



VENEZUELA

Quick Facts

Population: 31,304,016 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 912,050 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Arab, German, African, indigenous people

GDP (official exchange rate): \$210.1 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2018)

INTRODUCTION

President Nicolas Maduro has continued his predecessor Hugo Chavez's welcoming stance toward the propaganda, recruitment, and fundraising of Islamist groups that fit into the anti-U.S. and anti-Semitic worldview inherent in the anti-imperialist "Bolivarian" ideology of the Venezuelan government. Maduro continues to provide various Islamist elements with assistance and safe havens for a range of financial and extra-territorial activities in Latin America and beyond.

The roots of this Islamist affinity stretch back to Chavez's years as a revolutionary in the 4-F movement, during which time the future Venezuelan president fell under the sway of individuals with a sympathetic view of a variety of "non-aligned" Middle Eastern rogues. Members of that group included now-embattled Syrian despot Bashar al-Assad, the late Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi, former Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein, and the leaders of the Iranian Revolution.¹ These early lessons provided the basis for the foreign policy that Chavez pursued from the start of his presidency in 1999—a foreign policy that has been perpetuated by Maduro, and which made Venezuela a close ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran and an array of radical Islamist groups, chief among them Hezbollah.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Venezuela is an attractive way station for Islamist groups, which have a quiet but longstanding and profitable presence there that includes fundraising, smuggling, money laundering, and training. The U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) estimates that "Islamist terrorist groups raise between three hundred million and five hundred million dollars per year in the Triple Frontier and the duty-free zones of Iquique, Colon, Maicao, and Margarita Island, Venezuela."²

There is a special relationship between the Venezuelan government and Iran's chief terrorist proxy, Hezbollah. Venezuela provides political, diplomatic, material and logistical support to Hezbollah. As it is in most of Latin America, Hezbollah is the primary Islamist force in Venezuela. Capitalizing on the network of enterprising Lebanese Shiamerchants throughout the country's larger cities, the group uses the

South American country for fundraising and various forms of money-laundering, smuggling, and fraud. The basic model is a simple “pay to play” system, in which local Lebanese Shiamerchants are persuaded by Hezbollah agents and financiers, through varying degrees of coercion, to “tithe” to Hezbollah.³ Most worrisome, however, is the network of underworld connections that Hezbollah is building throughout the hemisphere from its base in Venezuela.

There have been several reports of the Venezuelan government providing identification documents to suspected members of Hezbollah, and other Islamist terrorist organizations from the Middle East. One former director of Venezuela’s immigration agency has suggested that the number of documents provided to Islamist militants number in the tens of thousands.⁴ Another official, a former legal attaché to the Bolivarian Republic’s embassy in Iraq named Misael Lopez-Soto, provided even more damning evidence. In a special CNN documentary, Lopez-Soto provided an eyewitness account and documentary evidence that the Venezuelan embassy in Baghdad was selling passports to suspected members of Hezbollah.⁵ In one case, Lopez-Soto identified an acquaintance of one of the 9/11 hijackers who fled to Venezuela after the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

The CNN documentary pointed to the country’s former Vice President (and current Minister of Industry and Production), Tareck El-Aissami, as the most prominent government official involved in this alleged passports-for-terrorists scheme. The son of Syrian-Lebanese parents, El Aissami was groomed as an ardent supporter of Islamists and has used his political prominence to establish conduits to several Islamic governments. He has helped create a criminal-terrorist pipeline funneling illicit funds and drugs to the Middle East and facilitating the movement of Islamists into the Western Hemisphere.⁶ One intelligence report cited by the CNN documentary estimates that at least 173 Islamist militants from the Middle East received identification documents from the government of Venezuela. These militants capitalized on a sophisticated, multi-layered money-laundering network established by El Aissami and his family while he was the Interior Minister from 2008-2012.⁷

One of the individuals benefitting from El Aissami’s financial network is the former Venezuelan diplomat, Ghazi Nassereddine, who is sanctioned as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist” by the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Financial Assets and Control (OFAC).⁸ The Nassereddine’s are a prominent Lebanese family in Venezuela with close ties to Hezbollah. They are believed to have facilitated travel to, and logistical support in, Venezuela for Hezbollah operatives for several decades, establishing a real estate footprint on Margarita Island, off the Caribbean coast.⁹ Ghazi Nassereddine, who is also wanted by the FBI, and Tareck El Aissami are both sanctioned by OFAC. Ghazi in 2008 and Tareck in February 2017 as a “Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker.”¹⁰

Walid Makled Garcia, a noted Syrian-Venezuelan drug kingpin incarcerated in 2011, identified Tareck El Aissami and his brother Feras as former clients.¹¹ Makled claimed that the El Aissami brothers would pay him to create spaces for the Venezuelan armed forces to move illicit products from Venezuela to the Middle East and West Africa. With more than 40 Venezuelan generals on his payroll, Makled had strategic access to ports, airports, national airlines, and fertilizer plants, to cover and conceal the movement of illicit narcotics and launder the funds for several Drug Trafficking Organizations, including Hezbollah.¹²

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Venezuela’s Muslim population is small but influential. According to the conservative estimate of the U.S. State Department in its 2017 *International Religious Freedom Report*, there are more than 100,000 Muslims in Venezuela, primarily of Lebanese and Syrian descent, and concentrated in Nueva Esparta and Caracas.¹³ While Margarita Island’s Muslim population is almost entirely Lebanese Shi’a, there are Sunni Muslims elsewhere in the country, and Caracas has a largely Sunni population of 15,000 that is served by one of the largest mosque in Latin America, built by the Saudis as a sister mosque to the Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Ibrahim mosque in Gibraltar.¹⁴ There are other mosques in the major cities of Maracaibo, Valencia,

Vargas, Punto Fijo, and Bolivar. Local cable television outlets in Margarita carry *Al-Jazeera* and the Lebanese Hezbollah outlet LBC, while on the mainland the Saudi Channel is available via satellite as well.¹⁵

The picture of Islamism and society in Venezuela resembles that of much of Latin America. While there is a vague anti-globalist sense that pervades society, actual friendship with Islamist aims is at the political, rather than the religious, level.¹⁶ While the Latin American left at times can sound Islamist in its politics and its understanding of who the “enemy” is, apart from one-off episodes, there is no mass conversion to Islam taking place in Venezuela—or, indeed, in the region. This is not to say that efforts have not been made, especially among indigenous and Creole groups whose Christianity has never been especially solid. To the contrary, in the past 150 years of immigration from the Middle East to the New World, the opposite trend has held sway. Many prominent *turcos* (immigrants and their descendants from the Middle East) originally were Muslim, but have been genuine conversos (converts to Christianity) for generations.

Thus, the presence in Caracas of the largest mosque in Latin America may give Muslim proselytizers the right to say they have penetrated the region, but it reflects Venezuela’s cosmopolitan self-image more than it serves as evidence of an Islamic trajectory. Nonetheless, one should not dismiss the larger fact that Islam does play a significant—if not central—role in Venezuela’s anti-globalist and anti-hegemonic culture, which post-colonial critic Robert Young notes incarnates a “tricontinental counter-modernity” that combines diaspora and local cultural elements, and blends Arab, Islamic, black and Hispanic factors to generate “a revolutionary black, Asian and Hispanic globalization, with its own dynamic counter-modernity... constructed in order to fight global imperialism.”¹⁷

However, there has been at least one instance of a radical Islamist group that was based in Venezuela and seemingly concerned with Venezuelan social issues. The group advertised itself as Hezbollah en América Latina (“Hezbollah in Latin America.”) Though it was largely eclipsed in the news media by the U.S. 2006 mid-term elections, Hezbollah en América Latina’s failed attempt in October 2006 to bomb the U.S. (and perhaps the Israeli) embassy in Caracas was a significant event. The group, based within the country’s Wayuu Indian population, boasts of activity in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico on their website,¹⁸ which is written in Spanish and Chapateka (a combination of the Wayuu language and Spanish). However, the backbone of the organization is in Venezuela on the country’s western border with Colombia. The group’s members are local Venezuelans without Muslim heritage, and claim to be Shiite supporters of Hezbollah and Iran.¹⁹

In its manifesto, the organization asserted that Venezuelan society, with its interest in sex, money, industry and commerce, has become a “swamp of immorality and corruption.”²⁰ It claimed that political movements and parties could not provide an answer to these challenges because they were also part of the problem. Thus, only “a theocratic, Political-Islamic force can liberate society from this situation.”²¹ By contrast, Hezbollah en América Latina “respect[ed] the Venezuelan revolutionary process, and support[ed] its social policies as well as its anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism,” even as it rejected socialism in favor of an Islamic order. Tellingly, the group urged everyone to vote for and support Chavez.²²

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Ever since Hugo Chavez took his first trip to Iran in 2001, close relations with the Islamic Republic have been a cardinal tenet of Venezuela’s foreign policy. During Iran’s 2009 elections, Chavez offered “total solidarity” to Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, equating attacks on him as an assault by “global capitalism,”²³ and condoned the brutal tactics of Iran’s domestic militia, the *Basij*, in their crackdown on opposition protesters.²⁴ Iran reciprocated these friendly feelings when Hugo Chávez was decorated with the Higher Medal of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2008, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called Chávez “my brother... a friend of the Iranian nation and the people seeking freedom around the world.

He works perpetually against the dominant system. He is a worker of God and servant of the people.”²⁵ Ahmadinejad even risked a public embrace of Chavez’s grieving mother at the caudillo’s funeral, a move which scandalized the mullahs back home.

This relationship manifested itself in a series of agreements over the years. Venezuela announced the agreement to purchase Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) from Iran in 2007. But this drone cooperation, troubling enough in and of itself, may mask still more sinister cooperation. There has been speculation, albeit never corroborated, that Venezuela and Iran signed an agreement to construct a joint missile base in Venezuela and co-develop ballistic missiles.²⁶ Notably, however, the State Department claimed that it had “no evidence to support this claim and therefore no reason to believe the assertions made in the article are credible.”²⁷

In November 2008, Iranian and Venezuelan officials signed a secret “science and technology” agreement formalizing cooperation “in the field of nuclear technology.”²⁸ As part of that outreach, then-Iranian Minister of Science, Research and Technology Mohammad-Mehdi Zahedi led a delegation to Caracas and held talks with high-ranking Venezuelan officials. The delegation visited the Venezuelan Foundation for Seismological Research, Caracas Central University, the Simon Bolivar University, and the Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research.²⁹ During the visit, Chavez promised to provide the Islamic Republic with 20,000 barrels of petrol a day, despite the sanctions on Iran’s economy being contemplated by much of the world and despite Venezuela’s own problems in supplying its domestic markets with fuel.³⁰

In January 2010, the two countries launched a bi-national bank with \$200 million of initial capital—with each country contributing half—and a final goal of \$1.2 billion.³¹ The Iran Venezuela Bi-National Bank (IVBB) is the first non-governmental bi-national bank in Iran supposedly financing projects of mutual benefit to the two countries. Based in Tehran, it offers a convenient channel for Iran and Venezuela to sidestep U.S. sanctions along with the several branches of Iran’s Saderat Bank already open in Venezuela.³² Furthermore, U.S. State Department cables, published by Wikileaks, reveal an Iranian shipment of *Mohajer-2* unmanned aerial vehicles in violation of UNSCR 1747 bound for Venezuela sometime before May 2009.³³ Subsequently, a visit to Iran by Chavez in September 2009 yielded a new deal on nuclear cooperation.³⁴ The agreement was an addition to a rapidly growing list of bilateral pacts between Caracas and Tehran. Despite U.S. sanctions, in November 2011, the first *Mohajer* was spotted at El Libertador airbase in Ochoa. In the summer of 2012, a Spanish news source, ABC.es, broke a story about U.S. investigations into the program and Chavez admitted and shared pictures of the UAVs, according to a Reuters report.³⁵

Other violations of UNSCR 1747 included a more alarming Iranian enterprise in Venezuela. Parchin Chemical Industries (PCI) is part of Iran’s Defense Industries Organization’s Chemical Industries Group, and specializes in the production of ammunition, explosives, as well as the solid propellants for rockets and missiles. It is prominently listed in the annex to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1747, as an entity that is involved in Iran’s missile and WMD programs.³⁶ In April 2007, U.S. officials identified PCI “as the final recipient of sodium perchlorate monohydrate, a chemical precursor for solid propellant oxidizer, possibly to be used for ballistic missiles,”³⁷ and subsequently added them to the specially designated national and blocked persons list of the Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Asset Control.³⁸ In addition, the Parchin military complex approximately 20 kilometers southeast of Tehran (where PCI is believed to be located) is suspected to be a testing site for explosives used in the detonation of nuclear weapons. PCI and CAVIM, Venezuela’s state-owned weapons manufacturer, were constructing plants to produce nitroglycerine and nitrocellulose (both active ingredients for manufacturing explosives and propellants), as well as a gunpowder factory in the state of Falcón.³⁹ These joint military projects led the U.S. State Department to sanction CAVIM in 2011 – penalties which it renewed in 2013 that are still active today.⁴⁰

The relationship between Iran and Venezuela has now persisted for four years beyond the personal bond

between late president Chavez and former president Ahmadinejad. The joint ventures erected between Caracas and Tehran, and the purchase of Venezuelan enterprises, allow Iran to do business with U.S. companies and even within the United States itself. Because of the direct connection between Caracas and Tehran, efforts to contain trade with Iran are futile without cutting off the billions of dollars of legitimate U.S. trade with Venezuela, according to Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau.⁴¹ In June of 2015, Iran and Venezuela signed a series of agreements, complete with a \$500 million line of credit. The scope of the agreement included drugs and surgical equipment, along with joint nanotechnology research.⁴²

Iran and Venezuela have continued to strengthen ties under the leadership of Hassan Rouhani and Nicolás Maduro. In August 2016, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohamad Javad Zarif took a six-country tour of Latin America, culminating in a visit to Venezuela to meet with President Maduro.⁴³ The Foreign Minister's trip was to prepare for Iran's President Hassan Rouhani's first and only official visit to the region. Rouhani attended the 17th summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in September 2016, before traveling New York for the UN General Assembly.⁴⁴

2017 began with a period of instability for Venezuela as street protests and social uprisings spread throughout the country. Amid the political and economic crisis in Venezuela, the spokesperson for Iran's Foreign Ministry stated "the continuation of instability in Venezuela does not benefit anyone, but could only serve to heighten the pressure felt by citizens. The stability and security of Latin America, especially that of our friend Venezuela, is of great importance to Iran."⁴⁵ This show of solidarity was followed by pledge of military support from Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Hossein Dehqan, who met with Venezuela's Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López at the Moscow International Security Conference.⁴⁶

Venezuela and Iran are experiencing similar political and economic crises, fueled by hyperinflation, high levels of corruption, and plunging oil prices. Iran and Venezuela, both OPEC members, remain key suppliers to world oil markets and have been cooperating to drive oil prices up. Venezuela's crisis, however, has reached historic proportions rivaling Syria's humanitarian situation, with refugee outflows upwards of 1.5 million leaving since 2014.⁴⁷ The Trump administration has sanctioned some 70 regime officials in Venezuela to date for corruption, drug trafficking, and human rights abuses.⁴⁸ It has also begun to re-impose sanctions on Iran after the May 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal known as the JCPOA.

After years of investments in Venezuela, the Iranian regime will not let its stake in the country go to waste. To this end, Iran's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Morteza Sarmadi recently called for "closer cooperation" with Venezuela in standing against the Trump administration.⁴⁹ For his part, President Maduro reassured his Iranian allies that Venezuela will remain steadfast in partnership with the Islamic Republic against "U.S. aggression," stating that "[Iran and Venezuela] must firmly stand against U.S. patronizing policies in OPEC and coordinate the policies of OPEC and non-OPEC members against Washington."⁵⁰ Indeed, as of July 2018, the Iranian government had already dispatched top diplomats to Venezuela to rekindle the relationship, indicating that strategic ties between Tehran and Caracas are hardly a thing of the past.

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