



VENEZUELA

Quick Facts

Population: 28,644,603 (July 2020 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 2020)

INTRODUCTION

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-American and anti-Semitic worldview inherent in the anti-imperialist ideology of the Bolivarian revolution and the Venezuelan regime. Maduro continues to provide various Islamist elements with assistance and safe havens for a range of financial and extra-territorial activities in Venezuela and beyond.

The roots of this affinity stretch back to Chavez's years as a militant 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, since 2013, been perpetuated by Maduro, and which has made Venezuela a close ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran and an array of radical Islamist groups, chief among them Hezbollah.

Aside from its traditional terrorist activity, Hezbollah has increasingly become involved in the world of transnational organized crime. Years of state support to various criminal groups and the ever-worsening economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, have transformed Venezuela into a global hub of crime-terror convergence in the Western Hemisphere, further entrenching Islamist presence in the country.

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 through illicit and licit activity in various free trade zones

throughout Latin America, including in Maicao, Colombia, and Margarita Island, Venezuela.”² Among the most prominent is Hezbollah, Iran’s main terror proxy.

One of the most notable Hezbollah financiers in South America is Assad Ahmad Barakat, who was sanctioned by the Treasury Department in 2004 and served a stint in a Paraguayan prison for tax evasion from 2002-2009.³ More recently, Barakat was arrested again in Brazil in 2018 for immigration fraud, and was extradited to Paraguay in July 2020.⁴ Barakat comes from a large Lebanese clan in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) where Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil intersect – a hotbed infamous for its role in the 1994 AMIA terrorist attack in Argentina. In Argentina, Assad Ahmad Barakat has been implicated by authorities in the AMIA attack for his role in facilitating communications between the TBA and Lebanon. He did this through an array of front companies, some stretching as far north as the Andes.

One such company, Saleh Trading LTDA, was established in 2001 in the duty-free zone of Iquique, Chile, and later on the Caribbean coast in Margarita Island, Venezuela.⁵ According to research by Venezuelan legislator Carlos Papparoni, in 2001, Saleh Trading LTDA signed preferential business deals with the Venezuelan Ministry of Education, which was controlled by Hugo Chávez.⁶ This contract provided a precedent for the special relationship between the Venezuelan government and Iran’s chief terrorist proxy, Hezbollah.

Venezuela provides political, diplomatic, material and logistical support to Hezbollah. In turn, the group uses Venezuela for fundraising and various forms of money-laundering, smuggling, and illicit finance. The basic model is a simple “pay to play” system, in which local Lebanese merchants are persuaded by Hezbollah fixers, facilitators, and financiers, through varying degrees of coercion, to “tithe” to Hezbollah.⁷

There have been several reports of the Venezuelan regime 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.⁸ Another official, a former legal attaché to the Bolivarian Republic’s embassy in Iraq named Misael Lopez-Soto, provided an eyewitness account and documentary evidence that the Venezuelan embassy in Baghdad was selling passports and other identification documents to suspected members of Hezbollah.⁹ 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.¹⁰

A 2017 CNN documentary pointed to the country’s former Vice President (and current Minister of Petroleum) Tareck El Aissami as the most prominent government official involved in this alleged passports-for-terrorists scheme. El Aissami, the son of Syrian-Lebanese Druze, is an ardent supporter of Hezbollah and has used his political prominence in Venezuela 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.¹¹ One intelligence report cited by the CNN documentary estimates that at least 173 Islamist and other 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 2008-2012.¹²

El Aissami’s partner in this immigration scheme is alleged to be the former Venezuelan diplomat Ghazi Nassereddine. The Nassereddines 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 in the Caribbean.¹³ Ghazi Nassereddine, who is also wanted by the FBI, and Tareck El Aissami are both sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Financial Assets and Control.¹⁴

Walid Makled Garcia, a noted Syrian-Venezuelan drug kingpin incarcerated in 2011, identified Tareck El Aissami and his brother Feras as former clients.¹⁵ 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. Claiming to have 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.¹⁶

These accusations were formalized by the Department of Justice on May 27, 2020, when a former member of Maduro's political party, the PSUV, was charged with an alleged "cocaine-for-weapons" conspiracy between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, the FARC, and the Maduro regime-controlled drug network, the Cartel de Los Soles, named after the military insignia of the Venezuelan generals.¹⁷ Adel El Zebayar, the former Venezuelan legislator, traveled in 2013 and 2014 to Syria to supposedly fight alongside forces defending dictator Bashar Al-Assad. According to the indictment, while in Syria and after, Zebayar helped the Maduro-regime controlled Cartel de Los Soles serve as an intermediary to transfer multi-ton shipments of cocaine from Colombia's the FARC to Hezbollah and Hamas, in exchange for military-grade weapons, including AK-47s and AT4 rocket launchers.¹⁸

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

For more than 150 years, waves of mass migration arrived from Lebanon, Syria, Armenia, and other countries in the Middle East, to Venezuela. In the early 20th century, a second wave of mass migration arrived in Venezuela from Lebanon who settled largely in Margarita Island, Puerto Cabello, Punto Fijo, and La Guaira.¹⁹ It is via this mass migration that Venezuela's small Muslim population began to grow.

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. They are primarily of Lebanese and Syrian descent and concentrated on Margarita Island, Punto Fijo, and in the country's capital, Caracas.²⁰ One of the largest and most established Muslim communities in Venezuela is on Margarita Island in the Nueva Esparta state. Around 12,000 Lebanese call the island their home, and there a growing Muslim population is increasingly involved in real estate and tourism.²¹

While Margarita Island's Muslim population is almost entirely Lebanese Shi'a, there are Sunni Muslims elsewhere in the country. For example, Caracas has a Sunni population of 15,000 that is served by one of the largest and tallest mosques in Latin America, built by the Saudi government as a sister mosque to the Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Ibrahim mosque in Gibraltar.²² Venezuela's deteriorating economy, however, has pushed Muslim immigrants out of the country. This is apparent as the community ebbs and flows from Margarita Island, to Caracas, to Punto Fijo, along Venezuela's Caribbean coast, until it reaches the country's northwest border with Colombia in La Guaira. Across the border, the city of Maicao, Colombia, has become one of the most prominent destinations for Venezuelan migrants and refugees escaping the harsh conditions of the humanitarian crisis. This border town is home to Colombia's largest Sunni population, with approximately 5,000 Muslims.²³

For the time being no mass conversion to Islam is taking place in Venezuela. 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 *convertos* (converts to Christianity) for generations.

The presence in Caracas of the second largest mosque in Latin America 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.”²⁴

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,”²⁵ and condoned the brutal tactics of Iran’s domestic militia, the *Basij*, in their crackdown on opposition protesters.²⁶ 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.”²⁷

In terms of concrete policy implementation, these have included joint nuclear science and technology pacts,²⁸ delegation and diplomatic visits,²⁹ promises of oil exchanges,³⁰ the launch of a binational bank to illicitly channel funds,³¹ suspected industrial levels of support for Iran’s WMD program,³² and distributed lines of credit used to fund medical research.³³

In 2017, street protests and social uprisings spread throughout Venezuela. Amid the domestic political and economic crisis, 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.”³⁴ 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.³⁵

In 2018, Iran’s Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Morteza Sarmadi called for “closer cooperation” with Venezuela in standing against the Trump administration.³⁶ 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.”³⁷

Concurrently, as Caracas strengthened its relationship with Tehran, it has reached out to Ankara. In 2018, Turkey announced plans to start the construction of a new mosque in Caracas at the behest of the Maduro regime,³⁸ although that project still has not materialized. That same year, the Venezuelan government began a complex gold-for-food scheme with Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.³⁹ The scheme was built off an existing trade-based money laundering network run by Colombian Lebanese businessman, Alex Saab, and tapped into Venezuela’s gold-rich Arco Minero and the regime’s military-run food distribution program known as the CLAP system.⁴⁰

In 2020, Saab was named as Maduro’s special envoy to Tehran. He subsequently aimed to build a gold-for-gas scheme similar to the previous successful efforts with Turkey. With fuel shortages rampant throughout Venezuela, Saab and the Maduro regime arranged for no fewer than nine oil tankers from Iran, only five of which arrived in late May delivering approximately 1.5 million barrels of gasoline to various ports in Venezuela.⁴¹ Prior to the tankers, 17 flights from the Iranian airline, Mahan Air, also arrived in Venezuela beginning in April, to deliver technicians and parts to help repair some of the country’s oil refineries.⁴²

Saab was arrested on June 13, 2020, in Cape Verde, off the coast of West Africa, off an Interpol Red Notice for money-laundering charges by the U.S. Southern District of Florida.⁴³ Saab was traveling to Iran at the time, and his arrest set off a diplomatic tug-of-war between the Trump administration and the Maduro regime. While as of August 2020 the matter is unresolved, Cape Verde authorities have so far

accepted the extradition request from the United States and denied various appeals by Saab's lawyers, dealing a blow to the Tehran-Ankara-Caracas relationship.⁴⁴

Iran and Venezuela increasingly unite using trade and humanitarian assistance as a cover for potential military transfers.⁴⁵ The nature of the flights by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) preferred airline, Mahan Air, stopping in Algeria and arriving at the Paraguana peninsula in Venezuela with contents unknown, suggest the return of "Aero Terror." This is a reference to a similar flight between Iran and Venezuela almost a decade ago.⁴⁶ Moreover, in addition to the five tankers with Iranian flags that arrived in early June, an additional four Liberian re-flagged tankers from Iran were in route to Venezuela before being stopped due to U.S. economic pressure on Greece, where the tankers were registered and insured. The U.S. then seized 1.1 million barrels of fuel reportedly on board these Liberian-flagged tankers, the largest U.S. seizure of Iranian fuel to date.⁴⁷ A civil forfeiture complaint in the District of Columbia by the Justice Department implies that these fuel shipments to Venezuela were arranged by the IRGC through the National Iranian Oil Company.⁴⁸

The fuel shipments were followed by another Iranian-flagged general cargo ship, the Golsan, bringing food to Venezuela in June.⁴⁹ Shortly after, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Iran's first supermarket recently inaugurated in Caracas, Megasis, was owned by a military conglomerate, Etko, that is known to cooperate with the IRGC.⁵⁰

The blending of commercial with military activity, has provided Iran and the Maduro regime a degree of plausible deniability for potential covert military transfers. Fuel, food, technicians, and technology between Tehran and Caracas are layered with Iranian state-owned entities sanctioned specifically for its dual-use activity with the revolutionary guards. This concern culminated in early August 2020, when Colombian President Ivan Duque openly stated in a virtual event that the Maduro regime is seeking to acquire medium-to-long range missiles from Iran, a claim initially denied by the Venezuelan regime but now acknowledged by Nicolás Maduro as a "good idea."⁵¹

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