

American Foreign Policy Council

BOLIVIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 10,969,649 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 1,098,581 sq km

Ethnic Groups: mestizo (mixed white and Amerindian ancestry) 68%, indigenous 20%, white 5%, cholo/chola 2%, black 1%, other 1%, unspecified 3% ; 44% of respondents indicated feeling part of some indigenous group, predominantly Quechua or Aymara

Religions: Roman Catholic 76.8%, Evangelical and Pentecostal 8.1%, Protestant 7.9%, other 1.7%, none 5.5%

Government Type: presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$35.7 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated January 2017)

OVERVIEW

Bolivia, a country of over 10.6 million people, has a Muslim population of approximately 2,000. But while the practice of the religion in Bolivia remains small and dispersed, the election of President Evo Morales in 2005 brought about a more amiable relationship with Islamic countries in the Middle East, and significantly opened Bolivia's official policy towards Islam in the years since.¹

Bolivia's Muslim population counts among its members' descendants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Iran, Syria, and Lebanon. These communities are generally spread out between the major cities of La Paz and Santa Cruz, with a smaller presence in Sucre, Cochabamba, and Oruro and other remote cities throughout the country. There are at least nine different Islamic organizations, both Shi'a and Sunni, operating within Bolivia, funded primarily by either Saudi Arabia or the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Since opening an embassy in La Paz in 2008, Iran has been a driving force in increasing the Islamic presence in Bolivia, within both society and the state. Iran has proposed several bilateral agreements with Bolivia, ranging from economic development projects to military-to-military exchanges. In return, Bolivia has lifted visa restrictions for Iranian citizens, and has facilitated the increased presence of Iranian officials in this Andean nation.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamic proselytization (*da'wah*) began in Bolivia in the early 1970s, during the economic boom that integrated Santa Cruz into national and international markets. Over the ensuing years, Santa Cruz became the financial hub of Bolivia and in the 1990s the department's local economy was greatly bolstered by the capitalization of the country's petroleum and gas industry. This spurred a mass wave of immigration that flooded Santa Cruz, of which an initial influx of Islamic immigrants was also a part. Today, this shift has ended, and economic investment by the state is focused on the western highlands of Bolivia. As a result, Islamic communities, particularly those that are Shi'a, have begun to populate this western region, and many Islamist elements have followed.

In La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, a prominent local Islamist is known to boast ties to the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxies. The leader of the Association of the Islamic Community of Bolivia (ACIB) *Ahlul Bait*, and of the Bolivian Shi'a community writ large, is Roberto Chambi Calle, a Bolivian lawyer who converted to Islam in 1996. Chambi also goes by the name of Yousef, and simultaneously runs another Shi'a organization—the Bolivia Islamic Cultural Foundation (FCIB in its Spanish acronym). Also based in La Paz, the FCIB was founded in August 2007 with the support of the Iranian government.

Chambi and his wife, Sdenka Saavedra Alfaro, actively promote an Islamist message through seminars and small meetings that they organize. They have invited *imams* from other Latin American countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, to these gatherings, and have a longstanding relationship with Shi'a spiritual leader Sheikh Abdul Karim Paz from Buenos Aires. Karim Paz is a direct disciple of Iranian intelligence operative Mohsen Rabbani, and was his successor at the *At Tawhid* mosque in Buenos Aires after Rabbani left Argentina following his involvement in the 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA) building.²

The Bolivian couple currently resides in Qom, Iran, alongside Rabbani, but continues to actively help in the spread of an Islamist message to the indigenous peoples of Bolivia. The Iran government, meanwhile, has further enhanced these effort via its work with state-owned media. In 2008, for instance, the Iranian government attempted to build a television station in Bolivia's coca-growing region of Chapare.³ Al-

though that project did not materialize, Iran did succeed in launching a broader, Spanish language television network in 2011. Known as HispanTV, it is owned and operated by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) conglomerate and is based out of Tehran.⁴ HispanTV currently broadcasts Islamist-leaning programming 24 hours a day in several countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. The channel's local Bolivian correspondent is an Argentine journalist, Andrés Sal-lari, who used to work for Bolivia's state-owned Canal 7.⁵

Andrés Sal-lari is also a reporter for a new state-owned media outlet believed to be financed by the Iranian government to the tune of approximately \$3 million. In 2012, President Evo Morales reportedly received a gift from his then-Iranian counterpart, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, to launch *Abya Yala*, a new multimedia network. Financed through one of Morales' foundations, the *Abya Yala* network has benefited from large amounts of government advertising and preferential contracts with various government agencies, notably the national tax service and the hydrocarbons agency, among other public entities. As of 2015, *Abya Yala* had 135 hours of national coverage a week through a major telecommunications firm, and in the eastern cities of La Paz and El Alto broadcast 24-hour coverage through an open signal on channel 41.

According to Bolivian journalist Amalia Pando, the *Abya Yala* network's rapid expansion raises at least some suspicion: "here are two immoralities, first that the president receives three million dollars from a foreign power to launch a TV channel, then that the channel, which does not have a significant audience, receives such large amounts of public contracts and advertising."⁶ *Abya Yala*'s meteoric rise in Bolivia is due, in part, to its integrated programming with Venezuela's state-owned Telesur network, Russia Today, and the Iranian-owned HispanTV. In the case of Iran, *Abya Yala* provides an authentic way to reach Bolivia's largely indigenous population to propagate an Islamist message.

For instance, in July 2015, the *Abya Yala* network broadcast the opening of a new Iranian-funded hemodialysis center, The Red Crescent Society, in the city of Cochabamba. Nevertheless, the broadcast omitted the fact that the women working at The Red Crescent Society were forced to wear *hijabs*, to the displeasure of many Bolivians. Lourdes Millares, the deputy for an opposition party in Bolivia, subsequently called this Iranian demand an "assault on the dignity of women..." and excoriated President Morales for, "...submission to the rules of another government."⁷

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Bolivia has a small Islamic community, numbering between one and three thousand, most of whose members are Sunni, with a smaller number of Shi'a followers. Altogether, Muslims in Bolivia account for less than 0.1% of the total population. However, they are increasingly active.

Most of the established members of the Islamic community in Bolivia were born in the country and converted, or are the descendants of Palestinian or Lebanese immigrants who have lived in Bolivia for decades. The traditional Islamic community in Bolivia is primarily Sunni, and typically adheres to the local Bolivian style of dress and culture. They do not practice fundamentalist Islamic traditions, nor do they actively proselytize. Nevertheless, there has been a recent influx of Pakistanis and Iranians that follow a more fundamentalist line, and are actively recruiting and proselytizing among Bolivian youth and women, causing some friction with the established Muslim community in Bolivia.⁸

Bolivia's Islamic community began its Islamic proselytization (*da'wah*) in 1974, when Mahmud Amer Abusharar arrived from the Palestinian territories. Almost immediately after arriving, Amer started gathering Muslims from around Bolivia and inviting them to his home for prayer. He quickly became the leader of the small but emerging Islamic community in Bolivia, particularly in Santa Cruz, and in 1986 registered the first Bolivian Islamic organization—which was officially recognized by Bolivia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Office of Religion three years later, in 1989.⁹

This organization, the Bolivian Islamic Center (CIB is its Spanish acronym), based in the country's commercial capital, Santa Cruz, claims to have founded Bolivia's first fully operational mosque in 1994, serving some 300 congregants. The CIB claims to support "open-mindedness and peace," but does appear to espouse an anti-U.S. political position closely aligned with that of the Bolivian government.¹⁰

On May 14, 2011, Mahmud Amer Abusharar died of natural causes. One of his disciples, Isa Amer Quevedo, has since stepped in to serve as Director of the CIB. Quevedo has a degree in Islamic jurisprudence from the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, and used to be the CIB's administrative director and translator. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Quevedo supports his predecessor's anti-U.S. stance, as he offered criticism of the United States on the CIB website immediately after the September 11th attacks.¹¹

The CIB has grown over the years to become Bolivia's largest Islamic organization, and is known to receive support from the Saudi-based Islamic Organization for Latin America and the Muslim World League. The Egyptian Embassy in Bolivia and the Gulf Cooperation Council both also have helped to fund the CIB's first mosque. Moreover, the CIB has an affiliation with the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, acting as this organization's headquarters in Bolivia.

Also, connected with the Muslim World League is the Bolivian Muslim Cultural Association (ACBM is its Spanish acronym), located in Sucre, the constitutional capital of Bolivia. A Palestinian doctor and lawyer, Fayez Rajab Khedeer Kannan, runs this organization. Kannan espouses an extreme worldview, and has, among other things, openly praised the late Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi.¹² In 1998, he received a 30-year grant from the Sucre city council to use five acres of land in the *Los Liberta-*

dores neighborhood to construct an educational center and clinic, with additional funding for the effort coming from the Muslim World League and the Islamic Development Bank. By 2003, ACBM had built a private Islamic school, which led to some legal disputes over a revoked title transfer (disputes which were finally resolved in 2006, in favor of ACBM). It is not clear whether this school is still active.

More recently, in 2016, an Indian couple, Ghalib Ataul and Nayara Zafar, built a new mosque in the Paititi district of Warnes, a small town outside the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. The mosque adheres to the creed of the Ahmadiyya, a small sect of Islam from the late 19th century in northern India, and, according to Ghalib Ataul, will serve all faiths, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The mosque, however, has generated some negative reaction, as noted by Bolivian journalist Magali Sánchez: “As long as they respect our customs and our creed, no problem. But do not try to change us. They should not think that the women of Warnes want to wear hijabs and burkas.”¹³ The new mosque in Warnes is emblematic of the small but notable growth of Islamic communities within remote eastern regions of Bolivia, including in San Borja and Riberalta, Beni, where there are practicing Muslims.

Moving north along the Andean ridge, in La Paz, is the Association of the Islamic Community of Bolivia (ACIB is its Spanish acronym). It is believed that the origin of Islam in La Paz dates to 1995, when Moumin Candia, a Bolivian trained in an Argentine mosque, brought Islam to the city. A Bolivian convert and the former president of ACIB, Gerardo Cutipa Trigo is educated as an engineer, and was an atheist through most of his college years in Bolivia, assuming leadership roles in leftist student unions. It wasn't until the late 1990s that Cutipa converted to Islam while working in Spain, where he first was exposed to the religion. The ACIB is now led by Ahmad Ali, who claims to informally represent a community of approximately 300 Muslims, of which around 70 regularly attend service at the ACIB's mosque, called *Masjidum Jbelannur*.¹⁴

In 2006, a more fundamentalist mosque was opened in La Paz by a group of Pakistanis that had arrived in Bolivia three years earlier. This small Pakistani community, known as the Islamic Association of Bolivia, operates the *Masjid As-Salam* mosque, and has offered prayer services to other Muslims, including many Bolivian-born Muslim converts in La Paz. The *imam* of the *Masjid As-Salam* mosque was Mahmud Ali Teheran, a Peruvian-born son of Iranian immigrants who converted to Sunni Islam. Prior to this, Ali Teheran led the *Babu Ul-Islam* mosque in Tacna, Peru and as of 2008 has left Bolivia to lead the Islamic community in Uruguay.¹⁵

La Paz is also a hub for a small but growing Shi'a community, which is much smaller than its Sunni counterparts. This small influx of Shi'a Muslims is primarily due to the newfound Iranian presence in Bolivia, as the more visible Shi'a organizations have ties to the Iranian Embassy in La Paz.

The oldest Shi'a organization has a name like the Sunni ACIB; however, it adds the suffix "*Ahlul Bait*" which literally means "family of the House." This has an important distinction for Shi'a Muslims because the term refers to the family of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, and is generally where Shi'a Muslims derive their *hadiths*. It is unclear how this organization was founded, but it appears to have been operational since 2000. For at least some time, however, it seems to have operated under a different name (Shi'a Islamic Community of Bolivia), until resurfacing with its original name in 2006.

During the brief time that the ACIB *Ahlul Bait* was organized under a different name, it was run by a licensed psychologist named Tommy Nelson Salgueiro Criales, a former Jesuit who converted to Islam in the mid-1990s while living in Australia. ACIB *Ahlul Bait* is known for its publications and translations of Islamic text into Spanish, and was the first to introduce Islamic literature to the 15th annual international book fair in 2010, where they presented Bolivian Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera with their own in-house publication, "*La Revolución de la Mano de Dios*," written by resident Islamic scholar Sergio Grover Dueñas Calle.

ACIB *Ahlul Bait* has an associated mosque purchased with the help of the Iranian government. The first Shi'a mosque in Bolivia, *As-Salam*, is a three-story building in the heart of La Paz with a large prayer hall that was inaugurated in 2006. The mosque is meant to serve a growing Shi'a community in La Paz, and other smaller Islamic communities nearby.

Many of the organizations mentioned above have created their own websites, radio broadcasts, and/or social media outlets. Social media plays a significant part in spreading the Islamic message throughout Bolivia, as many communities have a virtual presence on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Roberto Chambi and his colleagues at ACIB *Ahlul Bait* are arguably the most active in both mainstream and social media, establishing a local radio program, "*Al-Islam*," that broadcasts every weekday morning on 107.3 FM. Chambi is also a regular on HispanTV's local broadcasts and is featured in ACIB's web portal *Islam en Bolivia* (www.islam.org.bo). This portal is frequently updated, largely with articles claiming Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, and recently launched an effort to proselytize in *Aymara*, one of Bolivia's major indigenous languages and culture. It currently offers a translation of the tract "What is Islam?" in the Aymara language.¹⁶

In 2014, according to an interview with Ahmad Ali, an American student researching Islam in Bolivia discovered that Aymara and Quechua Indians had begun converting to Islam.¹⁷ This represents an important advance for the Islamic community, because *Aymara* indigenous groups hold important political currency with the current government and society. Establishing a footprint with this group would help advance Islam (and, potentially, Islamism) to a significant degree within Bolivian society.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The growing political and strategic ties between La Paz and Tehran dominate Bolivia's contemporary relationship with Islam. Bolivian President Evo Morales first met former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the inauguration of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa in mid-January 2007. At the time, the two leaders showed unprecedented interest in bringing their respective countries closer together politically, culturally, and economically. Ahmadinejad focused on agriculture, gas, and oil, referring to "academic potentials" in Iran for "improving the technical knowledge of Bolivia experts... in accordance with our Islamic teachings and duties."¹⁸

Months later, in September 2007, Bolivia's Foreign Minister, David Choquehuanca, visited Tehran to meet with his then-counterpart, Manuchehr Mottaki, to build upon the January meeting with firm commitments outlined in a strategic agreement to broaden political and economic relations. Later in the month, the first bilateral agreement was drafted. It provided a strategic framework for future collaborative ventures in the hydrocarbons, extractive, agriculture, oil and gas industries, as well as science, culture and technology. There were also several side agreements made to implement the importation and installation of six Iranian milk-processing plants in Bolivia. But the larger strategic agreement was the focus of the effort, and was announced on September 27, 2007 during Ahmadinejad's first official visit to Bolivia. At the time, Morales noted: "we are interested in broadening relations with Iran, starting in the trade area with a view to continuing and consolidating relations of friendship, understanding and diplomacy."¹⁹

However, the agreement was not ratified by the Bolivian Congress until three years later, in 2010. Nevertheless, this did not stop the two countries from continuing to foster their diplomatic relationship, and the first Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran was inaugurated in La Paz in February 2008. Evo Morales announced later that year that Bolivia would move its only embassy in the Middle East from Cairo to Tehran (such a move, however, never happened, likely due to a lack of resources on Bolivia's part).

By March 2008, Iran's relationship with Bolivia had developed an economic facet as well. News sources out of Tehran reported that Iran had signed several joint projects with Bolivia worth some \$1 billion in total.²⁰

Morales finally reciprocated Ahmadinejad's Bolivian visit when he arrived in Tehran on September 1, 2008. Brief meetings with the Iranian president and the country's Minister of Mining and Industry punctuated his short stay in the Islamic Republic, where he focused on persuading Ahmadinejad to accelerate payments under Iran's promise to invest \$1 billion in Bolivia.

By the end of September 2008, Bolivia and Iran had exchanged technical delegations, with one Hojatollah Soltani emerging as Iran's business attaché to Bolivia. Soltani

pledged that, apart from the promised investment of \$1 billion, Iran would also invest some \$230 million in a cement factory and another \$3 million to build dairy farms.²¹ A month later, Soltani announced that Iran would use Bolivia as the base for a planned Red Crescent health clinic expansion across Latin America.²² The announcement coincided with Bolivia signing a credit agreement with Venezuela and Iran for \$115 million, reportedly to cooperate in mineral exploration in Coroma, a mineral rich region in southern Bolivia. This cooperation created suspicion of a dual-use effort, because—according to a retired Bolivian mining engineer—Coroma covers more than 100,000 hectares where there are uranium and other dispersed minerals.²³

By February 2009, pledges from Iran to invest in economic development projects had yet to materialize, but the milk processing plants were already under construction. Some Iranian funding had found its way to Bolivia, but much of what was promised had not yet been delivered. This gap between rhetoric and action, however, did not appear to dampen relations between the two countries. In July 2009, Bolivia announced that it would receive a \$280 million loan from the Islamic Republic. Iran's top diplomat in Bolivia, Masoud Edrisi, stated at the time that the money was to be used as President Morales saw fit.²⁴ The loan was part of the \$1 billion originally promised when Ahmadinejad first met Morales in 2007. Later in 2009, a new Iranian-funded maternal care health clinic was opened in the poor municipality of El Alto, on the outskirts of La Paz. The health clinic reportedly cost \$2.5 million and filled a gap in community healthcare despite some controversy over a requirement that female nurses wear *hijabs*, or head covering.²⁵

In 2010, some of the original financial promises made by Iran began to materialize, albeit quite slowly and extremely inconsistently. By the middle of that year, more agreements were signed, particularly in the extractive industry, as Iran began to look at Bolivia's strategic resource wealth. Bolivia is one of Latin America's most resource-rich countries, and possesses some of the world's largest reserves of lithium chloride. Knowing this, Iran made a move to become Bolivia's co-developer of this resource, to include the production of lithium batteries. This resource exploitation project, in turn, has prompted speculation that other strategic minerals, namely uranium, would be exploited. To date, however, there is no evidence that Iran has effectively received any uranium ore from Bolivia.²⁶

This is not to say, however, that Iran is not exploring or exploiting other strategic resources from Bolivia. In 2010, the Bolivian government awarded six new oil and gas exploration blocks to Iran and later signed an agreement to train Bolivian technicians in petroleum drilling and petrochemical operations. By July 2011, 26 Bolivian technicians had completed their first petrochemical training in Iran.²⁷ While the Islamic Republic was training Bolivian engineers, and exploring the country's strategic mineral deposits, a more nefarious relationship began to form through military-to-military exchanges between both countries. This bilateral military relation-

ship was highlighted when Bolivia's Defense Ministry invited then-Iranian Minister of Defense, Ahmad Vahidi, one of the accused masterminds of the bombings of the AMIA community center in Buenos Aires in 1994, to attend the inauguration of a new regional defense school for the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA in its Spanish acronym). Iran reportedly helped finance this regional defense school to the tune of approximately \$1.8 million. Argentine foreign minister Hector Timmerman immediately sent a complaint to his Bolivian counterpart, and Vahidi had to make a hasty exit from the country, leaving President Morales to do damage control by apologizing to Argentina for the fiasco.²⁸

Vahidi's trip sparked many questions as to what type of military relationship exists between the two countries, and it was subsequently discovered that Bolivia had bought a package of military equipment from Iran just a year earlier, in October 2010. The items procured included a FAJR-3 piston trainer, an S-68 turboprop trainer, and the Iran-140 light transport (a licensed version of the Russia Antonov An-140 light transport).²⁹

Once the aftermath and embarrassment of Vahidi's trip to Bolivia had subsided, the Bolivian government re-established military ties with Iran. On June 20, 2012, during Ahmadinejad's third official visit to Bolivia, an anti-narco trafficking accord was signed to help Bolivia in its "fight" against drug trafficking. This accord created the political and legal groundwork for Iran to have a military footprint in Bolivia, and the Islamic Republic is currently rumored to be helping Bolivia set up a new unit within one of their military special operations wing.³⁰

A few months prior to Ahaminejad's visit, on April 2, 2012, news surfaced that a Bolivian-flagged vessel had been seized by Somali pirates off the coast of Maldives. After learning that the vessel, the *MV Eglantine*, belonged to Iran, it was freed by the pirates and continued its route to deliver sugar to Brazil. The incident sparked speculation that the Bolivian government maybe violating international sanctions then in effect against Iran by helping its sanctioned ships sail through strategic ports using a Bolivian flag.³¹ Later that month, Reuters reported that 15 vessels linked to IRISL, the UN-sanctioned Iranian shipping conglomerate, carried the Bolivian flag. The Bolivian government responded by saying that it would revoke the Bolivian flag license and remove these Iranian vessels from its shipping register, but it was never confirmed that this took place.

Bolivia has become one of Iran's most important strategic partners in Latin America. This relationship has fostered and enhanced a greater Islamic presence in this pluri-national state—one that is unprecedented in size and scope. Growing alongside this presence is the size of Iran's official mission in the country—which has been linked to the propagation of an increasingly active Islamist element there. The Spanish daily *El País* reported in 2012 that Bolivia has at least 145 registered Iranian diplomats in country.³² By comparison, Spain has only ten. On the surface, Bolivia appears to be

the beneficiary of this relationship, but upon closer examination one can determine that for every Iranian investment or action into this Andean nation, there is a reciprocal action by Bolivia.

Some analysts speculated that this strategic relationship had been prompted by aggressive outreach of the Ahmadinejad regime, and would dissipate with Ahmadinejad's departure from power in 2013. However, more recent Iranian activity suggests otherwise. For example, on August 25, 2016, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif arrived in Santa Cruz, Bolivia along with a delegation of at least 70 executives of Iranian state-owned firms for a series of events with prominent Bolivian businessman. Against the backdrop of Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with the West, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Zarif's visit was a clear signal that Iran is back in business in Bolivia. In a concrete demonstration of his government's commitment to Iran, Bolivian President Evo Morales flew from La Paz to Santa Cruz to meet with Zarif and decorated him with the Order of the Condor of the Andes, a state medal awarded for exceptional merit to Bolivians or foreign nationals.³³

ENDNOTES

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[11] *Ibid.*, 3.

[12] *Ibidem*, 4.

[13] Quote taken from an interview with *El Deber* newspaper in Santa Cruz, Bolivia published on Aug. 9, 2015. Online link is no longer active, however, the article has been reposted on Eju.tv: <http://eju.tv/2015/08/ahmadies-quieren-aportar-en-la-construccion-de-una-bolivia-mas-multicultural/>

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