

American Foreign Policy Council

VENEZUELA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 30,912,302 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 912,050 sq km

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

Religions: nominally Roman Catholic 96%, Protestant 2%, other 2%

Government Type: Federal Presidential Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$333.7 billion (2015 est.)

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

OVERVIEW

Nicolas Maduro, has continued his predecessor's welcoming stance toward the propaganda, recruitment, and fundraising of groups, including Islamist ones, that fit into the anti-US and anti-semitic worldview inherent in the anti-globalist anti-US "Bolivarian" ideology of Venezuela. He continues to provide them with assistance and safe haven for a range of their financial activities.

The roots of this institutional affinity stretch back to Chavez's years as a revolutionary in the 4-F guerilla group, 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 Basbar 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 of the foreign policy that Chavez pursued from the time of his assumption of power in 1998—a foreign policy that has made his country 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 Shi’a merchants 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 Shi’a merchants 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. According to former Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega, Hezbollah operatives are collaborating with sophisticated and high level drug-smugglers and guerrillas in the region. In 2013, Noriega outlined two such schemes—Walid Makled García’s “Lebanese Cartel” (Cártel Libanés) and Ayman Jouma’s cocaine smuggling and money-laundering scheme—in testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.⁴ In recognition of this and related Iranian/Hezbollah activity in the region, the U.S. Congress passed the “Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act of 2012” which mandated the Secretary of State to develop a strategy that should include:

within Latin American countries, a multiagency action plan, in coordination with United States allies and partners in the region, that includes the development of strong rule-of-law institutions to provided security in such countries and a counterterrorism and counter-radicalization plan to isolate Iran, the IRGC, its Qods Force, Hezbollah, and other terrorist organizations linked to Iran that may be present in the Western Hemisphere from their sources of financial support and counter their facilitation of terrorist activity.⁵

There has been much speculation that the financial assets freed by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the P5+1 nations, the European Union, and Iran would be funneled into Latin America. While Iran has shown an increased

interest in deepening relations with several Latin American countries, including Venezuela,⁶ there is no concrete evidence at this time to suggest that increased interest has been matched by increased investment.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Venezuela's Muslim population is small but influential. According to the U.S. State Department's conservative estimate in the 2015 *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.⁷ 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 the largest mosque in Latin America, built by the Saudis as a sister mosque to the Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Ibrahim mosque in Gibraltar.⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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 conversion to Islam taking place in Venezuela—or, indeed, in the region as a whole. 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. A large number of 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 the New World may give Muslim proselytizers the right to say they have penetrated Latin America, but it reflects Venezuela's cosmopolitan self-image more than it serves as evidence of an Islamist 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."¹¹

However, there has been an 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,¹² which is written in Spanish and Chapateka (a combination of the Wayuu language and Spanish). However, the backbone of the organization is located in Venezuela on the country’s western border with Colombia. The members of this group are locals and not Muslim in origin, despite their tenuous claim to be Shi’ite supporters of Hezbollah and Iran.¹³

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.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

It is not coincidental that this phenomenon occurred at a time when Hugo Chavez and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad had become close allies, which is further discussed below. It points to an alarming possibility: that Hezbollah and radical Islamist groups need not import Islamists from the Muslim world to Latin America. Rather, they can be homegrown in the region, because the social and emotional conditions provide fertile ground. Furthermore, this new available human capital does not need previous connection to Islam; it can be converted, because Islamism is not merely a religion but also a political movement.

This principle helps to explain the near-perfect symbiosis of the “Bolivarian” Revolution promoted by Chavez with the aims of Hezbollah: “Hezbollah Latin America respects the Venezuelan revolutionary process and supports the policies of this process that have to do with social benefits for the poor, as well as the anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist policies of the revolution. It does not, however, support the socialist ideology. This is not because we are opposed to it but because we are theocrats and we obey a divine prerogative.”¹⁷

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 Venezuelan 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,”¹⁸ and con-

doned the brutal tactics of Iran's domestic militia, the basij, in their crackdown on opposition protesters.¹⁹ Iran reciprocated these friendly feelings. When he decorated Hugo Chávez 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.”²⁰ 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 itself, may mask still more sinister cooperation. There was speculation, never corroborated, that Venezuela and Iran signed an agreement to construct a joint missile base in Venezuela and co-develop ballistic missiles.²¹ 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.”²²

In November 2008, Iranian and Venezuelan officials signed a secret “science and technology” agreement formalizing cooperation “in the field of nuclear technology.”²³ As part of that outreach, Iranian Minister of Science, Research and Technology Mohammad-Mehdi Zahedi led a delegation to hold talks with Venezuelan high-ranking officials in Caracas. The delegation visited the Venezuelan Foundation for Seismological Research, Caracas Central University, the Simon Bolivar University, and the Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research.²⁴ 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 in spite of Venezuela's own problems in supplying its domestic markets with fuel.²⁵

In April 2009, 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.²⁶ The bank is supposed to finance projects of mutual benefit to the two countries. Based in Venezuela, it will offer a convenient channel for Iran to sidestep U.S.-led sanctions along with the several branches of Iran's Saderat Bank already open there.²⁷ Furthermore, U.S. State Department cables, published by Wikileaks, reveal an Iranian shipment of *Mohajer-2* unmanned aerial vehicles in violation of UNSC 1747 bound for Venezuela sometime before May 2009.²⁸ Subsequently, a visit to Iran by Chavez in September 2009 yielded a new deal on nuclear cooperation.²⁹ 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.³⁰

The relationship between Iran and Venezuela has persisted four years now beyond the individual affinities of the late president Chavez and the former president Ahmadijad. Iran sees its Venezuelan connection as an important means to render international sanctions impotent. 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.³¹ In June of 2015, Iran and Venezuela signed a series of agreements, complete with a \$500 million line of credit. Included along with drugs and surgical equipment in the scope of the agreement was joint nanotechnology research.³²

Just as Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was touring Venezuela in August 2016, the Brazilian press obtained a 2009 document in which the late Chavez approved the release of funds designated for the import of equipment for a gunpowder factory and the development of production plants for nitroglycerin and nitrocellulose.³³ These two elements are used in rocket propulsion.³⁴ This document sheds light on the fact that less than a year later, in October 2010, Chavez announced an initial study of nuclear capacity for his country, a move analysts believe could be largely one of cover for Iran's program which Venezuela has been supporting for several years.³⁵

Nor is all of this limited to Venezuela. Iran is interested in Latin America generally, as they perceive it in some strategic sense as our soft underbelly. It will be important to watch, over the longer term, for this sort of cultural and ideological solidarity at the popular level between the traditional leftist, anti-globalist, and anti-Semitic forces of Venezuela and elsewhere in both the "Bolivarian" and the more status quo countries of Latin America with the radical Islamists of the Middle East. After all, the phenomenon of apparent confluence of interests and ideals is one that is not limited to Venezuela but could be – and no doubt is being – worked into a narrative of natural partnership between Latin Americanism and the Iranian face of Islamism. One thing is certain, if America allows itself to be seen as an adversary of Latin America, the more currency this narrative will have, in Venezuela and beyond. And the greater currency this narrative has, the more Venezuela's government can be expected to continue to be sympathetic to Islamist groups, and provide them with assistance and safe haven for their financial, narco-trafficking, and training activities in America's near abroad.

ENDNOTES

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