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Radical Islam's Western Foothold:

Hugo Chavez and Hezbollah

BY SAM PICKELL



This paper is a condensed and edited version of a full-length masters thesis researched and written by Mr. Sam Pickell through his participation in the FMSO-University of Kansas (KU) Global Security Studies Internship Program, April 2010.

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Introduction

Hugo Chavez' strategy of embracing Iran in its quest to build an “anti-imperialist” and anti-American coalition of nations has undoubtedly gained strength in recent years. Beyond the close ties between Venezuela and Iran due to the two countries' shared anti-American priorities, there are also many similarities between the basic ideologies of Chavez' Bolivarian revolution and Iranian revolutionary thought. The Lebanese group Hezbollah shares many of Iran's priorities and principles, and it receives a sizeable amount of financial support from the Islamic Republic.

Although its armed activities are focused primarily within its traditional area of operations in the Middle East, Hezbollah has been implicated in terrorist activities around the globe. These activities range from financing and training to outright attacks and cooperation with criminal elements. The recent establishment of direct airline flights between Caracas and Tehran, as well as the eagerness of both regimes to embrace the other, does not bode well for anti-terror prospects in Latin America, given the close collaboration of Iranian and Hezbollah operatives in the past. Hezbollah members and sympathizers have gained the ability to move with relative ease outside the Middle East to Latin America and such movements already appear to be taking place. This points to a particularly worrisome possibility: that Hezbollah will move beyond financing and support in Latin America to pursue operational objectives within the Western Hemisphere.





Hugo Chavez. Photo by Agencia Brazil from Wikimedia Commons
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Hugo Chavez has established himself as a left-leaning opponent of the United States and its allies in Latin America. Chavez openly praises the actions of rebel groups in US-allied Colombia like the FARC, which the United States and other nations have designated as terrorist organizations. These groups have a demonstrated track record of violence and drug smuggling. Chavez' readiness to support these groups based on a shared anti-American sentiment should come as no surprise to those who view Chavez' moves as calculated to ruffle feathers in Washington and Bogotá. However, given the recent strategic alignment of Iran and Venezuela, this also serves as evidence of his willingness to support far more unsavory organizations like Hezbollah.

Evidence indicates that there exists in Latin America at least a small level of support for radical Islam and in particular groups like Hezbollah, though precisely what impact this support has upon these groups' ability to covertly function within society remains unclear. This is evidenced by the emergence of small, local, Hezbollah-inspired radical Islamic groups in Latin America, most notably "Hezbollah Venezuela." Though lacking logistical support and large bases such as those which exist in Lebanon and Iran, these groups share similar ideological views with the "Bolivarian revolutionary" ideology of Hugo Chavez. They share Chavez' emphasis on resistance to neo-liberalism and capitalism. They also share his staunch anti-American platform, and openly praise his efforts on jihadist websites and communiqués.

In recent years, the primary threat that Hezbollah has posed in the Latin American region has come in the form of obtaining material support. However, on two occasions in the 1990s the group was indicted for attacks in Argentina, and so has a demonstrated track record of violence outside of the traditional Israel-Lebanon theater of operations. Evidence indicates that as Iran's engagement in Venezuela has increased so too has that of Hezbollah. The potential support available from the large Lebanese expatriate community in the region and the copycat organizations in Latin America that Hezbollah has already spawned demonstrate the potential of Hezbollah's ideological inspiration to indoctrinate other radical Islamist groups within Latin America. This inspirational prospect is heightened by what evidence suggests is a certain level of cooperation on the part of the Chavez government.

Chavez' revolutionary project in Venezuela is predicated upon a radical restructuring of the Venezuelan economy and society. His intention is to use the country's oil revenues to reduce the dramatic wealth disparity present in Venezuelan society. Internationally, Chavez' presidency has thus far been dominated by harsh anti-American rhetoric and attempts to create a multi-polar coalition of states opposed to the current geopolitical order. However, his political survival is dependent on his ability to deliver for his population those things that previous governments have been unable or unwilling to do. This primarily includes the delivery of basic services and

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an increase in social justice and equality. Chavez’ ability to achieve these domestic goals is put at risk primarily by his proclivities to align Venezuela with states like Iran, and by proxy, with dangerous organizations like Hezbollah.

By making Venezuela an attractive and accessible place for these groups to operate, Chavez is creating a problem for his own government, the region, and ultimately the United States and the rest of the western world. Despite his anti-American rhetoric about United States attempts to dominate Latin America and the world, Chavez is slowly but surely aligning himself with organizations and states that, if history is any indicator, may well prove more far more hazardous to the security of Venezuela than he imagines the United States could ever be.

Chavez’ Identification with Radical Islam and Resistance Ideology

Hugo Chavez and his Bolivarian revolutionary ideology share many of the underlying social and anti-imperialist views of radical Islam. The Bolivarian (or “21st century”) socialist project of Chavez’ government is predicated upon engendering a strong sense of national identity upon ordinary citizens, but also upon regaining independence from what is perceived to be a neo-colonial world order. While the Iranian revolution took place under vastly different circumstances and with a clearly religious connotation, a fundamental similarity between the two was and remains the rejection of American influence in each state’s respective affairs. Indeed, the ability of both Chavez and the Iranian leadership to reconcile Venezuela’s current socialist agenda with Iran’s Islamic revolutionary ideology represents a strategic partnership that is certainly mutually beneficial to each state, but which is also grounded in fundamentally similar social outlooks. This partnership allows Chavez to claim broad-based international support against Western imperialism and aggression, but at a cost which may come home to roost for Chavez domestically.

Chavez’ Venezuela and Iran share pariah status in the United States, and both claim leadership of nations dedicated to creating a multi-polar world no longer dominated by America. In a meeting with Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei in July of 2009, Chavez agreed to enhance the two states’ cooperation, both economically and politically. Khamenei called on the two nations to “consolidate the newly-formed independence front,” with Chavez agreeing that both Iran and Venezuela “should help revolu-



Hugo Chavez in Iran. Photo by Amir Kholoosi from Iranian Students News Agency www.isna.ir

tionary nations by strengthening ties between the two nations.”¹ Chavez has also called Iranian President Ahmadinejad his “ideological brother,” stating that “co-operation of independent countries such as Iran and Venezuela has an effective role in defeating the policies of imperialism and saving nations.”²

The concept of resistance is a key part of Bolivarian revolutionary thought. Chavez has made it a priority since his first election to decouple Venezuela from perceived American influence, and to strongly assert Venezuelan and Latin American identity as a counterweight to such influence within the region. As part of this counterweight, pro-government media outlets in Venezuela have made a point to identify clear links between Venezuela’s socialist agenda and the struggles in the Middle East. In July 2008, the pro-government Venezuelan newspaper *Diario Vea* ran an editorial espousing the close connections between the “oppressed” classes in Lebanon and Latin America. The article advocated solidarity between the two “brother homelands,” and claimed that the “bourgeoisie” of Lebanon and Latin America are “...today, more than ever before, demonstrating their shameful role as servile to U.S. imperialism and international Zionism.”³

In March 2008, Hugo Chavez labeled Colombia the “Israel of Latin America,” drawing a parallel between Israeli strikes on Palestinians and Colombian military cross-border raids on guerilla camps in Ecuador.⁴ A striking comparison can be made of Chavez and the FARC as a parallel to Iran and Hezbollah. This analogy highlights Chavez’ stance against “imperialist” US-backed Colombia, much as Hezbollah stands against US-backed Israel. Labeling Colombia the “Israel of Latin America” allows Chavez to demonstrate his solidarity with the Palestinian cause and with Iran (and its proxy Hezbollah) through a shared anti-American and anti-Zionist platform. Chavez is keen to view Lebanese Hezbollah as one of the only “example[s] of successful, targeted and organized resistance.”⁵ The labeling of Colombia is an attempt by Chavez to generate support from Iran and other anti-American nations in the Middle East by couching his regional political agenda in terms to which they very clearly relate.

Chavez and the FARC

Hugo Chavez has consistently opposed ongoing American support to neighboring Colombia, which has been fighting a decades-long guerilla war with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Both Chavez and the FARC are members of the Sao Paulo Forum (FSP), an organization “which brings together nearly every leftist organization in Iberian America, including armed guerrilla movements.”⁶ The FSP was formed by a group of communist parties and leftist governments to examine the direction of leftist policy in the region following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and it aims to place its members in positions of power in Latin America in order to counter the expansion of free trade regimes and general neo-liberal trends and to emphasize a

¹ “Sayeed Khamenei Urges Chavez to Boost Economic Ties.” *Islamic Resistance in Lebanon*. 9 Jul. 2009: Web. 8 Nov. 2009.

² “Chavez Visits ‘Brother’ Ahmadinejad.” *Al Jazeera*. 2 Jul. 2007: Web. 6 Nov. 2009.

³ Tajeldine, Basem. “Libano y Latinoamérica Talladas en el Mismo Molde.” *Diario Vea*. 7 Jul. 2008: Web. 16 Nov. 2009.

⁴ “Chavez: Colombia Has Become the Israel of Latin America.” *Haaretz*. 3 Mar. 2008.

⁵ Cecil, Bill. “Anti-Imperialists Unite at Beirut Forum.” *International Action Center*. 21 Jan. 2009.

⁶ Pena-Esclusa, Alejandro. “The Foro De Sao Paulo: A Threat to Freedom in Latin America.” *UnoAmerica.org*. Feb. 2009.

“[S]topping them is not our job...we don't have to incur expenses to contain an enemy that is not our enemy. That's their [Colombia's] job.”

socialist agenda.⁷ Chavez' support for the FARC has come under scrutiny as his government has been accused of complicity in providing weapons and other material support to the group.

Chavez' support of FARC has also caused considerable tension within the Venezuelan armed forces, not least because of Chavez' role in a failed 1992 coup attempt. One high-ranking former Venezuelan military officer, Gen. Dagoberto Rodriguez Lozada, who overlapped with Chavez for one year at the Venezuelan Military Academy, recounted being forced to retire by Chavez due to his known opposition to the 1992 military coup. He has since fled the country for the safety of his family. At the beginning of Chavez' presidency, however, Gen. Lozada regularly toured military operations across the country as part of his duties as Deputy Inspector General of the National Armed Forces.

Lozada recounted that during one such inspection of an area of operations (AOR) in La Guajira near the Colombian border, a sergeant approached him with troubling news. The sergeant recounted to Lozada that the commanding officer of that particular AOR was under direct orders from Chavez' government not to fight the Colombian rebels who had set up camp in Venezuelan territory. Quite the contrary, the sergeant noted that he and his unit had actually met and played soccer with Colombian guerrillas, a far cry from the stated mission of ensuring Venezuelan sovereignty in the border region.⁸ As if to reinforce the point, Chavez' former top military advisor, Gen. Alberto Muller Rojas, has unequivocally stated about the FARC that “[S]topping them is not our job...we don't have to incur expenses to contain an enemy that is not our enemy. That's their [Colombia's] job.”⁹

Colombia finds itself with a hostile neighbor actively supporting an armed insurrection within its borders – a clear violation of international law. So Colombia has taken the battle to FARC sanctuaries in its neighbors' territory, actions viewed by Chavez and his leftist allies in the region as acts of aggression. However, such hostile rhetoric by Chavez appears to be little more than that: rhetoric. This could perhaps be because Colombian raids into neighboring countries' FARC camps have indeed proved highly successful in both eliminating the rebel group's leadership, and in exposing cooperation between the FARC and leftist governments in the region, including Venezuela. Documents seized by Colombian forces during a raid on a camp in neighboring Ecuador detail how rocket-propelled grenades and ground-to-air rocket launchers were sold by Sweden to Venezuela. These then ended up in FARC hands.¹⁰

⁷Personal Correspondence: Jesus Dagoberto Rodriguez Lozada, General of the Venezuelan Army (ret.) Venezuela. 4 March. 2010.

⁸Personal Correspondence: Jesus Dagoberto Rodriguez Lozada, General of the Venezuelan Army (ret.) Venezuela. 4 March. 2010.

⁹Kraul, Chris. “Slayings Cast Light on Border Intrigues in South America.” *Los Angeles Times*. 15 Jun. 2007.

“electronic documents were found that detailed campaign contributions by FARC to Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa, a Chavez ally”

During the raid on the group’s camp in Ecuador, electronic documents were found that detailed campaign contributions by the rebel group to Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa, a Chavez ally.¹¹ Video seized by Colombian police in Bogota from a FARC operative’s home shows the group’s second-in-command Jorge Briceño giving a speech lamenting the loss of its secrets in the raid in which documents allude to agreements between FARC and the Venezuelan and Ecuadorean governments.¹² Though both governments deny these claims, they point to a larger pattern of support for such groups, and indeed complement Chavez’ own ideological affinity for the FARC.

A shared ideological foundation, combined with a desire to see Colombia’s current U.S.-friendly government toppled, may have led Chavez to conclude that not only is his tacit support of FARC not harmful, but actually beneficial. Indeed, Chavez does not consider the rebel group to be a terrorist organization. The Venezuelan legislature has backed Chavez’ call to afford the group belligerent status, a standing that would recognize the group as a legitimate fighting force within Colombia rather than as a terrorist organization.¹³ This status would afford it certain rights under international law and the laws of armed conflict, and as such has been soundly rejected by both Colombia and the United States. However, support for groups like FARC appear indicative of Chavez’ willingness to, at minimum, adopt a policy of benign neglect towards organizations and governments based primarily on mutual opposition to the United States.

Radical Islamic Links to the Venezuelan Government

Though it is difficult to gauge the extent of Hezbollah support among donors within Arab populations in Latin America, there are numerous indications of direct and indirect state support to terrorist groups from Venezuela. One such example involves Venezuelan diplomat Ghazi Nasr al-Din, who spent several years as ambassador to Damascus and Beirut. In 2008, the US Treasury Department alleged that Al-Din used his position in Lebanon to facilitate travel arrangements for Hezbollah operatives into Venezuela, and for Hezbollah sympathizers in Venezuela to travel to Lebanon for military training in Hezbollah-run camps.¹⁴ He has reportedly provided financial donors with advice regarding specific bank accounts to transfer funds accessible to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and he allegedly arranged travel for Hezbollah operatives to attend training camps in Iran.¹⁵

¹⁰Escarguel, Olivier. “Chavez, Uribe y Las FARC.” *El Tiempo*. 5 Jan. 2009.

¹¹“Colombia Alleges FARC-Correa Link.” *Al Jazeera*. 18 Jul. 2009; Web. 5 Nov. 2009.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Janicke, Kiraz. “Venezuelan Legislature Supports Belligerent Status for Colombian Rebels.” *Venezuela Analysis, Inc.* 19 Jan. 2008.

¹⁴“Treasury Targets Hizballah in Venezuela.” United States Department of the Treasury. 18 Jun. 2008.

¹⁵Logan, Samuel. “Iran’s Latin America Inroads.” 29 Apr. 2009. ISN Security Watch, International Relations and Security Network.

A Venezuelan of Syrian descent named Tarek El-Aissami was appointed by Chavez as chief of the Venezuelan Identification and Immigration Directorate, ONIDEX. ONIDEX is responsible for Venezuelan border controls and the issuance of passports and national ID cards.¹⁶ While heading ONIDEX, Aissami oversaw the inauguration of direct airline flights between Tehran and Caracas, and some reporting indicates that Iranians traveling on these flights are subject to only the most cursory customs inspections.¹⁷ Aissami's father is the president of the Venezuelan Ba'ath Party, and his great-uncle was an assistant to the party secretary in Saddam Hussein's Iraq.¹⁸ Before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Aissami's father held a press conference in which he praised "the great Mujahedeen, Sheik Osama bin Laden," and even said he considered himself to be a Taliban.¹⁹



Tarek El Aissami. Photo from EL Nacional www.elnacional.com.ve

Like Chavez, Aissami has been an outspoken critic of Israel, and has exhibited a flair for the dramatic in his defense of the Palestinian cause. His speeches bear a strong resemblance to those of radical Islamists like Hassan Nasrallah. In one notable instance in January 2009, Aissami attended a Caracas mosque where he spoke to the congregation. In his remarks, Aissami stated "Beyond my mission as minister, I am also an Arab, I am a Palestinian, and I am an Iraqi and today we are the force of resistance against the genocide being committed by Israel in the Gaza Strip."²⁰ In his remarks, Aissami attempted to demonstrate solidarity with the Palestinian cause and link that struggle with the foundation of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, claiming:

"Palestine deserves to be free and that is why I have no hesitation in saying that here in Venezuela is a piece of Palestine and that Palestine is a piece of Venezuela...Our [Bolivarian] revolution is a revolution also fighting for a free Palestine and here we are ready to offer all our lives, if necessary. We have dignity and the dignity today which powers the Bolivarian revolution is the same rising in Palestine against the Israeli genocide."²¹

One striking aspect of the above quotations is that Aissami's remarks were carried in official, government-controlled Venezuelan media, Venezuela National Radio, indicating tacit endorsement of these positions by Chavez' government. Far from disqualifying Aissami from holding such an important post, these radical sympathies were of no concern to Chavez who, in September 2008, actually promoted Aissami to become Minister of Interior and Justice, a post

¹⁶ Spencer, Robert. "Jihad in Venezuela?" *Jihad Watch*. 29 Nov. 2003.

¹⁷ "Venezuelan Ties to Hezbollah." ICT Database Staff Commentaries. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism. 14 Aug. 2008.

¹⁸ Ferrand, Nicole. "Venezuela's Tarek El-Aissami." *The Manges Hemispheric Security Report*. Center for Security Policy. 2 Oct. 2008. Vol. 5:1.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ "El Aissami: Toda Venezuela Lucha por Unidad Mundial en Busca de la Paz." *Radio Nacional de Venezuela*. 6 Jan. 2009

²¹ *Ibid*

responsible for Venezuelan internal state security.²² Thus emerges the prospect of Hezbollah operatives using official Venezuelan documentation to travel north to the United States. Hezbollah has already demonstrated its ability to cooperate with Mexican drug cartels to utilize smuggling techniques and routes in order to bring drugs and people into the United States. In 2001, a Lebanese man named Mahmoud Youssef Kourani crossed the Mexican border illegally into the United States and drove a car all the way to Dearborn, Michigan. Kourani was later convicted of providing “material support and resources” to Hezbollah.²³ Through such cooperation with drug cartels, Hezbollah operatives can repeat Kourani’s infiltration with operational intent. While the FBI states that no operations have yet been carried out against domestic United States targets by Hezbollah, it shows a proven ability of the group to infiltrate through the southern border.

In the 1990s Hezbollah carried out attacks well outside the Israel-Lebanon theater of operations. Hezbollah was accused, with Iranian complicity, of two attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In the first attack in 1992, 30 people were killed when the Israeli Embassy was bombed. Two years later, 85 people were killed when the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association of Buenos Aires was bombed.²⁴ Hezbollah and Iran deny responsibility for the attacks. After an extensive investigation, the Argentine government indicted nine people in November 2006 who were wanted in connection with the bombings. Among those indicted included the notorious Hezbollah external security chief Imad Mughniyehh as well as eight Iranian government officials.²⁵ None have been subsequently arrested or brought to trial.

Hezbollah Fundraising in Latin America

It must be noted that the existence of a large Lebanese expatriate community in Venezuela and other parts of the region does not by itself indicate nefarious activity. Distinctions must be made between the majority existing peacefully in Latin America and those for whom such activity and terrorist connections are evident. Financial remittances to family and friends in Lebanon are a widespread practice, and one not likely to be curtailed as they contribute significantly to the economy of their home country. Indeed, according to the International Monetary Fund, remittances were estimated to make up nearly 20 percent of Lebanon’s GDP by 2008.²⁶ These remittances are sent not only to individuals, but to local Lebanese charities and social-service providers that supplement a lack of government services in many areas.

Hezbollah is a significant political actor in Lebanon and it operates a large network of social services throughout the country. It operates medical clinics and job-placement centers, which do serve legitimate purposes for many citizens in need. This is significant because money provided for these services comes from Hezbollah’s general fund, which is also used to finance its armed wing.²⁷ As a result, money sent from an expatriate Lebanese in Latin America could very con-

²²“Rodriguez Chacin leaves the Ministry of Interior and Justice.” *El Universal*. 8 Sep. 2008.

²³Carter, Sarah. “Hezbollah Uses Mexican Drug Routes Into U.S.” *Washington Times*. 27 Mar. 2009

²⁴Sullivan, Mark. “Latin America: Terrorism Issues.” *CRS Report For Congress*. 9 Jan. 2008.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Abdih, Yasser, Ralph Chami, Michael Gapen and Amine Mati. “Fiscal Sustainability in Remittance-Dependent Economies.” *IMF Working Paper*. International Monetary Fund. Sep. 2009.

²⁷Barham, John. “Hezbollah’s Latin American Home.” *Security Management*. Feb. 2008.

²⁸Berman, Ilan. “No Diplomatic Relations Until Terrorist Funding Stops.” *Mclatchy-Tribune News Service*. 12 Feb. 2009.

“...money sent from an expatriate Lebanese in Latin America could very conceivably find its way to Hezbollah’s coffers and end up funding its military wing without the sender’s consent or knowledge.”

ceivably find its way to Hezbollah’s coffers and end up funding its military wing without the sender’s consent or knowledge. It is thus imperative to highlight those individuals and organizations that do so intentionally as well as those that facilitate such actions.

The Hawala System of Money Transfer

Some estimates contend that the Iranian government sends Hezbollah nearly \$10 million a month. Despite this, Hezbollah has reached out to the Lebanese Diaspora around the world to supplement its income in substantial ways.²⁸ A large Lebanese expatriate community exists in Latin America and in Venezuela in particular. This community is able to send money to Hezbollah through sympathetic charity organizations at the village level and large-scale smuggling operations and cooperation with drug cartels. In the case of both organized funding and individual charitable donations, one financial instrument that plays a significant role in these transactions is the traditional Islamic system of hawala.

In its basic form, hawala amounts to an informal money transfer system between networks of individuals across the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and South Asia. A hawala transaction bypasses banks and other traditional financial institutions to carryout a transaction quickly and without any records.²⁹ Hawala transactions are based on the honor system, and typically, an individual who wishes to send money overseas or across long distances hands his or her money to a hawala dealer, or hawaladar, who can offer better exchange rates, lower fees, and anonymity. The hawaladar then contacts another hawaladar in the recipient’s area who will disburse the desired funds to the recipient.³⁰ In effect, no money has actually been transferred, only a verbal agreement to repay it, thus the transaction is untraceable. This makes hawala an ideal method for individuals to send financial support to groups like Hezbollah while avoiding the authorities and retaining anonymity.

Numerous documented instances of individual support for Hezbollah exist, such as the case of a Lebanese emigrant to Paraguay named Assad Ahmad Barakat who was arrested in 2002 as the alleged ringleader of a financial network that funneled large sums of money to Hezbollah.³¹ Authorities found a letter in one of his businesses, purportedly from Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, stating that Nasrallah was “most thankful for the contributions Assad Ahmad

²⁹ İnalçık, Halil. “Ḥawāla.” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman , Th. Bianquis , C.E. Bosworth , E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2010. Brill Online. University of Kansas Libraries. Accessed online 4-14-2010.

³⁰ Jost, Patrick and Harjit Sandhu. “The Hawala Alternative Remittance System and its Role in Money Laundering.” *Interpol General Secretariat*. Lyon: Jan. 2000.

³¹ Karmon, Ely. “Iran and its Proxy Hezbollah: Strategic Penetration in Latin America.” *Working Paper 18*. Real Instituto Elcano. Madrid. 4 Aug. 2009.

³² Karmon, Ely. “Fight on All Fronts: Hizballah, the War on Terror, and the War in Iraq.” *Research Memorandum*. No. 45. The Washington Institute. Dec. 2003.

Barakat has sent from the Triple Border,” a reference to the so-called tri-border area between Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina. However, the authenticity of this letter has not been clearly established.³²

Two of the most prominent communities in Latin America with large Arab populations are Venezuela’s Margarita Island, and the Colombian town of Maicao. Maicao is located on the border with Venezuela on the La Guajira peninsula. The town of Maicao has an Arab population of only 8,000 out of 58,000, but it is alleged to control nearly seventy percent of all commerce in the town, and many of its Arab residents are reported to give between ten and thirty percent of their incomes to Hezbollah, through banks in Venezuela and Panama.³³ In July 2009, the Israeli foreign ministry publicly accused Hezbollah of operating a cell in La Guajira, where it alleged that mosques in the region collect funds which are then sent on to Hezbollah in Lebanon.³⁴

For its part, Margarita Island is a small, but populous, speck of land northeast of Caracas run largely by Arab merchants from Lebanon and Iran. Located on Margarita is the Venezuelan-Arab Friendship Association, which despite its location on a tropical island, has been described in news reports as a “fortress with armed guards outside,” a clear indicator of the not-so-friendly business taking place inside its walls.³⁵ In prepared testimony, United States Southern Command Gen. James Hill noted that Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic militant group Islamiyya al Gammat all operate cells on Margarita, which has a population of more than 440,000.³⁶ In a historical twist of fate, it is from this same island that Chavez idol Simon Bolivar launched his anti-colonial military operations against the Spanish that eventually reached across the continent.

Precise levels of alleged financial support have not been made publicly available in these cases. Likewise, it is also impossible to estimate to what extent any financial support to Hezbollah from these areas is intentional, or simply represent incidents of local charities funneling donations from unwitting and otherwise pious and peaceful Muslims. What is clear is that large sums of money are being intercepted from these areas in transit to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and they are coming from multiple sources through multiple channels. Thus, support for Hezbollah exists at least in some fashion in these regions, leading to the most troubling and urgent question as to what extent it reaches. Does it simply represent small groups and individuals whose sympathies lead them to donate to the resistance in their homeland, or does it have the potential to metastasize into operational support should the impetus arise?

Links between Hezbollah, Drug Cartels, and Organized Crime

Hezbollah has been linked to drug cartels and crime syndicates around Latin America, and even in the United States. Indeed, as recently as June 2009, authorities on the Dutch Caribbean

³³“Venezuelan Ties to Hezbollah.” ICT Database Staff Commentaries. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism. 14 Aug. 2008.

³⁴“Israel Alerta Sobre Creación de Células de Hezbolá en La Guajira.” *El Tiempo*. 18 Jul. 2009.

³⁵Robinson, Linda. “Terror Close to Home.” *US News and World Report*. 6 Oct. 2003.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷Zambellis, Chris. “Mystery Surrounds Alleged Hezbollah Links to Drug Arrests In Curacao.” *Terrorism Monitor*. 25 Jun. 2009. 7:18.

“If we cannot kill them with guns we will kill them with drugs.”

island of Curacao arrested seventeen suspects on drug-trafficking charges. They allege that these individuals were part of a major money-laundering and drug-smuggling operation which shipped drugs from Latin America to the Middle East and Europe.³⁷ While these sorts of arrests may be relatively common within the wider context of the drug war in Latin America, Dutch authorities accuse the organization of funneling part of their profits directly to Hezbollah through informal banking mechanisms such as the Hawala system.³⁸

That same month, the Colombian Supreme Court approved the extradition of Oscar Serna Acosta, known as “Beto,” to the United States, where he is wanted on drug-trafficking charges. “Beto” and several others are accused of being members of the Medellin-based paramilitary group “Office of Envigado,” which Colombian authorities claim maintains connections with Hezbollah through its drug-smuggling operations to the Middle East.³⁹

Earlier, in October 2008 authorities in Colombia and overseas arrested over one hundred suspects in a similar drug-smuggling and money-laundering operation. According to the Colombian attorney general’s office, three of those arrested were Arabs living in Colombia who were alleged to operate front companies that sent a portion of their drug profits to Hezbollah.⁴⁰ Numerous similar charges have been made, linking Hezbollah to Colombian cartels, paramilitary groups, and money-laundering operations. Though no part of any indictment has asserted that Hezbollah intended to undertake operations, collectively they demonstrate the willingness and ability of the drug cartels to work with Hezbollah in funneling profits and sharing logistics networks. With one foot in the door of the cartels’ networks, it is highly conceivable that Hezbollah could exploit these connections for purposes beyond mere funding.

Hezbollah denies any involvement with organized crime and drug-smuggling, and has claimed that attempts to link it to such activities are part of a “misleading Zionist imperialist campaign” to slander it.⁴¹ However, Hezbollah has a demonstrated track record of support for both drug trafficking and drug production. The area of Lebanon where Hezbollah originates and maintains a strong base of support and recruitment is the Bekaa Valley, which is a hub of drug cultivation. Cannabis and poppy plants are grown in abundance and sold both locally and abroad to European consumers.⁴² One need only take Hezbollah at its word, in a Hezbollah fatwa in the 1980’s that explicitly stated that the group was “making these drugs for Satan – America and the Jews. If we cannot kill them with guns we will kill them with drugs.”⁴³

Iran has also been linked to similar operations. In 2008 *El Universal* reported that the Mexican

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “La Conexión Libanesa Con la Oficina de Envigado.” *El Espectador*. 9 Mar. 2009.

⁴⁰ Alsema, Adriaan. “Authorities Smash Drug Ring with Hezbollah Ties.” *Colombia Reports*. 21 Oct. 2008.

⁴¹ Goodenough, Patrick. “Hezbollah Denies Link to Latin American Criminals.” *CSN News*. 24 Oct. 2008.

⁴² “Hezbollah.” Executive Summary. Center for Policing Terrorism. p.23.

⁴³ Bodansky, Yossef. *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America*. New York: Random House, 2001. p.322.

“There is an undercurrent among Muslim converts and radical imams in both Colombia and Venezuela that adheres to the notion that becoming a Muslim is less about conversion to a new religion than it is the regaining of a much older cultural identity.”

Sinaloa drug cartel was sending elite assassins to train on weapons and explosives with Islamic radicals in Iran.⁴⁴ The article reported that this travel was facilitated through Venezuela, courtesy of the direct airline flights established between the two countries, and that some of the operatives even used Venezuelan travel documents.⁴⁵ This mutually beneficial arrangement allowed the assassins to receive training in guerilla tactics, while the extremists gained entry into Latin America with its relative ease of access to the United States. The article went so far as to claim that some extremist group members were purchasing marriages to local Venezuelan and Mexican nationals in order to take on Latino surnames, increasing ease of entry into the United States.⁴⁶ Taken together, these reports indicate extensive associations between Iran, Hezbollah and drug cartels, highlighting the potential for Hezbollah to utilize these groups' existing support networks and infrastructure.

“Hezbollah Venezuela” - an Example of Ideological Expropriation

A group calling itself “Hezbollah Venezuela” emerged in July 2005, claiming to have gained followers sympathetic to the radical Islamic ideology, and gained prominence within Venezuela during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁴⁷ The leader of this group, Teodoro Darnott, initially did not claim that his group was an official branch of Hezbollah, but that he simply expropriated the name and held sympathetic views. He has since drastically changed his story in a manifesto published from prison on the internet. In it, Darnott makes the unsubstantiated claim that he was approached by Hezbollah cell members from Argentina who recruited him to form a Venezuelan cell. Regardless of whether or not his affiliation with Hezbollah was “official,” his group’s emergence underscores the level of influence that radical groups like Hezbollah can have at a local level halfway across the world. The lack of a large indigenous Islamic community led Darnott to wrap his group’s mantra around the local Wayuu Indian tribe, for whom a pre-existing culture of resistance to foreign oppression appears to have served as a solid foundation for radical Islamist thought and indoctrination.⁴⁸

The irony is that this underlying philosophy of resistance is shared not only by the revolutionary ideology espoused by Hugo Chavez, but also by many Muslims already in Latin America. There is an undercurrent among Muslim converts and radical imams in both Colombia and Venezuela that adheres to the notion that becoming a Muslim is less about conversion to a new

⁴⁴Gomora, Doris. “Aprenden Narcoterror con Extrimistas: EU.” *El Universal*. 17 Jul. 2008

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Soriano, Manuel R. Torres. “La Fascinacion Por El Exito: El Caso De Hezbollah En America Latina.” 17 Oct. 2006. *Jihad Monitor Occasional Paper No. 1*. Universidad Pablo de Olavide de Sevilla.

⁴⁸Karmon, Ely. “Hezbollah America Latina: Strange Group or Real Threat?” Institute for Counter-Terrorism. 14 Nov. 2006.

⁴⁹Zambellis, Chris. “Al-Qaeda in the Andes: Spotlight on Colombia.” *Unmasking Terror: A Global Review of Terrorist Activities*. Vol. 7. Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation. 6 Apr. 2006.

religion than it is the regaining of a much older cultural identity. They emphasize what they consider to be “natural cultural and even ethnic links to Arabs and Muslims, stemming from Spain’s Islamic Moorish heritage.”⁴⁹ They contend that the Roman Catholic tradition that the conquistadors brought to Latin America is yet another example of Western imperialism and colonialism. Hence, Islam is touted as a way to regain a lost culture, and reassert an identity long-suppressed by colonial forces. This sort of twisted logic is of the type responsible for the conversion of native peoples like the Wayuu, and should indeed serve as a warning of its potential to reach other populations outside of mainstream Latin American society.

An examination of Hezbollah Venezuela’s websites indicates a rather inept and elementary attempt to mirror the success of Lebanese Hezbollah, with limited apparent success. The aforementioned lack of an indigenous Islamic community may explain some of these website incongruities. They were reported to contain a very obvious lack of basic knowledge of Islam, going so far as to post quotations from the Bible rather than the Koran. However, they seemed to share some of the same basic rhetoric and symbolism with other jihadist groups.⁵⁰

Hezbollah Venezuela under Darnott lasted only a few months before he was arrested November of 2006 by Hugo Chavez’ government, charged with a failed attack on the U.S. embassy in Caracas in which two small explosive devices were to be detonated, scattering the groups’ flyers into the streets with no injuries.⁵¹ The attack failed when the man who placed the explosives panicked and was arrested, and the bombs were defused before they could explode. Regardless of the failure, Hezbollah Venezuela took public credit for the attack, and praised the failed (and jailed) attacker as a “brother Mujahedeen...the first prisoner of the revolutionary Islamic Movement Hezbollah Venezuela.”⁵²

Before Darnott’s arrest, Hezbollah Venezuela’s website openly praised Hugo Chavez’ revolutionary government and its socialist bent, though with the caveat that Hezbollah Venezuela seeks to move beyond Chavez’ Bolivarian socialism and represents the precursor to a theocratic system which seeks to “obey divine rules.”⁵³ Despite acknowledging his groups’ responsibility in the explosive plot, Darnott continued to carry on his activities in the open, including registering his websites with free web services like MSN Groups under his own name, and displaying pictures of himself on his website. His website contained explicit threats against U.S. and Israeli interests in Venezuela and posted pictures of masked men holding what appear to be explosive devices. This combination of rhetoric with action, however amateurish, may have prompted Chavez to crack down on Darnott to avoid negative publicity, especially given Darnott’s high-profile flaunting of his intentions and “terrorist” credentials.⁵⁴ Public exposure of that nature would certainly serve as a propaganda victory for Chavez’ opponents, including the United States, and

⁵⁰ Soriano, Manuel R. Torres. “La Fascinacion Por El Exito: El Caso De Hezbollah En America Latina.” 17 Oct. 2006. *Jihad Monitor Occasional Paper No. 1*. Universidad Pablo de Olavide de Sevilla.

⁵¹ Taylor, Clinton. “Hezbollah in Latin America.” *The American Spectator*. 30 Nov. 2006.

⁵² Karmon, Ely. “Hezbollah America Latina: Strange Group or Real Threat?” Institute for Counter-Terrorism. 14 Nov. 2006.

⁵³ Soriano, Manuel R. Torres. “La Fascinacion Por El Exito: El Caso De Hezbollah En America Latina.” 17 Oct. 2006. *Jihad Monitor Occasional Paper No. 1*. Universidad Pablo de Olavide de Sevilla.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

would undermine Chavez' ability to publicly deny support to terrorist groups, despite any ideological affinities he might share.

Implications for U.S. Policymakers

The United States has been aware of the threat posed by Hezbollah since the 1983 suicide attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut killed 231 United States military personnel. That attack was the single deadliest attack on Americans overseas since the Tet offensive in Vietnam, and as if to emphasize that point, former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage believes that "Hezbollah may be the 'A-Team of Terrorists' and maybe al Qaeda is actually the 'B' team."⁵⁵ Past associations between Hezbollah and al Qaeda demonstrate the ability of the two groups to put aside religious differences (Hezbollah is Shia, while al Qaeda is Sunni) in order to focus on the common enemy, America. The plea agreement of a former al Qaeda member states that Osama bin Laden met personally with Imad Mughniyeh, the former head of Hezbollah external security who masterminded the 1983 attack.⁵⁶ Testimony from other former al Qaeda members indicates that al Qaeda sent operatives to Lebanon in the mid-1990s, where they kept a safe house and were given instruction by Hezbollah members on how to blow up large buildings in the manner of the 1983 barracks bombing.⁵⁷

Despite these past associations, close collaboration on a large scale between Hezbollah and al Qaeda is unlikely today given the high priority placed by the United States on disrupting al Qaeda operations since September 11. A congressional report on Hezbollah issued for a joint House committee meeting in September 2006 took note of several important developments regarding Hezbollah and al Qaeda.⁵⁸ This report presented the overall assessment of the Hezbollah threat to the United States as "moderate." It also concluded that Hezbollah and al Qaeda did not appear to be making any attempts to establish ties with each other, if for no other reason than Sunni al Qaeda's inherent disdain for Shiism. Moreover, Hezbollah's highly public and top-down organizational structure makes it a much larger and more accessible target than al Qaeda, providing a strong incentive for the group to avoid association with near-universally-reviled al Qaeda methodology since September 11.

Hugo Chavez' affection for Hezbollah's successful model of resistance may serve as wonderful rhetorical ammunition, but in the end Chavez' past actions have shown a proclivity to pragmatic decision-making when it really counts. And few things are more vital to Venezuela and Chavez' political survival than a steady flow of crude oil out of the country. Despite occasional threats to cut off oil to the United States, even a populist like Chavez would find little support if he suddenly lost the massive oil revenues that make up the bulk of Venezuela's economy.⁵⁹ Venezuela exports roughly a million barrels per day to the United States and is its fifth-largest supplier of oil.⁶⁰ Likewise, the United States is the primary consumer of Venezuelan crude, accounting for nearly 63 percent of Venezuelan exports.⁶¹ A loss of the American market would be catastrophic

⁵⁵Leung, Rebecca. "Hezbollah: 'A-Team of Terrorists.'" *CBS News, 60 Minutes*. 18 Apr. 2003.

⁵⁶Ali Mohamed plea agreement: "Excerpts from Guilty Plea in Terrorism Case." *The New York Times*. 1 Oct. 2000.

⁵⁷*U.S.A. v. Usama bin Laden*, Testimony of Jamal al-Fadl, February 6-7, 2001.

⁵⁸"Hezbollah's Global Reach." Presented to a Joint Hearing of the Committee on International Relations of the House of Representatives." Sept. 2006.

⁵⁹Romero, Simon. "Chavez Backs off Threats to Halt Oil Exports to U.S." *New York Times*. 18 Feb. 2008. Accessed online 2-12-2010.

“A great many governments in the world do indeed differentiate between Hezbollah’s armed activities and its aboveboard political and social operations. It is a mistake for governments and policy-makers to draw lines between these components when, as Sheik Qassem makes crystal clear, Hezbollah itself considers such distinctions illegitimate.”

both for Venezuela’s economy and for Chavez’ Bolivarian socialist project, which depends almost entirely on continued oil revenues for its survival. In a large dose of irony apparently lost on Chavez, his Achilles heel remains his dependence on the American oil market to financially support his anti-capitalist, anti-western socialist vision for Venezuela.

Many states around the world, including Venezuela, do not view Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Those who fail to classify Hezbollah as a terrorist organization tend to view the differing wings of Hezbollah’s operations as entirely separate entities. That is, a clear distinction is made between the armed operations and the political and social aspects of Hezbollah activities. This convenient division of responsibility makes it easier for Hugo Chavez to praise Hezbollah as a successful model of resistance without explicitly advocating violence and terrorism. This rationale, however, ignores a very fundamental premise of Hezbollah’s organizational structure and hence must be re-evaluated by states that do not list Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

Hezbollah is organized with a strong top-down division of responsibility, in many ways like a corporate structure. Thus, as strategic policy decisions are made at the top, or Shura Council, they are implemented by all parts of the organization, including the medical clinics, social workers, politicians, guerilla fighters, and the outwardly-focused External Security Organization. Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Sheik Naim Qassem illustrates:

“If the military wing were separated from the political wing, this would have repercussions, and it would reflect on the political scene. But Hezbollah has one single leadership, and its name is the Decision-Making Shura Council. It manages the political activity, the Jihad [i.e., the military] activity, the cultural and the social activities. Hezbollah’s Secretary General is the head of the Shura Council and also the head of the Jihad Council, and this means that we have one leadership, with one administration.”⁶²

For policymakers concerned with the global threat that Hezbollah poses, there could be no clearer indicator of how the organization views itself and its overall objectives. A great many governments in the world do indeed differentiate between Hezbollah’s armed activities and its aboveboard political and social operations. It is a mistake for governments and policymakers to

⁶⁰“Crude Oil and Total Petroleum Imports: Top 15 Countries.” U.S. Dept. of Energy, Energy Information Administration. 2009 data, published 25 Feb. 2010. Accessed online 3-28-2010.

⁶¹U.S. Dept. of Energy, Energy Information Administration. Accessed online 3-28-2010.

⁶²“Hezbollah.” The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center. Special Information Bulletin, June 2003. Accessed online 3-15-2010.

⁶³Logan, Samuel. “Iran’s Latin America Inroads.” 29 Apr. 2009. ISN Security Watch, International Relations and Security Network.

draw lines between these components when, as Sheik Qassem makes crystal clear, Hezbollah itself considers such distinctions illegitimate. As was noted earlier, financial donations transferred to Hezbollah from anywhere in the world end up in a single general fund, portions of which are then divided among the disparate social, political, and armed wings. Funding generated through otherwise-legitimate means such as charities can easily end up in the coffers of the armed resistance and the “Jihad Council.”

The question in attempting to fully understand the extent of support existing in Latin America for Hezbollah, then, is one of intent. It becomes difficult to distinguish between those who otherwise would not send money to support violence but do so because they are duped, and those who are ultimately responsible for such deceit. It is the latter who represent the core of support and who manage the infrastructure necessary for complex overseas financing operations. The most troubling aspect of this support network is whether or not the capability exists to move from mere financing to armed operations.

The most pressing questions about this support network are to what extent the capability exists to move from mere financing to armed operations, as well as how quickly such infrastructure could be exploited. Hezbollah’s activities in Latin America have been described as akin to a Western-Hemisphere “insurance policy,” hedging against any threat to its base of operations in Lebanon.⁶³ Testimony given by Dr. Eitan Azani, a colonel in the Israel Defence Forces (Reserve), at a 2006 Congressional hearing on Hezbollah confirmed that the organization’s general approach to international operations has consistently been oriented in precisely this manner:

“[Hezbollah’s] approach stipulates a methodical formation of global operational capabilities that would provide flexibility in deciding to carry out an operation and shorten the organization’s response times. It is likely that the expansion of the organization’s infrastructure abroad suits Iranian interests, which sees Hezbollah as one of the components of its retaliation in case of a military or diplomatic crisis surrounding the Iranian nuclear program.”⁶⁴

None of this precludes the possibility of a change in policy on the part of Venezuela, Hezbollah or its Iranian patron. Indeed, should the geopolitical situation prompt any of the parties to deem it in their interests for Hezbollah to move to an operational posture in Latin America, it appears evident the capacity for a quick escalation of these activities is in place. One scenario likely to prompt such a change would involve significant armed conflict in the Middle East involving Israel, Hezbollah, and/or Iran. This, together with at the very least benign neglect on the part of Venezuelan government officials make clear that such a “rapid breakout” capacity is well within reach.

Conclusion

By cultivating a closer relationship with Iran, Hugo Chavez may be letting the genie out of the bottle. The close ties between the two nations of late could well turn out to be little more than a

⁶⁴“Hezbollah’s Global Reach.” Presented to a Joint Hearing of the Committee on International Relations of the House of Representatives.” Sept. 2006.

marriage of convenience. Though Iran does indeed share many of Chavez' anti-western and anti-American views, its priorities for the region may not turn out to align with Chavez' own strategic imperatives. Ironically, it is through his actions to strengthen ties to Iran and implicitly to groups like Hezbollah that Chavez actually increases the possibility for the conflict that he warns is being planned by the United States. As a military officer, Chavez is certainly aware of his country's inability to win a conventional war against the United States. Given that oil remains the mainstay of the Venezuelan economy and that the United States is Venezuela's primary consumer of oil, it is reasonable to conclude that despite his harsh rhetoric, Chavez does not seek conflict with the United States.

The significance of Teodoro Darnott's Hezbollah Venezuela lies not in the fact that it failed in its initial attack, or that Chavez shut it down, but that it came to exist at all. The ability of Hezbollah to gain ideological traction within a tribal society of Venezuela speaks to the movement's prospects for ideological indoctrination and recruitment within the region. Without a doubt, Teodoro Darnott was behind a rather pathetic attempt to copy Hezbollah's success. However, the fact that he was even able to recruit followers and to mount an attack in Venezuela's capital after publicly making radical statements on his websites prior to those attacks should worry not only Western policymakers, but Hugo Chavez himself.

The fact that Chavez' government allowed Hezbollah Venezuela to operate at all speaks to the affinity with which Chavez views Hezbollah's successes in Lebanon. Despite the explicit public threats made by Hezbollah Venezuela against Western interests in the country, it was not until an attempted attack that Chavez' government was prompted to take action. This represents the core paradox facing Chavez as he attempts to build his anti-American "multi-polar" coalition: How will it be possible to continue to align himself with players like Iran and Hezbollah if the actions of those groups come to directly threaten his own security?

The answer seems that in his haste to oppose the United States, Chavez may indeed have overplayed his hand. Iran and Hezbollah have shown a willingness to use terrorism overseas in the past, and they are taking advantage of warming ties with Venezuela to establish a western support network. Should Iran, Hezbollah, or an inspired local offshoot like Hezbollah Venezuela decide to take violent action in the future utilizing the preexisting support network in Venezuela, Chavez would stand to lose as much as the intended target of the attack, if not more. It would directly threaten Chavez' security, as pressure to crack down would be immense. The two response options Chavez possesses in this scenario would both undermine his entire anti-American project.

The first would require a major policy shift on his part to distance Venezuela from all associations with Iran and Hezbollah. If such an attack were to be even moderately successful, Chavez would be forced to denounce it lest he be seen as a supporter of terrorism -- a political prospect that not even Chavez would be likely to survive. This outcome would be of tangible strategic benefit to the United States as well as a blow to Chavez' credibility. The second option would be to maintain the status quo. This presents no good alternative for Chavez in that he would be tacitly endorsing terrorism and counting himself among international pariahs even more so than he already is today. He would thus be faced with near-certain political defeat, or in a worst-case scenario, armed opposition and conflict. Each of these scenarios represents a losing proposition for Chavez' regime and his Bolivarian socialist project. They illustrate the long-term dangers of

his foreign policy agenda should he continue on his current path.

Iran's close ties to Hezbollah and its deepening embrace of Chavez' regime should put the United States on alert to the security of both friendly Latin American governments and its own southern border. Groups like Hezbollah now possess the ability to use Venezuela as an entry point to the Americas, to obtain official Venezuelan documentation, and to utilize well-known smuggling networks in cooperation with established violent drug cartels.

Hugo Chavez identifies with what he considers to be Hezbollah's successful model of resistance to imperialism, and it appears he seeks to emulate elements of that success within his sphere of influence. His demonstrated support for anti-American groups like FARC and his consistent harsh rhetoric against neighboring Columbia must be viewed as an indication of his willingness to embrace other radical elements sharing a common anti-American agenda. By allowing Iranian and Hezbollah operatives ease of access to the Americas through Venezuela, Chavez runs a substantial risk to the stability of his regime. If and when Hezbollah or Iran seek to exploit their ability to function in Venezuela by pursuing specific operational goals, the probability of future confrontation with the United States will most certainly increase, thus inviting the only scenario in which Chavez is nearly guaranteed to lose.

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