there were no reason to do so.

Conclusions

Multiple factors, when taken together, point to Iran being more than a mere irritant in one of the most important and geographically proximate spheres of influence of the United States. Because the Iranian presence is based almost exclusively on a shared anti-U.S. agenda among the principal actors, and the ties of the Chávez and Ahmadinejad governments to armed non-state actors, Iran's presence is potentially destabilizing not only to the United States but to the region.

The Iranian presence is due in no small measure to the sharp turn toward radical populism self-identified as socialist and Marxist, with a strong anti-U.S. component, in recent elections across Latin America. The triumphs of radical populism is due in part to the corruption and inability of the prior "neo-liberal" governments to seriously curtail poverty. However, it is worth noting that the populists have also lost significant elections, when the populace is presented with a viable, credible alternative. The Bolivarian victories have allowed Iran, operating through Venezuela, to spread its influence largely by invitation, using the promise (often unfulfilled) of significant economic aid. There is a significant lack of public accountability and transparency in the economic dealings between Iran and Venezuela and its allies in Latin America.

The hemispheric picture is clouded by the close relationship of Chávez and Ortega to the FARC, an insurgency seeking to overthrow a democratically elected (although flawed, particularly in the field of human rights) government in neighboring Colombia and promoting armed revolution in other Latin American countries.[36] Given Iran's ties to Hezbollah and Venezuela, Venezuela's ties Iran and the FARC, the FARC's history of building alliances with other armed groups, and the presence of Hezbollah and

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[35] "El Esteve no Brazil," *Veja* on-line, no. 1,794, March 19, 2003; "Bin Laden Reportedly Spent Time in Brazil in '95," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2003, p. A24.
[36] Farah, "The FARC's International Relations: A Network of Deception," op cit.

other armed Islamist groups in Latin America, it would be imprudent to dismiss this alignment as an annoyance. It is, instead, a direct and growing threat.

Given the global recession, low oil prices, the necessity of Venezuela to maintain a U.S. market for its oil, and the deep economic ties between the United States and Latin America, the long-term extent of Iran ultimate threat remains unclear. The ability of Iran and Venezuela to present a viable anti-U.S. agenda and support non-state groups will likely be in direct proportion to the world price of oil. If oil prices stay below $80 a barrel both nations will continue to face severe economic hardship internally and likely have less to spend on expansionist dreams.

However, it is worth noting that even when oil prices were at their lowest, neither Tehran nor Caracas significantly cut back their joint programs, despite intense internal pressure in each country to do so. Given that Iran is spending scarce resources on courting Latin America at a time of deep economic crisis, one can deduce the expansion in Latin America is a very high priority. The primary objectives appear to be breaking its international isolation while significantly improving its intelligence and logistical capabilities in an area of vital strategic value to the United States. Iran's presence is felt more acutely because of the absence of a U.S. agenda that is broadly embraced by Latin Americans, particularly since the 9/11 attacks. While the scope of the threat is open to debate, the intentions of Iran and is allies, led by Venezuela, are clear and should not be underestimated or dismissed.