

# Iran's Advances in Latin America

by Gabriel Andrade

For more than two decades, Iran has expanded its influence in Latin America, aided by the so-called “pink tide”—the turn to the radical political Left in the region that began in the 1990s. And while the 2013 death of Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez, the chief architect of this movement,<sup>1</sup> seemed to have reversed this trend, after some initial setbacks, the leftist forces have recuperated and have made relevant come-

backs in key areas. Once again, Tehran has fresh opportunities to penetrate the region with the ultimate goal of threatening U.S. security by challenging its hegemony in its own backyard.



*Buenos Aires, July 2016. Participants at a forum on anti-Semitism in Latin America hold photos of the victims of the 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina Jewish Center. Iranian-backed terrorists detonated the car bomb that murdered eighty-five people.*

---

<sup>1</sup> René Rojas, “The ebbing ‘pink tide’: An autopsy of left-wing regimes in Latin America,” *New Labor Forum*, Apr. 2017.

## Islamic Theocracy Mixed with Anti-Semitism

During the Cold War, Latin American revolutionary movements pursued a conventional Marxist approach with a strong anti-religious element. This was not only directed at Catholic clerical elites (who were widely perceived to be in league with conservative dictators) but at any form of religious practice. In Cuba, for example, grassroots Afro-Cuban religions (Santería, Palo) were persecuted alongside Catholicism. Religion, whatever the creed, was considered the opiate of the masses. The Soviet Union's struggle with potentially secessionist Muslim minorities further fed the narrative among Latin American revolutionary movements that religion was an obstacle to a proletarian revolution.

Yet this began changing in the 1980s. The endorsement of the Iranian revolution by leftist figures such as French social theorist Michel Foucault heralded a transformation in the Marxist approach to religion. Christianity was still to be distrusted in Latin America, but Islam seemed potentially ripe for an alliance. Foucault's lauding of the Islamic revolution as "a great joust under traditional emblems, those of the king and the saint, the armed ruler and the destitute exile, the despot faced with the man who stands up bare-handed and is acclaimed by a people,"<sup>2</sup> aroused sympathies in the region. A regime that called the United States "the Great Satan" seemed to be a nice fit for movements heavily invested in anti-Americanism. Under the simple yet relentless logic that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, the Latin American Left began to look to the Islamist regime

---

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, "What are the Iranians dreaming about?" *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Eng. ed., Oct. 16-22, 1978.

in Tehran as a political force with which it could work.

Iran rode through the gate flying an anti-Semitic banner alongside its anti-American one. And anti-Semitism is most virulent in the one country that is home to Latin America's largest number of Jews: Argentina. Whereas in World War II, most countries in the hemisphere declared war on the Axis powers, Argentina's president Juan Domingo Perón refused to do so, and a significant number of Nazis were warmly received there after the war.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1970s, Argentina was ruled by right-wing military juntas that often circulated anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. The most influential was formulated by one Walter Beveraggi, who published a pamphlet that, not unlike the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, purported to detail the so-called Andina Plan. Allegedly, this was a plot organized by Jews to seize the Patagonia region of Argentina and annex it to Israel.<sup>4</sup>

While Argentinean revolutionary movements fought against the dictatorships and ultimately managed to restore democracy, anti-Semitism continued to spread across the country; and while this anti-Semitism was originally fed by right-wing juntas, it subsequently became more prevalent on the Left under the old travesty that Jews control finances and exploit the proletariat. As the Iranian regime intensified its anti-Semitic rhetoric in the ensuing years,

---

<sup>3</sup> Gaby Weber, *La conexión alemana: el lavado del dinero nazi en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2005), pp. 55-6.

<sup>4</sup> Ernesto Bohoslavsky, "Contra la Patagonia Judía. La familia Eichmann y los nacionalistas Argentinos y Chilenos frente al plan Andina (de 1960 a nuestros días)," *Cuadernos Judaicos*, Center for Judaic Studies of the University of Chile, Santiago de Chile, Santiago, 25 (2008): 223-48.

the ideologies of the Latin American Left and the Islamic theocracy further converged.

### **What Iran Has Accomplished**

In 1994, Iranian-backed terrorists detonated a car bomb outside the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) Jewish center in Buenos Aires, murdering eighty-five people. It soon transpired that Tehran was responsible, but no one has ever been brought to trial. Despite pressure from successive Argentine governments, Iran refused to cooperate or to extradite those named by investigators.

When Néstor Kirchner was elected president in 2004, he envisioned a new strategy and hoped to reach a deal with Tehran where Argentine investigators would be able to interrogate the suspects. He failed. Kirchner assigned the investigation to chief prosecutor Alberto Nisman so that he could take the case to Interpol. Nisman complied and, in 2007, managed to place five Interpol red notices on high-ranking Iranian officials who had participated in the attack (red notices direct law enforcement officers worldwide to locate and arrest a person). Iran, however, never agreed to having its officials interrogated in Argentina.

Kirchner died in 2009 and was succeeded in power by his wife Cristina Fernandez. In 2015, Nisman once again took interest in the AMIA case and concluded that Fernandez herself may have colluded with the Iranians. He was determined to prove that she had proposed a deal in which Iranian



*Aftermath of the bombing by Tehran's Hezbollah proxy of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, with twenty-nine murdered, March 1992. As early as 1983, Iranian cleric Mohsen Rabbani trained disciples in Argentina and helped establish Islamist cells.*

officials would be exonerated in return for access to favorable oil deals.<sup>5</sup>

Nisman was scheduled to present evidence for his case in 2015 but died the night before his planned appearance. His body was found with a gunshot wound to the head. Having initially insisted that Nisman had committed suicide,<sup>6</sup> Fernandez changed her story within days under a storm of public pressure; she acknowledged that the chief prosecutor had indeed been murdered and

<sup>5</sup> David M.K. Sheinin, "The Death of Alberto Nisman, the Argentine Presidency Unhinged, and the Secret History of Shared United States-Argentine Strategy in the Middle East," *Latin American Studies Association Forum*, Winter 2016, pp. 34-8.

<sup>6</sup> Dexter Filkins, "Death of a Prosecutor," *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2015.

claimed that she had been given false information by her political adversaries.<sup>7</sup> The murder has still not been solved, but powerful interests want to clear the Iranians involved in the bombing in order to facilitate trade deals. As Argentine congressman Julian Obligio and analyst Diego Naveira explain,

**Powerful interests want to clear the Iranians involved in the AMIA bombing to facilitate trade deals.**

if Iran can manage to adjudicate the Buenos Aires bombings in its favor, absolving itself of all responsibility and increasing its international legitimacy as a result, an enhanced financial relationship between the two countries may follow.<sup>8</sup>

While this was by no means the first Iranian-related terrorist attack in the region—Tehran’s Hezbollah proxy bombed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, murdering twenty-nine civilians, in March 1992—and while the threat of new terrorist attacks remains, just as important has been the aggressive Iranian spread of jihadist Shiite ideology through centers established across Latin America.

The chief architect of this endeavor has been Iranian cleric Mohsen Rabbani, implicated as the mastermind of the AMIA bombing.<sup>9</sup> As early as 1983, long before the bombing, Rabbani actively trained disciples

in Argentina and helped establish cells and possibly training camps in the largely uncontrolled tri-border area where Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay converge. According to Joseph Humire’s report “After Nisman,” one of Rabbani’s frequent (and largely successful) tactics was the establishment of *halal* certification processes in the food industry that served as cover for recruiting jihadis.<sup>10</sup>

Iran’s influence in the region accelerated with the 1998 election of Hugo Chavez as president of Venezuela. Under the mentorship of Fidel Castro, Chavez escalated his anti-U.S. agenda. Even more influential in Chavez’s ideological radicalization was Argentine sociologist Norberto Ceresole, a notorious Holocaust denier and anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist.<sup>11</sup> It was Ceresole who first convinced Chavez to align himself with Iran’s expansionism and the first to propose the creation of an Office of Strategic Intelligence to be financed by Hezbollah.<sup>12</sup>

The project never came to be, but Chavez showed some initial sympathies toward jihadist movements, regardless of their sectarian affiliation. For example, he sympathized with the notorious Venezuelan terrorist Ilich Ramirez (aka Carlos the

<sup>7</sup> CNN en español, Jan. 22, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Julian Obligio and Diego Naveira, “Rewriting History in Argentina,” in Joseph Humire and Ilan Berman, eds., *Iran’s Strategic Penetration of Latin America* (New York: Lexington, 2014), p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Levitt, “Iranian and Hezbollah Operations in South America,” *Prism*, Dec. 16, 2015, pp. 119-33; *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [Jan. 10, 2020](#).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Humire, “[After Nisman](#): How the death of a prosecutor revealed Iran’s growing influence in the Americas,” Center for a Secure Free Society, Washington, D.C., June 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Alberto Garrido, *Mi amigo Chávez: conversaciones con Norberto Ceresole* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Autor, 2001), p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> Ely Karmon, “Hezbollah America Latina: Strange Group or Real Threat,” The International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Nov. 2006.



Jackal, who hid in Sudan under Omar Bashir's tenure and who ultimately converted to Islam)<sup>13</sup>: "[Ramirez] was, in fact, a revolutionary warrior; I support him."<sup>14</sup>

The 2005 rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iranian president facilitated the cooperation between the two countries, culminating in more than two hundred bilateral agreements. Some financial projects have enabled evasion of international sanctions on Iran, the most notorious project being the Banco Internacional de Desarrollo, which operates beyond the reach of sanctions.<sup>15</sup>

During Ahmadinejad's tenure, direct flights between Caracas and Tehran were established.<sup>16</sup> The flights stopped for a while but later resumed and have raised suspicions among analysts. The route has no economic viability whatsoever, and customs authorities in Caracas have not screened passengers



*The rise of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (left), here with Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez in 2009, facilitated cooperation, culminating in hundreds of bilateral agreements.*

upon arrival.<sup>17</sup> The real purpose of the weekly flight seems to be the importation of military equipment to Venezuela.<sup>18</sup> The Caracas regime also sent missile equipment to Iran's allies in Syria that was later used by the Assad dictatorship to savage its opponents in the Syrian civil war.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, the Pentagon has reported that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has increased its presence in

---

<sup>13</sup> Brian A. Nelson, "The Education of Hugo Chávez," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 2011, p. 175.

<sup>14</sup> BBC Mundo, Nov. 9, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Leopoldo Colmenares, "Las relaciones entre Irán y Venezuela: implicaciones para el gobierno venezolano," Programa de Cooperación en Seguridad Regional, Bogota, July 2011, p. 1-10.

<sup>16</sup> Joshua Kucera, "What is Hugo Chavez up to?" *The Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 2011, pp. 22-30.

---

<sup>17</sup> Kavon Hakimzadeh, "Iran and Venezuela: The Axis of Annoyance," *Military Review* (Ft. Leavenworth), May-June 2009, p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Bradley Porter, "[Altered Landscape or Arms Race? Making Sense of Military Spending in South America](#)," Western Hemisphere Security Analysis Center, U.S. Southern Command and The Applied Research Center at Florida International University, Miami, Nov. 2010.

<sup>19</sup> "[Venezuela Aids Iranian Missile Sales to Syria, Intelligence Agencies Say](#)," Nuclear Threat Initiative, Washington, D.C., Dec. 22, 2008.

Venezuela.<sup>20</sup> There are also reports of Iranian-backed indoctrination camps (centers where jihadist ideology and propaganda are introduced) near the Colombian border. More worryingly, Hezbollah may have training camps and active cells on the island of Margarita,<sup>21</sup> where large communities of people of Lebanese descent reside.

Chavez died of cancer in 2013. During his illness, his health status was kept secret. But it is plausible that Iranian intelligence knew about his condition and anticipated his early demise. Therefore, perhaps foreseeing that Chavez's hand-picked successors might not be able to remain in power, the Iranian regime moved to expand its influence beyond Venezuela.

Chavez had already facilitated this himself, having emerged as the undisputed head of the radical Left in Latin America and the chief leader of the pink tide. And he used his influence to mediate the alliances Tehran had hoped to establish with other countries in the region, notably through the formation of



*Iranian tankers docking in Venezuela. Tehran rushed to save Venezuela's plummeting oil production during the COVID-19 pandemic by sending oil tankers in defiance of Washington's economic sanctions on both countries.*

the so-called ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana Para Los Pueblos De Nuestra America), which comprised Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Bolivia with Iran in observer status. This is the platform the Islamic Republic has used to extend its influence beyond Venezuela.

Tehran took a special interest in Bolivia. It founded an ALBA regional defense school outside the city of Santa Cruz with Iranian advisors. Under the mentorship of Chavez, President Evo Morales signed bilateral agreements with Iran.<sup>22</sup> Projects included cultural exchanges (possibly a cover for recruitment activities) and mining. This turned out to be significant. Even as the Obama administration was negotiating its nuclear deal with Tehran, Bolivia was suspected of extracting uranium and

---

<sup>20</sup> Emmanuel Karagiannis and Clark McCauley, "The Emerging Red-Green Alliance: Where Political Islam Meets the Radical Left," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2 (2013): 167-82.

<sup>21</sup> Christian Vianna de Azevedo, "Venezuela's Toxic Relations with Iran and Hezbollah: An Avenue of Violence, Crime, Corruption and Terrorism," *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Policiais*, 1(2018): 43-90.

---

<sup>22</sup> President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, [statement](#), Tehran, Feb. 25, 2015.

delivering it to Iran for the acceleration of its nuclear program.<sup>23</sup>

Eventually, this expansion in Latin America moved beyond the mere preparation phase and into active attacks against American targets. Three incidents are noteworthy:

- In 2007, an unsuccessful attempt to blow up fuel tanks underneath John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York<sup>24</sup> involved Abdul Kadir, a Guyanese man under the mentorship of Rabbani who recruited members of the Guyanese diaspora in New York.<sup>25</sup>
- In 2011, the IRGC organized an attempt to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States in a Washington, D.C. restaurant.<sup>26</sup> That involved an undercover informant with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) who posed as a hitman provided by Mexico's Los Zetas drug cartel. The plot also included a plan to bomb the Israeli embassy in Washington and possibly a target in Buenos Aires, but it never came to fruition.<sup>27</sup>

**Tehran has a keen interest in the region as a way to meddle in Washington's backyard and to prepare for future attacks.**

- In 2011, a purported massive cyber-attack against the United States involved Mexican hackers backed by Venezuelan and Iranian diplomats.<sup>28</sup>

None of these attacks succeeded, but they are signs that Iran's influence in Latin America has grown considerably over the last two decades and that the Islamic Republic has a keen interest in the region, chiefly as a way to meddle in Washington's backyard and to prepare for future attacks. While these events took place almost a decade ago, Iran has repeatedly indicated its continued interest in the region with Venezuela constituting the most recent axis of expansion. Thus it was Tehran that rushed to save Venezuela's plummeting oil production during the COVID-19 pandemic (when the world largely ignored Maduro's pleas for help) by sending oil tankers in defiance of Washington's economic sanctions on both countries.<sup>29</sup> U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo voiced concern that, as part of this operation, Iranian aircraft transferred support to the Maduro regime while assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs David Schenker said, "One could imagine them sending other things [to Venezuela]—I mean weapons."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *The New York Times*, [May 25, 2009](#); Ely Karmon, "Iran Challenges the United States in Its Backyard, in Latin America," *American Foreign Policy Interests*, Oct. 2010, pp. 276-96.

<sup>24</sup> Levitt, "Iranian and Hezbollah Operations in South America."

<sup>25</sup> *The New York Times*, [Dec. 15, 2010](#).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Oct 11, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Joel Hernández, "Terrorism, drug trafficking, and the globalization of supply," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 4 (2013): 41-61.

<sup>28</sup> *The Washington Times*, [Dec. 13, 2011](#).

<sup>29</sup> *Extremism Watch*, Voice of America, [May 31, 2020](#).

<sup>30</sup> Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty, [May 28, 2020](#).

## What Lies Ahead

Chavez's death in 2013 seemed to mark the ebbing of the pink tide. In Brazil, Lula de Silva's government showed an interest in

establishing closer ties to Iran, but his successor, Dilma Rousseff, backed off from such arrangements, despite herself being a radical leftist.<sup>31</sup> Rousseff was ultimately removed from office, and a government far more tuned to U.S. interests headed by Jair Bolsonaro closed the door on Iranian influence.

Iran also explored expanding its influence in Ecuador under left-wing strongman Rafael Correa. His successor Lenin Moreno is someone Washington can work with, so Tehran's plans for expansion in that country have been put on hold.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, in the wake of massive demonstrations as a result of electoral fraud, Bolivia's Evo Morales was forced to resign, and Iran consequently no longer has the same degree of influence there.

However, these changes do not mean Iranian influence is no longer active. Tehran still operates through proxy networks, including financial support for cultural projects that maintain subversive activities in those countries. Thus, for example, the prominent Shiite Islamist Roberto Chambi Calle established the Fundacion Cultural Boliviana Islamica with Iranian capital in 2007 and organizes Islamist seminars with imams from neighboring countries. Another network founded by Fayeze Rajab Khedeer Kannan of the Asociación Cultural Boliviana Musulmana disseminates Islamist messaging

**Tehran supports cultural projects that maintain subversive activities in Latin American countries.**

throughout Bolivia and serves as a recruiting ground for jihadist ideology.<sup>33</sup>

It would seem that the pink tide has not completely receded, and there are worrying signs that it may surge again. Cristina Fernandez has returned to power in Argentina as vice president, and she is once again insisting that Nisman committed suicide and that Tehran is not responsible for the 1994 attacks.

Recently, there has been left-wing agitation in Ecuador, Colombia, and Chile. If these radicals reach power in those countries, Iran could seize the opportunity and attempt to establish new operating centers for terrorism. Colombia is particularly troubling because as a part of peace negotiations, rebels of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC) were given access to political participation. Reports have confirmed that Hezbollah and FARC have cooperated in the past.<sup>34</sup> If FARC politicians move into positions of power, Iran could cement its influence there.

Although Iranian intelligence anticipated that, as a result of Chavez's death, it would need to cater to other countries in the region, Venezuela remains the hub of Iranian expansionism in Latin America. Despite an economic collapse that has sparked massive waves of refugees, the country's strongman Nicolás Maduro remains in power. One of

<sup>31</sup> Ilan Berman, *Iran's Deadly Ambition: The Islamic Republic's Quest for Global Power* (New York: Encounter, 2016), p. 225.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas Farah, "[Cuba's role](#) in the Bolivarian radical populist movement's dismantling of democracy," IBI Consultants, Phila., 2018.

<sup>33</sup> *The World Almanac of Islamism, 2019*, American Foreign Policy Council (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2019), p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> Vanessa Neumann, "[The New Nexus of Narcoterrorism: Hezbollah and Venezuela](#)," Foreign Policy Research Institute, Phila., Dec. 3, 2011.



his closest ministers, Tareck El Aissami, is of Lebanese descent. He has been indicted by the U.S. government on drug charges,<sup>35</sup> having long been thought to be an important figure in the Los Soles drug cartel, an organization that may have worked closely with Hezbollah.<sup>36</sup>

These connections cannot be underestimated. In 2013, it was reported that the Venezuelan embassy in Baghdad had been issuing passports to terrorists for a price since 2007,<sup>37</sup> at a time when Iraq was firmly under the control of the U.S.-led international coalition. This likely continues to this day. Given Iran's firmly established influence in Iraq, there are strong suspicions that Iranians may have been among the recipients of those passports and may have used them as a way to move Tehran's sphere of influence into territories that are closer geographically to the United States.<sup>38</sup>

In 2017, caravans originating in Honduras may have included militants hoping to enter the United States. Vice President Mike Pence announced that Maduro was financing the caravan<sup>39</sup> while President Trump warned there may have been criminals in the caravan's ranks but gave no further specifications as to who they were. Given the Venezuelan regime's ties to Iran and Hezbollah, there may be reason to suspect that the caravan might have included

**A 2012 U.S. law requires an assessment of “Iran’s growing presence and activity in the Western Hemisphere.”**

terrorists hoping to enter the United States to organize attacks from within.<sup>40</sup>

Washington has reckoned with these threats but not sufficiently. However, in 2012, Congress passed

the Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act sponsored by Rep. Jeff Duncan (Republican of South Carolina). This law compels the U.S. government to develop strategic responses to Iranian activities in Latin American countries and to draft “an assessment of the threats posed to the United States by Iran’s growing presence and activity in the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>41</sup> According to Duncan, these mandates are necessary to reduce Iran’s “capability to direct or support terrorist activity in our own hemisphere.”<sup>42</sup>

Following the Obama administration’s 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, the State Department downplayed Tehran’s presence in Latin America. The Trump administration then showed much more concern about the danger posed by the Islamic Republic, and the January 2020 killing of Qassem Soleimani may present a renewed opportunity to confront Iranian expansionism. Yet so far, even this administration has not sufficiently recognized that the expansion of Iranian power goes well beyond the Middle East all the way into Latin America. Halting it requires the engagement of Latin America’s political actors and potential U.S. allies without alienating them.

<sup>35</sup> France 24 TV (Paris), [Aug. 3, 2019](#).

<sup>36</sup> Al-Arabiya News Channel (Dubai), [Apr. 27, 2020](#).

<sup>37</sup> CNN, [Feb. 14, 2017](#).

<sup>38</sup> *The Miami Herald*, [Apr. 17, 2017](#).

<sup>39</sup> *The Washington Times*, Oct. 23, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Xinhua News Agency (Beijing), [Jan. 10, 2020](#).

<sup>41</sup> [Public Law 112-220](#), 112th Congress, Washington, D.C., Dec. 28, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Jeff Duncan, “An ‘invisible’ Iran in the Western hemisphere: America’s strategic blind spot,” *The Hill* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 21, 2014.

Anti-Americanism (frequently attached to anti-Semitism) fuels much of the Iranian influence in the region. President Trump's remarks about Hispanic immigrants contribute significantly to anti-U.S. views in the region and feed Iran's narrative. Given that Tehran has been moderately successful at winning some hearts and minds in the region, Washington needs to do better. It must increase its soft power through trade agreements, cultural exchanges, and educational initiatives so as to reclaim

cultural influence in a zone that, since it promulgated the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, it has considered to be its sphere of influence.

**Gabriel Andrade** is an assistant professor at Ajman University, United Arab Emirates. He is the author of books and articles on psychology, philosophy, and sociology. He is a frequent collaborator to *Merion West*.

