

American Foreign Policy Council

VENEZUELA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 28,459,085

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 Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$382.4 billion



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated August 2013)

The late “Tropical Mussolini,” Hugo Chavez, welcomed the propaganda, recruitment and fundraising activities of groups, including Islamist groups, that fit into his anti-U.S. and anti-Semitic worldview. In the short to medium term, his successor, Nicolas Maduro, can be expected to continue to be sympathetic to Islamist groups, and provide them with assistance and safe haven for their financial activities, both legitimate and illegitimate. The roots of this 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. That gallery featured 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 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 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 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 Hezbollah. Venezuela provides political, diplomatic, material and logistical support to Hezbollah. As in most of Latin America, Hezbollah, Iran’s chief terrorist proxy, 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 said to be a simple “pay to play” system, in which 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. Walid Makled García’s “Lebanese Cartel” (Cártel Libanés) and Ayman Jouma’s cocaine smuggling and money-laundering scheme are two examples Noriega cited in recent testimony to the U.S. Congress of prominent narco-traffickers wanted by U.S. law enforcement whose organizations provide funding for Hezbollah.⁴

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Venezuela’s Muslim population remains small but influential. According to the U.S. State Department’s conservative estimate in the 2011 *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.⁵ 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 which 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.⁶ There are other mosques in 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.⁷

The picture of Islamism and society in Venezuela resembles that of much of Latin America. This is to say that while there is a vague anti-globalist sense that pervades society, actual friendship with Islamist aims is at the political and not the religious level.⁸ While the Latin American left at times can sound Islamist in its politics and its understanding of who the “enemy” is, there appears to be no sizable 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. 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 large—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 diasporic 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.”⁹

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Ever since Hugo Chavez took his first trip to Iran in 2001, upgraded relations with the Islamic Republic have become a cardinal tenet of Venezuelan foreign policy. 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.¹⁰

Earlier, in November 2008, Iranian and Venezuelan officials signed a secret “science and technology” agreement formalizing cooperation “in the field of nuclear technology.”¹¹ 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.¹² 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 responsible world and in spite of Venezuela's own problems in supplying its domestic markets with fuel.¹³

Subsequently, a whirlwind visit to Iran by Chavez in September 2009 yielded a new deal on nuclear cooperation.¹⁴ The agreement was an addition to a rapidly growing list of bilateral pacts between Caracas and Tehran. Venezuela announced the agreement to purchase Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) from Iran in 2007. 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 2009.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ But this drone cooperation, troubling enough in itself, may mask still more troubling cooperation. Speculation, as yet uncorroborated, exists that Venezuela and Iran have signed an agreement to construct a joint missile base in Venezuela and co-develop ballistic missiles.¹⁷

It is clear that 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.¹⁸ These ties, moreover, have expanded in recent years; 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

During Iran's 2009 elections, Chavez offered "total solidarity" to Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, equating attacks on him as an assault by

“global capitalism,”²¹ and condoned the brutal tactics of Iran’s domestic militia, the *basij*, in their crackdown on opposition protesters.²² 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.”²³ Ahmedinejad even risked a public embrace of Chavez’s grieving mother at the *caudillo*’s funeral, a move which scandalized the mullahs back home.

What all this may mean, in the longer term, may best be considered in light of the curious 2006 case of the rise—and apparent fall—of a group advertising itself as “Hezbollah in Venezuela.” 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,²⁴ 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 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.²⁵

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.”²⁶ In response, it claimed that political movements and parties cannot provide an answer to these problems because they are also part of the problem. Thus, only “a theocratic, Political-Islamic force can liberate society from this situation.”²⁷ Hezbollah Latin America “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.²⁸

It is not coincidental that this phenomenon occurred at precisely the moment when Hugo Chavez and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad became close allies. 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 “home-grown” 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 to Islam, because Islamism is not merely a religion but also

a political movement.

This principle helps 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.”²⁹

While the incident could easily have been a one-off propaganda campaign, 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 nominally Catholic Venezuela with the radical Islamists of the Middle East. Furthermore, it is an open question how much of the much hyped strategic partnership between Tehran and Caracas was personality-driven. Chavez and Ahmedinijad harbored deep affections for each other personally though many analysts have questioned the depth of those ties below the national leader level. Nonetheless, no one should look to Chavez’s successor, Nicolas Maduro, to disrupt the relationship in the near future. 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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