

Iran Courts Latin America

by Ilan Berman

In October 2011, U.S. attorney general Eric Holder and FBI director Robert Mueller revealed the thwarting of an elaborate plot by elements in Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to Washington at a posh D.C. eatery, utilizing members of the Los Zetas Mexican drug cartel.¹

The foiled terrorist plot, with its Latin American connections, focused new attention on what had until then been a largely overlooked political phenomenon: the intrusion of the Islamic Republic of Iran into the Western Hemisphere. An examination of Tehran's behavioral pattern in the region over the past several years reveals four distinct strategic objectives: loosening the U.S.-led international noose to prevent it from building nuclear weapons; obtaining vital resources for its nuclear project; creating informal networks for influence projection and sanctions evasion; and establishing a terror infrastructure that could target the U.S. homeland.

BUILDING WESTERN HEMISPHERE ALLIANCES

Outreach to Latin America is seen by the Iranian regime first and foremost as a means to lessen its deepening international isolation. Since 2003, when its previously clandestine nuclear program became a pressing international issue, Tehran has sought to mitigate the mounting political and economic restrictions levied against it by the United States and its allies through intensified diplomatic outreach abroad.

Due to its favorable geopolitical climate—typified by vast ungoverned areas and wide-

spread anti-Americanism—Latin America has become an important focus of this effort. Over the past decade, the regime has nearly doubled the number of embassies in the region (from six in 2005 to ten in 2010) and has devoted considerable energy to forging economic bonds with sympathetic regional governments.²

Far and away the most prominent such partnership has been with Venezuela. Since Hugo Chavez became president in 1999, alignment with Tehran has emerged as a cardinal tenet of Caracas's foreign policy. The subsequent election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the Iranian presidency in 2005 kicked cooperation into high gear with dramatic results. Today, the two countries enjoy an extensive and vibrant strategic partnership. Venezuela has emerged as an impor-

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1 *The New York Times*, Oct. 11, 2011.

2 Gen. Douglas M. Fraser, statement before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, Washington, D.C., Mar. 30, 2011.

tant source of material assistance for Tehran's sprawling nuclear program as well as a vocal diplomatic backer of its right to atomic power.³ The Chavez regime also has become a safe haven and source of financial support for Hezbollah, Iran's most powerful terrorist proxy.⁴ In turn, Tehran's feared Revolutionary Guard has become involved in training Venezuela's secret services and police.⁵ Economic contacts between Caracas and

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Tehran likewise have exploded—expanding from virtually nil in the early 2000s to more than \$20 billion in total trade and cooperation agreements today.⁶

Just as significantly, Venezuela has served as Iran's gateway for further economic and diplomatic expansion into the region. Aided by its partnership with Caracas and

bolstered by a shared anti-American outlook, Tehran has succeeded in forging significant strategic, economic, and political links with the regime of Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. Even Iran's relations with Argentina, where Iranian-supported terrorists carried out major bombings in 1992 and 1994, have improved in recent times, as the government of President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner has hewed a more conciliatory line toward Tehran.⁷

It would be a mistake, however, to view these contacts as simply pragmatic—or strictly defensive. The Iranian regime's sustained systematic outreach to regional states suggests that it sees the Western Hemisphere as a crucial strategic theater for expanding its own influence and re-

ducing that of the United States. Indeed, a 2009 dossier prepared by Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that "since Ahmadinejad's rise to power, Tehran has been promoting an aggressive policy aimed at bolstering its ties with Latin American countries with the declared goal of 'bringing America to its knees.'"⁸ This view is increasingly shared by the U.S. military: In its 2010 report on Iranian military power, the Office of the Secretary of Defense noted that "Iran seeks to increase its stature by countering U.S. influence and expanding ties with regional actors" in Latin America.⁹

To this end, Tehran is ramping up its strategic messaging to the region. In late January, on the heels of Ahmadinejad's very public four-country tour of Latin America, the Iranian regime formally launched HispanTV, a Spanish-language analogue to its English-language Press TV channel.¹⁰ The television outlet has been depicted by Ahmadinejad as part of his government's efforts to "limit the ground for supremacy of dominance seekers"—a thinly-veiled reference to U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere.¹¹

As Ahmadinejad's statement indicates, Tehran is pursuing a strategy that promotes its own ideology and influence in Latin America at Washington's expense. In this endeavor, it has been greatly aided by Chavez, who himself has worked diligently to diminish U.S. political and economic presence in the region under the banner of a new "Bolivarian" revolution.

EXPLOITING RESOURCE WEALTH

Since the start of the international crisis over Iran's nuclear ambitions nearly nine years

3 *China Central TV* (Beijing), Jan. 10, 2012.

4 *The Washington Times*, July 7, 2008.

5 Agence France-Presse, Dec. 21, 2008.

6 See, for example, Steven Heydemann, "Iran's Alternative Allies," in Robin Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics and U.S. Policy* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010).

7 Reuters, Dec. 5, 2011.

8 *YNet News* (Tel Aviv), May 25, 2009.

9 "Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran," U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Washington, D.C., Apr. 2010.

10 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 31, 2012.

11 *Arab News* (Riyadh), Feb. 1, 2012.

ago, it has become an accepted belief that Tehran's atomic program is now largely self-sufficient and that its progress is, therefore, largely inexorable. This, however, is far from the truth; in fact, the Iranian regime currently runs a considerable, and growing, deficit of uranium ore, the critical raw material needed to fuel its atomic effort.

According to nonproliferation experts, Tehran's indigenous uranium ore reserves are known to be both "limited and mostly of poor quality."¹² When Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi mapped out an ambitious national plan for nuclear power in the 1970s, his government was forced to procure significant quantities of the mineral from South Africa. Nearly four decades later, this aging stockpile has reportedly been mostly depleted.¹³ As a result, in recent years, Tehran has embarked on a widening quest to acquire uranium ore from abroad. In 2009, for example, it is known to have attempted to purchase more than 1,000 tons of uranium ore from the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan at a cost of nearly half-a-billion dollars.¹⁴ In that particular case, deft diplomacy on the part of Washington and its European allies helped stymie Tehran's efforts—at least for the time being.

The Iranian quest, however, has not abated. In February 2011, an intelligence summary from a member state of the International Atomic Energy Agency reaffirmed the Islamic regime's continued search for new and stable sources of uranium to fuel its nuclear program.¹⁵ This effort has recently focused on two principal geographic areas. The first is Africa where Tehran has made concerted efforts to engage a number of uranium producers such as Zimbabwe, Senegal, Nigeria, and the Democratic People's Republic of Congo.¹⁶ The second is Latin America where Tehran now is ex-



Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (left) embraces his closest ally in the Americas, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. Venezuela, located on the northern coast of South America, has become the focal point for Iran's ambitions in the Western hemisphere.

ploring and developing a series of significant resource partnerships.

The best known of these partnerships is with Venezuela; cooperation on strategic resources has emerged as a defining feature of the alliance between the Islamic Republic and the Chavez regime. The Iranian regime is currently known to be mining in the Roraima Basin, adjacent to Venezuela's border with Guyana. Significantly, that geological area is believed to be analogous to Canada's Athabasca Basin, the world's largest deposit of uranium.¹⁷

Bolivia, too, is fast becoming a significant source of strategic resources for the Iranian regime. With the sanction of the Morales government, Tehran is now believed to be extracting uranium from as many as eleven different sites in Bolivia's east, proximate to the country's in-

12 Associated Press, Feb. 24, 2011.

13 *Time*, Apr. 27, 2010.

14 Associated Press, Dec. 29, 2009.

15 *Ibid.*, Feb. 24, 2011.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Bret Stephens, "The Tehran-Caracas Nuclear Axis," *The Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 15, 2009.



Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (left) hosted an Iftar (fast breaking) ceremony on Ramadan in Tehran, September 3, 2009, which was attended by Bolivian president Evo Morales (right) during a two-day official visit. Tehran is now believed to be extracting uranium from as many as eleven different sites in Bolivia close to the country's industrial capital of Santa Cruz.

Regional experts note that Iran's mining and extraction efforts in Latin America are still comparatively modest in nature, constrained by competition from larger countries such as Canada and China and by Tehran's own available resources and know-how.²² However, the region is unquestionably viewed as a target of opportunity in Iran's widening quest for strategic resources—both because of its favorable political operating environment and because states there (especially Bolivia) represent unknown quantities in terms of resource wealth. This raises the possibility that Latin America could emerge in the near future as a significant provider of strategic resources for the Iranian regime and a key source of sustenance for Iran's expanding nuclear program.

dustrial capital of Santa Cruz.¹⁸ Not coincidentally, it is rumored that the now-infamous Tehran-Caracas air route operated jointly by Conviasa, Venezuela's national airline, and Iran's state carrier, Iran Air, will be extended in the near future to Santa Cruz.¹⁹ Additionally, a series of cooperation agreements concluded in 2010 between La Paz and Tehran have made Iran a "partner" in the mining and exploitation of Bolivia's lithium, a key strategic mineral with applications for nuclear weapons development.²⁰

Iran even appears to be eyeing Ecuador's uranium deposits. A \$30 million joint mining deal concluded between Tehran and Quito back in 2009 has positioned the Correa regime to eventually become a supplier for the Islamic Republic.²¹

ESTABLISHING AN IRANIAN PRESENCE

Tehran's formal political and economic contacts with regional states are reinforced by a broad web of asymmetric activities throughout the Americas. Illicit financial transactions figure prominently in this regard. Over the past several years, Tehran's economic ties with Caracas have helped it skirt the sanctions being levied by the international community as well as to continue to operate in an increasingly inhospitable global financial system. It has done so through the establishment of joint companies and financial entities as well as the formation of wholly Iranian-owned financial entities in Venezuela and the entrenchment of Iranian commercial banks there.²³ Experts note that this financial activity

18 Author interviews, La Paz, Bolivia, Jan. 23-25, 2012.

19 Author interviews, Santiago, Chile, Jan. 20-21, 2012.

20 *MercoPress* (Montevideo, Ury.), Oct. 30, 2010.

21 "Memorando De Entendimiento Entre El Ministerio De Minas Y Petroleos De La Republica Del Ecuador Y El Ministerio De Industrias Y Minería De La Republica Islamica De Iran En El Sector Geologico Minero," Dec. 3, 2009.

22 Author interviews, Santiago, Chile, Jan. 20, 2012.

23 See, for example, Norman A. Bailey, "Iran's Venezuelan Gateway," *Iran Strategy Brief*, no. 5, American Foreign Policy Council, Washington, D.C., Feb. 12, 2012.

exploits an existing loophole in the current sanctions regime against Tehran—one that leverages the freedom of action of Venezuelan banks to provide the Islamic Republic with “an ancillary avenue through which it can access the international financial system despite Western pressure.”²⁴

Tehran is also known to be active in the region’s ubiquitous gray and black markets as well as its free trade areas—operating both directly and via its terrorist proxy Hezbollah.²⁵ Most notoriously, these include the so-called “Triple Frontier” at the crossroads of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil as well as Venezuela’s Margarita Island.

The Iranians also boast an increasingly robust paramilitary presence in the region. The Pentagon, in its 2010 report to Congress on Iran’s military power, noted that the Qods Force, the Revolutionary Guard’s elite paramilitary unit, is now deeply involved in the Americas, stationing “operatives in foreign embassies, charities and religious/cultural institutions to foster relationships with people, often building on existing socioeconomic ties with the well-established Shia Diaspora” and even carrying out “paramilitary operations to support extremists and destabilize unfriendly regimes.”²⁶

This presence is most pronounced in Bolivia. Tehran has been intimately involved in the activities of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) since the formation of that Cuban- and Venezuelan-led geopolitical bloc—which also encompasses Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and a number of other nations—in the early



The long arm of Iran’s terror network became apparent in October 2011 with the announcement that U.S. authorities had thwarted an assassination plot by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard against the Saudi ambassador to Washington. The attempt was set to use members of the Los Zetas Mexican drug cartel. A display in Mexico of captured members and their armaments provides chilling proof of their lethality.

2000s. As part of that relationship, Tehran reportedly provided at least some of the seed money for the establishment of the bloc’s regional defense school situated outside Santa Cruz. Iranian defense minister Ahmad Vahidi reportedly presided over the school’s inauguration in May 2011, and Iran—an ALBA observer nation—is now said to be playing a role in training and indoctrination at the facility.²⁷ Regional officials currently estimate between fifty and three hundred Iranian trainers to be present in Bolivia.²⁸ Notably, however, a personal visit to the facility by this author in January 2012 found it to be largely unattended.

A BASE FOR ATTACK?

Conventional wisdom in Washington has long held that Tehran’s activism in the Americas

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Rex Hudson, “Terror and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America,” Library of Congress, Federal Research Div., Washington, D.C., Dec. 2010; “Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran,” Apr. 2010.

²⁶ “Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran,” Apr. 2010.

²⁷ Author interviews, Santiago, Chile, and La Paz, Bol., Jan. 20–24, 2012.

²⁸ Author interviews, Santiago, Chile, Jan. 20, 2012.



In January 2012, the Iranian regime formally launched HispanTV, a Spanish-language television outlet that will broadcast Iran's revolutionary, Islamic message in the Americas.

is opportunistic—rather than operational. Yet Iran's growing asymmetric capabilities throughout the region have the potential to be directed against the U.S. homeland. This was hammered home by the foiled October 2011 plot, an attack which—had it been successful—would potentially have killed scores of U.S. citizens in the nation's capital in the most significant terrorist event since 9/11.

The incident represents a seismic shift in Tehran's strategic calculations. As Director of National Intelligence James Clapper observed in his January 2012 testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, in response to mounting international pressure and asymmetric activity against Tehran's nuclear program, it appears that "Iranian officials—probably including Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i—have changed their calculus and are now willing to conduct an attack in the United States."²⁹

Latin America figures prominently in this equation. The foiled October 2011 plot suggests that Tehran increasingly deems the region an

advantageous operational theater. Moreover, as its influence and activities there intensify, the Iranian regime will be able to field a progressively more robust operational presence in the Americas. Clapper concluded his Senate testimony with an ominous warning: "The Iranian regime has formed alliances with Chavez, Ortega, Castro, and Correa that many believe can destabilize the hemisphere," he noted. "These alliances can pose an immediate threat by giving Iran—directly through the IRGC, the Qods force, or its proxies like Hezbollah—a platform in the region to carry out attacks against the United States, our interests, and allies."³⁰

OBSTACLES FACING IRAN

Understanding these motivations is essential to assessing the significance of Latin America in Tehran's strategic calculus and to determining whether its efforts there are successful.

For the moment, Iranian regional inroads represent a work in progress. The Islamist regime has demonstrated a clear interest in Latin America over the past decade and is now striving to expand its influence there. As of yet, however, it has not succeeded in solidifying this presence—or in fully operationalizing its regional relationships and institutionalizing its influence. As experts have noted, despite Tehran's generous promises of economic engagement with regional states, precious little of this aid has actually materialized, save in the case of Venezuela.³¹ Moreover, despite increasingly robust cooperation with regional states on mining and extraction, there is as yet no indication that Latin America by itself can serve as the answer for Iran's strategic resource needs.

Furthermore, an expansion of Tehran's footprint in the region is not necessarily inevitable.

29 James Clapper, testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Washington, D.C., Jan. 31, 2012.

30 Ibid.

31 Bailey, "Iran's Venezuelan Gateway."

Over the past year, the health of the Islamic Republic's foremost regional ally, Hugo Chavez, has become increasingly critical, and the Venezuelan strongman is now believed to be in the terminal stages of cancer. Significant ambiguity abounds over Venezuela's future direction and, as a result, about the durability of the partnership forged between Caracas and Tehran under Chavez.

Tehran's expanding regional activism, therefore, can be understood at least in part as contingency planning of sorts: an effort to broaden contacts and ensure the continuance of its regional influence in a post-Chavez environment. In this context, the regimes of Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador are significant with Correa in particular increasingly considered a potential successor to Chavez as a standard bearer of the new "Bolivarianism"—and an inheritor of cooperation with Iran.³² Tehran's future progress in solidifying and expanding those partnerships will serve as an important barometer of the long-term survival of its

bonds to the region as a whole.

For their part, since October 2011, policymakers in Washington have begun to pay serious attention to Tehran's activities in the Western Hemisphere. Yet they have done little concrete to respond to it, at least so far. Despite heartening early steps (including new legislation now under consideration by Congress),³³ a comprehensive strategy to contest and dilute Iranian influence in the Americas remains absent.

Unless and until such a strategy does emerge, Tehran's Latin American efforts—and the threats posed by them to American interests and the U.S. homeland—will only continue to expand.



A comprehensive strategy in Washington to contest and dilute Iranian influence in the Americas is absent.

32 Jose R. Cardenas, "Iran's Man in Ecuador," *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 15, 2011.

33 *Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act of 2012*, H.R. 3783, 112th U.S. Congress, 2d sess., Washington, D.C., Jan. 18, 2012.

In the Name of Honor

Palestinian police have freed a young woman whose father kept her locked in the bathroom of their house for about a decade. Spokesman Adnan Damiri said the 20-year-old woman was in a "deplorable" condition when she was found on Saturday.

Baraa Melhem revealed that she spent the decade by listening to the radio that her father had given her and by eating an apple that she got to eat every day.

Her father locked her up in the bathroom after she ran away from home to escape the torture at the age of 10. The police caught her and brought her back home.

She would be allowed to get out of the bathroom only in the middle of the night so that she could do the house work. She would be locked inside again around dawn. She did not see any sunlight for about a decade.

Baraa was given only a blanket, radio, and a razor blade by her father and stepmother, and both of them encouraged her to kill herself, the daily said. The girl was often physically assaulted, and her father would shave her head and eyebrows to punish her further.

He would often threaten to rape her till she got pregnant so that he could kill her in the name of honor killing.

Emirates 24/7 (Dubai), Jan. 24, 2012