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## JOURNAL

## Iran's Expanding Footprint in Latin America

By *Sandra Warmoth*

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With a near-nuclear Iran at the tip of the spear exploiting a mutual hatred of the U.S. and its representative democratic, free-market system in order to galvanize the mullah-caudillo alliance in the Western Hemisphere; and its premier Shi'ia terrorist organization, Hizb'allah, well expanded from its key operational base in the Tri-border Area (TBA) working the narco-terrorist nexus to facilitate ever innovative terrorist operations, is the U.S. really staring down a clear and present danger to its national security?

### A Constitutional Quest to Export the Shi'a Global Islamic Revolution

Atop its glorious ancient Persian perch, a prideful Iran looks down upon the U.S. as a transient, declining power, while it sees itself a rising international force to be reckoned with as it hastens its Khomeini-style "religious fight of Islam.[1]" Shi'a empowerment is in high gear these days, a result of the problematic U.S. performance in Iraq, and the great strides Iran has made toward the realization of its controversial nuclear weapons program, observed American Foreign Policy Council Vice President for Policy, **Ilan Berman, in his testimony before the U.S. Committee on International Relations.**

During that hearing, Dr. Col. (Res.) Eitan Azani, Senior Researcher at the Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Herzliya, Israel, pointed out that Ahmadinejad sees himself as promoter of the Second Islamic Revolution. Indeed, over the years, a militant, messianic Ahmadinejad has staunchly demonstrated that he will not be deterred from exporting another Iranian Islamic Revolution – globally – as he works to expedite the return of the "Hidden Imam," Muhammad al-Mahdi, the Shi'a messiah.

His drive is reflective of his dedication from youth to the fundamental Mahdist teachings of the Hojjaatieh Society, whose members went underground when the movement was suppressed in the early 1980s by Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who believed they threatened his authority. Today, Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi is looked to as leader of a newly resurrected Hojjaatieh, and it is no small matter that this senior cleric holds great sway over Ahmadinejad and other government officials, as well as the army and security forces, **and he makes no secret of his favorable views toward conquering the world, and preparing the way for the advent of the Mahdi using violent means, including nuclear weapons, in the service of the Islamic Revolution.**

The closer Ahmadinejad brings his regime to acquiring nuclear weapons, the greater his intransigence, and consequent hostility, toward the U.S. and its allies, which are feverishly working in concert to thwart the endeavor. With every nuclear breakthrough trumpeted by Ahmadinejad, progressives persist in giving the Iranian regime credit for its moderation, which they base on past declarations from artful Iranian leaders such as former President Mohammad Khatami, whose September 2000 United Nations address introduced a supposed new paradigm of dialogue among cultures and civilizations, which, according to Michael Rubin, resident scholar at the American Institute Enterprise think tank, **was a tactic designed to divert attention from Iran's nuclear progress.**

Rubin, no doubt, was referring to the oft-employed ancient Islamic tactic called *taqiyya* to deceive the infidel enemy. Ever true to his Constitutional duties to export the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Ahmadinejad is making an all-out effort to use his charm offensive in America's backyard to build an axis of power unified by a common hatred of the U.S., its values, institutions, and allies, in order to expand the regime's footprint and enhance its nuclear hegemonic projection in the hemisphere, **and put an end to America's superpower status.**

## **Low Friends in High Places: Ahmadinejad's Anti-U.S. Axis with the Bolivarian Revolution Gang in Latin America**

### **Ahmadinejad and Chavez – A Courting of Convenience**

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, a left-wing socialist, captured the conservative Ahmadinejad's attention when the latter rose to his presidency in 2005. The relationship flourished such that in 2007 the two established weekly flights between their countries via IranAir and Venezuela's Conviasa, with stopovers in Damascus; arrangements were made for cursory immigration and customs control to ensure hassle-free transcontinental passage of goods, and personnel; **and easy-to-obtain Venezuelan citizenship identity, and travel documents complemented the endeavors.**

Chavez and Ahmadinejad also established a joint shipping line, the IRISL Group. **Arrangements like these provide state cover and immunity for covert activities, both state and non-state, by allowing unfettered access to airports, and ports.** The IRISL Group, for instance, morphed into another company after the U.S. government **blacklisted it for providing logistical services to Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics.** Chavez also made hospitable arrangements for non-state armed groups such as Hizb'allah and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC, to carry out illicit activities unimpeded on Venezuelan territory.

**Multi-ton loads of cocaine, as well as sophisticated weapons and communications equipment, are moved via transcontinental pipelines that Iran and Venezuela are linked to, with the proceeds funding further Iranian penetration of the region, terrorist organizations, guerilla groups, and criminalized state coffers. Venezuela also seized six modified ocean-going tuna fishing boats to load cocaine** from Iranian installations in the delta of the Orinoco River in the country's eastern sector, with the upper hold of the vessels intended for transporting tuna, which emits an odor that could mask caches of drugs.

Strategically situated installations also conceal weapons and other contraband; and some have **manufacturing facilities that operate for illicit purposes.** A cement plant in Bolivar State owned by Iran's Ministry of Mines **craftily uses its manufacturing facility for shipping cocaine to West Africa and Europe in cement bags to evade detection, as the chemicals used to produce cocaine are also used in cement production.** This multi-purpose plant is located nearby a heavily guarded Iranian-controlled gold mine that sits atop one of the world's largest deposits of uranium. **The plant also serves as a conduit to move ore from that mine to a port on the Orinoco River for transport onto Iranian-flagged vessels. There is concern that this type of activity is facilitating the mining of precursor elements for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), meanwhile Chaves has announced plans to construct a nuclear village with Iranian assistance. Another multi-purpose facility that is a product of an Iranian-Venezuelan joint venture is a well-guarded tractor factory,** also near the gold mine, which produces weapons, and some tractors of poor quality and token value, and is housed in a military-style compound.

**Turkish authorities in 2008 intercepted 22 containers marked "tractor parts" heading from Iran to Venezuela in which they found bomb-making materials and weapons.** Other bilateral wait-and-see ventures include Iran's initiative to construct **10,000 buildings in Venezuela,** and manufacturing facilities purportedly for **automobiles, bricks, and bicycles.** At the grand opening of a new bicycle factory attended by Iranian Ambassador to Venezuela, Abdallah Zifan, Chavez cycled around on what he jokingly referred to as an **"atomic bicycle,"** making light of concerns expressed by U.S. officials, and analysts; during a broadcast on Iran's state-run Press TV, he stood next to the factory to mockingly prove it was not a nuclear reactor.

Chavez and Ahmadinejad also secured bilateral projects and business initiatives in agriculture, petrochemicals, and oil exploration. Iran and Venezuela are the world's fourth and fifth largest oil exporters, respectively, and since both countries were founding members of OPEC in the 1960s, the two leaders are well positioned to manipulate oil prices on the world market. Chavez also brought Iran and Syria into an anti-U.S. club for revolutionaries that he founded in 2004 with then Cuban President Fidel Castro, called the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas, ALBA, **whose members, inter alia, include Bolivia's Evo Morales, Ecuador's Rafael Correa Delgado, and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, as well as armed non-state actors such as FARC and Hizb'allah.** The Bolivarian gang advocates radical internal and external conflict to rebuild "Grand Colombia," 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism, a global revolution leading to a new world order, and a cashless system to replace U.S. currency.

**There is also a bi-national Iranian-Venezuelan development bank; an Iranian-owned universal bank, Bank Saderat; Iranian commercial banks in Caracas; and a bi-national investment and development fund.** These financial institutions and their products help Iran evade United Nations (U.N.) Security Council resolutions tied to its illicit nuclear weapons program. **The Iranian-owned Bank Saderat, which incorporated Banco Internacional de Desarrollo in Venezuela, was singled out by the U.N. as a possible conduit for funds used to finance terrorism and nuclear proliferation, and the former bank was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department for channeling funds to Hizb'allah.** There is also a financial scheme that Chavez can employ to help Iran duck forthcoming sanctions against Iranian gas imports, which involves **supplying Iran with gas using money from gas sales to be deposited to a fund Ahmadinejad set up to finance Venezuelan purchases of Iranian machinery and technology.**

**Since 2004, Iran has built up an extensive network of military installations in Venezuela, and has installed Quds Force operatives in several embassies,** where the offices of the military attaches operate as separate entities within these foreign outposts, which enables Hizb'allah to enter into countries through the dedicated offices. **The Iranian regime is also extensively training and equipping the intelligence apparatuses of the Bolivarian states,** especially Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador; and it provides training trips to member state officials and military-age youth cadres to Iran – its camps offering training in terrorism and unconventional warfare. **Chavez has been working on an \$800 million cash deal to purchase a weapons package from Russia that includes S-300PMU air defense systems** originally destined for Iran to facilitate Iranian attempts to bypass U.N. sanctions.

Meanwhile, **construction of an Iranian-Venezuelan military facility on the peninsula of Paraguana, 60 miles from the border with Columbia, is underway for the deployment of Iranian Shahab 3, Scud-B, and Scud-C missiles, and mobile launchers, and for the joint development of intermediate range ballistic missiles; while the Iranian Clerical Army, Pasdaran, and about 300 of Iran's IRGC-QF troops comprise Chavez's personal guard. The Quds Force is providing training, equipment, and operational instructions for Hizb'allah, and Iran is installing operatives in charities and religious-cultural institutions to forge relationships with the locals in their respective regions.** According to Dr. Norman Bailey, who served as Mission Manager for Cuba and Venezuela in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, **these so-called "cultural centers" never have ballet performances or art exhibits, but they do have four-foot thick concrete walls.** Chavez, a virulent enemy of the Jewish State, expelled the Israeli ambassador in protest of Operation Cast Lead in 2009, and has since created an inhospitable climate for Jews, resulting in increased anti-Semitism, and many Jews leaving the country.

### **An Open Door, An Expanding Footprint**

Chavez' relationships with ALBA countries, currently eight, opened the door for Ahmadinejad to expand Iran's footprint in the region. The Iranian regime now has Bolivia on its short list, followed by Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Iran is preparing for what the regime believes to be fertile Latin American soil for even more penetration, and radicalization, with its **January 2011 launch of HispanTV,** which can be viewed via cable or the Internet. Patterned after Iran's English language PressTV, the state-owned, 24-hour Spanish language satellite television channel will disseminate large doses of Iranian Shi'ite Islamic propaganda along with state-approved news, documentaries, and Iranian films, and can be used to

send clandestine messages to Hizb'allah and other actors. Representatives from Latin American countries, including Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, attended the inauguration ceremony. What follows are key developments pertaining to these three key countries, which are on Iran's current geo-strategic agenda in the region.

## **Bolivia**

Numerous meetings have taken place between socialist President Morales and Ahmadinejad, and other high-level officials, in the spirit of anti-imperialistic cooperation. **Iran opened an embassy in La Paz** in September 2010; **and requested dozens of spaces in the international school for children to accommodate a flurry of newly arriving Iranian diplomats. In May of 2011, the Iranian defense minister visited Bolivia to inaugurate a military training school for ALBA countries financed by the Iranian regime.** Since Ahmadinejad's January 2012 Tour of Tyrants Trip to Latin America, he has increased the presence of Quds Force operatives in Bolivia. **Dispatches of Iranian military attaches assigned to Bolivia facilitate Hizb'allah operatives and others entering into the country through their offices under diplomatic cover.** Arrangements were made for the purchase of Iranian military equipment, and for the maintenance of Bolivian Air Force aircraft; and **Iran is providing intelligence training and equipment.**

The **Kalacha region in Bolivia provides a base of operations** for Hizb'allah and other terrorist organization's, and organized criminal activity is on the rise, with collaboration between Venezuela and Bolivia on the drug trade. There are bilateral trade agreements, and an opportunity to trade with 57 Islamic countries; state-to-state shipping via land and sea, which are not subject to outside scrutiny; **a joint venture to build a nuclear power plant on Bolivian soil**; a plan to create a Geoscientist Center there for uranium exploration, and agreements for lithium exploration and exploitation; and oil, petrochemical, and gas projects. Bolivia sits atop one of the world's largest gas reserves and Iran seeks to develop its gas infrastructure.

**The Bolivian Congress passed a bill in June 2011** to facilitate tourism between Iran and Bolivia, which is viewed suspiciously given the potential to provide cover for the nuclear-related activities of Iranian specialists and officials. Plans were made to build a cement plant, tractor enterprise, bi-national bank and other financial institutions, and a network of antennas for national television broadcasts. As mentioned, a Bolivian representative attended the HispanTV inauguration, January 2012, so Bolivians can expect a steady diet of Iranian Shi'ite Islamic propaganda via cable and the Internet. Bolivia has already been cooperating with Iran to spread propaganda via radio broadcasts on its territory.

## **Ecuador**

**President Correa Delgado, a Roman Catholic with leftist, socialist leanings, opened an embassy in Tehran in July 2011,** despite internal opposition. **Iran also has an embassy in Ecuador.** Since Ahmadinejad's January 2012 Tour of Tyrants Trip to Latin America, he has increased the presence of Quds Force operatives in Ecuador. **Iran has military attaches in Ecuador,** thus facilitating Hizb'allah operatives and other such groups entering into the country, **and it provides for the extensive training and equipping of Ecuadorean intelligence services.** Agreements were signed to create a **dedicated shipping line between the two countries, and for visa-free flights between Caracas, Tehran, and Damascus.** Iran proposed to fund several joint mining projects that could set the stage for extraction operations. Another proposal is for a **Chemical-Geotechnical-Metallurgical Research Center** to jointly execute a comprehensive study, and topographic and cartographic analyses of Ecuadorean landscape. Correa made clear his intents to develop a close relationship with Iran despite a chorus of external pressure mounted against him for conducting business with the internationally sanctioned Export Development Bank of Iran, **which seeks to provide \$120 million** in the Central Bank of Ecuador to build power plants, and fund small-business investments and bilateral trade.

Ecuadorian banks are used by Iran to evade U.S., European, and U.N. financial sanctions. A loan was earlier extended to develop an oil refinery, and projects are slated for petrochemical facilities. **A representative from Ecuador attended the January 2012 HispanTV inauguration ceremony,** so Ecuadoreans will also be recipients of Iranian Shi'ite Islamic propaganda via cable or the Internet.

## Nicaragua

Dictator, President Daniel Ortega, has met with Ahmadinejad and other Iranian officials on several occasions. **The Iranian embassy in Managua houses 25 Iranian “diplomats” at this time**, and almost all of them are intelligence agents. Iranian agents are penetrating Central America and Panama via Nicaragua. Since Ahmadinejad’s January 2012 Tour of Tyrants Trip to Latin America, he has increased the presence of Quds Force operatives in Nicaragua. There are several start-up projects in the country still awaiting Iranian funding, such as deep sea port construction, and a dredging operation with Venezuela and Nicaragua to deepen the channel along the San Juan River that borders Nicaragua and Costa Rica, with the goal of creating a “Nicaragua Canal” to rival the strategically and economically important Panama Canal. Other infrastructure projects that are supposed to be forthcoming involve rails and highways. **Nicaragua has been cooperating with Iran for several years now to disseminate Iranian Shi’ite Islamic propaganda via radio broadcasts on its territory.** A representative from Nicaragua attended the HispanTV inauguration ceremony in January 2012, so Nicaraguans can get their Islamic propaganda via cable and the Internet, as well.

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[1] The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is founded on the basis of “religious guardianship” or Velayat Faqiye, as set forth by militant Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, to advance the “fight of Islam, pressing forward the struggle of the committed Muslim combatants, inside and outside the country,” as recorded in the “Islamic Government” section. Under “The Religious Army” section, the document establishes the responsibility of the military to fulfill its “religious mission, which is Holy War” in the way of Allah to extend his “supremacy throughout the world.” Articles 113 and 121 lay down the president’s duty to implement the Constitution in accordance with Muhammadan dictums and guidance from the “infallible Imams.” Articles 144 and 150 describe The Army of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as an Islamic army devoted to the cause of guarding the Iranian Revolution and its achievements, and realizing its objectives; and during peacetime, Article 147 requires the government to use its army for “Construction Jihad.” Article 151 is verse 8:60 of the Qur’an, which calls for mustering the forces to ready for battle to strike terror into the enemies of Allah.

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