

American Foreign Policy Council

BOLIVIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 10,461,053

Area: 1,098,581 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Quechua 30%, mestizo (mixed white and Amerindian ancestry) 30%, Aymara 25%, white 15%

Religions: Roman Catholic 95%, Protestant (Evangelical Methodist) 5%

Government Type: Republic (the new constitution defines Bolivia as a “Social Unitarian State”)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$27.12 billion

Map and Quick Facts Courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated May 2013)



Bolivia, a country of approximately 10.5 million people, has a Muslim population of just 2,000. But while the practice of the religion in Bolivia remains small and dispersed, the election of President Evo Morales in 2005 has brought about a more amiable relationship with Islamic republics in the Middle East, and significantly opened Bolivia’s official posture towards Islam.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. There are at least eight different Islamic organizations, both Shi’a and Sunni operating within Bolivia, funded primarily by either money from 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, both within the society and the state. Iran has proposed a number of 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

Bolivia has a small Islamic community, but one that is relatively active and gradually growing more radical. Most of the established members in this community were born in Bolivia 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 do 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.²

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 1989.³

This organization, the Bolivian Islamic Center (CIB in 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.⁴

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. Quevedo maintains his predecessor's anti-U.S. stance as evident when he criticized the United States on the CIB website immediately

after the September 11th attacks.⁵

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 in 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.⁶ In 1998, he received a 30-year grant from the Sucre city council to use five acres of land in the *Los Libertadores* 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.

Moving north along the Andean ridge, in La Paz, is the Association of the Islamic Community of Bolivia (ACIB in its Spanish acronym). A Bolivian convert, Gerardo Cutipa Trigo, a.k.a. Ahmad Ali, is president of this Sunni organization. Cutipa 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. Cutipa 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*.⁷

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. 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.⁸

La Paz, the seat of Bolivia's government, is also a hub for a small but growing Shi'a Islamic 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 that is similar to 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 period of time, however, it seems to have operated under a different name (Shi'a Islamic Community of Bolivia), until resurfacing with their original name in 2006.

The leader of 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 newer 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.

During the brief time that the ACIB *Ahlul Bait* was 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.

The relationship between Chambi and Salguero is unknown, and the connection between ACIB *Ahlul Bait* and the FCIB is unclear. However, considering that both organizations are led by Roberto Chambi and are registered on the same street (Calle Landeata), it is plausible to conclude that these organizations are now one in the same.

Within La Paz, Chambi and his wife actively promote the Islamic message through the organization of seminars and small meetings. They have invited

imams from other Latin American countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, and have a longstanding relationship with spiritual leader Sheikh Abdul Karim Paz from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Karim Paz is a direct disciple of Iranian intelligence operative Mohsen Rabbani, and was his successor at the *At Tahuid* mosque in Buenos Aires after Rabbani escaped Argentina following his involvement in the 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA) building.⁹

There is also a growing Shi'a community in El Alto, a northern suburb of La Paz, and other smaller Islamic communities in Cochabamba and Oruro. However, these are much smaller and less active than their counterparts in the capital city of La Paz and the commercial hub of Santa Cruz. Lastly, there are some confidential reports of an Islamic community forming in the remote region of Chapare, which is home to the coca growers unions and the epi-center of drug production in Bolivia.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Bolivian society has undergone a radical socialist shift over the last several years under the watchful eye of the late Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and the Castros of Cuba. President Evo Morales has embraced the “21st century socialist” model espoused by both countries, and used its tenets to dismantle institutions (both formal and civil society) in order to consolidate power into the executive branch of government. This has alienated at least half of Bolivian society, which does not share Morales’ ideological views or political agenda.

This is most evident in the eastern part of the country, what is often called the *Media Luna*, consisting of the departments of Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni and Pando. This lowland region of the country does not have the same *Aymara* and *Quechua* ethnic roots as the western highland region, because most of their indigenous settlers came from the *Guarani* of Paraguay or from the *Chiquitano* and *Chane* native tribes. As a result, the *Media Luna* does not relate to Evo Morales’ ethnic base (*Aymara* and *Quechua*) and feels alienated by his public policies, which are perceived to favor only half of the country at best.

This coincides with the transformation of Islamic presence and activities in Bolivia over the last several years, which have shifted geographically from the country’s east (Santa Cruz) to its west (La Paz). As noted in the previous section, when Amer Abusharar settled in Bolivia in the early 1970s, it was during the economic boom that integrated Santa Cruz to 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 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 has focused on the western highlands of Bolivia. As a result, Islamic communities, particularly those that are Shi'a, are beginning to populate this western region.

In modern day Bolivia, Islamist elements have a favorable climate for recruitment and proselytizing activities, because many of the religious leaders in Islamic communities are closely connected to Bolivian and Iranian officials—a connection that provides avenues to spread the Muslim message throughout Bolivian society. For instance, in 2008, the Iranian government attempted to build a television station in Bolivia's coca-growing region of Chapare.¹⁰ Although that project did not materialize, Iran did succeed at 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 based out of Tehran.¹¹ HispanTV currently broadcasts Islamic programming 16 hours a day in several countries throughout Latin America and the Middle East. Their local Bolivian correspondent is an Argentine journalist, Andrés Sal-lari, who works at Bolivia's state-owned Canal 7.¹²

Andrés Sal-lari recently covered one of the largest showcases of Islamic culture in Bolivia in May 2013, when the Iranian Embassy in La Paz brought a weeklong marathon of Iranian films to the big screen in Bolivia. Co-sponsored by Cinemateca Boliviana, this is not the first time Iranian films have been promoted in Bolivia; an earlier display in 2008 was also held in one of La Paz's largest movie theaters.¹³

These efforts in the fine arts are complemented by local Islamic media in Bolivia as a form of soft persuasion to entice Bolivians to embrace Islamic culture. Many of the organizations mentioned in the section above have created their own websites, radio broadcasts, and/or social media outlets. Social media is a big part of 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 mayor indigenous languages. It currently offers a translation of the tract "what is Islam?" in the *Aymara* language.¹⁴

This represents an important advance for the Islamic community, because *Aymara* indigenous groups hold important political currency with the current government and society as a whole. 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."¹⁵

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."¹⁶

However, the agreement was not ratified by the Bolivian congress until three years later, in 2010. Nevertheless, this did not stop both countries from continuing to foster 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.¹⁷

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 USD 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 USD, Iran would also invest some \$230 million USD in a cement factory and another \$3 million USD to build dairy farms.¹⁸ A month later, Soltani announced that Iran would use Bolivia as the base for a planned Red Crescent health clinic expansion across Latin America.¹⁹

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 the majority 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.

Money again headlined the Bolivian-Iranian relationship in July 2009, when Bolivia announced that it would receive a \$280 million USD 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.²⁰ 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.²¹

In 2010 some of the original financial promises made by Iran had begun 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.²²

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.²³

While the Islamic Republic was training Bolivian engineers, and exploring strategic minerals, a more nefarious relationship began to form through military-to-military exchanges between both countries. This bilateral military relationship was highlighted when Bolivia's Defense Ministry reached out to the Iranian Minister of Defense, Ahmad Vahidi, one of the accused masterminds of the bombings of the AMIA community center in Buenos Aires in 1994. The Bolivian government invited General Vahidi 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.²⁴

This trip sparked many questions as to what type of military relationship exists between the two countries, and it was discovered that Bolivia had bought a package of military equipment from Iran just a year earlier (in October 2010). The military 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).²⁵

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 laid the political and legal groundwork to enable 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.²⁶

Bolivia has become one of Iran's most important strategic partners in Latin America, and vice versa. This relationship has fostered and enhanced a greater Islamic presence in this Plurinational state—one that is unprecedented in size and scope. Growing alongside this presence is the official Iranian mission that via their embassy in La Paz is propagating a more radical Islamist element that is becoming increasingly active. The Spanish daily *El País* reported in 2012 that Bolivia has at least 145 registered Iranian diplomats in country.²⁷ By comparison, Spain has only five. 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.

Bolivia's next presidential elections are currently slated to take place in April 2014, but the trajectory of Bolivian-Iranian ties seems fixed. As long as Evo Morales remains president the Islamic presence and activities within the state and society will continue to grow, and Bolivia will continue to be a back door for Iran's strategic penetration of the region.

ENDNOTES

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[6] *Ibid.*, 4.

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- [18] Faramarz Asghari, “Iran-Bolivia Strategic Interaction,” *Siyasat-e Ruz* (Tehran), September 1, 2008.
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