

American Foreign Policy Council



LATIN AMERICA

COUNTRIES

Nicaragua

Bolivia

Venezuela

Regional Summary

At just six million people, Latin America's Muslim population represents only 1.2 percent of the region's total of 568 million. Yet, despite this modest size, there is considerable evidence that Islamist groups and movements have begun to make significant inroads there, operating among the local Muslim communities that dot the region's countries.

Most directly, there is growing awareness among policymakers and experts alike that Islamic terrorist organizations have succeeded in creating extensive economic and operational networks throughout the Americas. Currently, no fewer than six such groups—including Hezbollah and al-Qaeda—have been identified as being active in the region. These organizations have managed to exploit the area's large ungoverned spaces and lack of governmental oversight to erect a range of lucrative illicit enterprises, as well as to establish at least some level of operational capability. The U.S. military now estimates that Islamist groups raise between \$300 and \$500 million dollars annually as a result of their activities in areas such as the Tri-Border Region (where Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil intersect) and the free trade zones of Colon, Maicao and Margarita Island.

In their activities in the region, Islamist groups have been greatly aided by widespread anti-Americanism and vestiges of leftist revolutionary fervor. These attitudes can be seen most visibly in Venezuela, where the regime of Hugo Chavez has spearheaded efforts to erect an anti-American coalition with like-minded states under the banner of a new social movement termed

“Bolivarianism” (referring to the 19th century Venezuelan-born independence hero Simón Bolívar). Significantly, these political proclivities have translated into warmth for Islamist causes and organizations. Thus Venezuela, under Chavez’ leadership, has forged a broad-ranging political, economic and military partnership with the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past decade. This relationship encompasses not only extensive bilateral economic ties and cooperation on oil and natural gas, but also shared opposition to the West—as manifested by Venezuela’s support for Iran’s nuclear program and its offer to help the Iranian regime circumvent international sanctions.

Chavez’ sympathetic attitude toward Islamism extends beyond cooperation with Iran, however. On his watch, Venezuela has emerged as a major “way station” and fundraising for Islamist groups, chief among them Hezbollah. So pervasive has Hezbollah’s influence become that it has led to the creation of an indigenous group among the region’s Wayuu Indian population which has pledged allegiance to—and support for—both the Lebanese militia and its chief sponsor, Iran.

Bolivia has likewise drifted toward partnership with the Iranian regime, although as of this writing—and despite positive pronouncements from both Tehran and La Paz—that relationship remains largely unconsummated. Nevertheless, the government of president Evo Morales appears to have positioned itself as a “bridge” to the Muslim world, and places considerable emphasis on its relationship with Islamic nations. Given the small size of the country’s Muslim population and its integration into Bolivian society at large, this focus appears to reflect a governmental—rather than popular—priority.