

Hezbollah and Hugo Chavez:
Radical Islam's Western Foothold

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Abstract:

In recent years reports have appeared in government publications and the media alleging that the close relationship between Iran and Venezuela has resulted in the flourishing of radical Islamic groups like Hezbollah within Venezuela. This paper seeks to examine the juncture between Iran, Hezbollah, and Venezuela under Hugo Chavez. Chavez' socialist project underway in Venezuela shares many fundamental ideological principles with revolutionary Iran, most notably in its rejection of the current Western-led geopolitical order. This marriage of convenience has allowed both states to cement their respective positions as leaders of the global anti-American movement and has provided a platform from which Hezbollah and its Iranian patron have extended their global outreach. This paper seeks to examine this mutually-beneficial arrangement, and attempts to explain the risks and threats presented by this scenario for Latin America, Iran, and the United States.

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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 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 US 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.

This paper seeks to understand the influence of Hezbollah within Latin America, particularly in the states of Venezuela and Colombia, as well as Iran's role in Venezuela and the surrounding region. Evidence demonstrates that 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.

Thus far, the threat that Hezbollah has posed in the Latin American region has come in the form of obtaining material support, rather than seeking to carry out operations in the region, with two notable exceptions to be discussed further. 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 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 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 US 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.

Historical Foundations of Hezbollah and Iran

Lebanese Demographics and Civil War

Lebanon's fifteen-year war has been described as "at once a civil, communal war between Muslims and Christians, a Palestinian-Lebanese War, and a proxy Arab-Israeli war."¹ It can perhaps also be seen as a series of circumstances and events which continually added fuel to an already burning fire, entrenching the warring parties and hardening their positions. The causes that started the fighting in 1975 are numerous, but the central foundation for discontent and factionalism that led to open conflict can be traced to the demographics of Lebanon, and their distinctive role in its government. Lebanon's unique power structure, which had been in place since independence from France in 1943, was a reflection of the heterogeneous population that made up the small country of around one million people at its founding. Upon independence, the Lebanese had agreed on an unwritten set of principles upon which their government would be founded, known as the National Pact.

The most important aspect of the National Pact was its codification of the division of government, giving each religious sect a specific role to play. The president was to be a Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni, and the Speaker of the Parliament a Shiite.² It also assigned religious quotas to the unicameral parliament, giving Christians a majority by a 6:5 ratio. This was based upon the only census ever conducted in Lebanon, by the French in 1932, which indicated that Christians made up roughly 51% of the population compared to 42% who were Muslim, and 7% Druze.³ This arrangement worked well for several decades, and Lebanon enjoyed a long period of relative peace and prosperity, and

¹ Ajami, Fouad. *The Dream Palace of the Arabs*. 1998. p.87.

² Hittie, Phillip. *A Short History of Lebanon*. p.225

³ "Lebanon Civil War 1975-1991. *Globalsecurity.org*

a large influx of western investment. Beirut during the 1950s and 60s was known as the “Paris of the Middle East,” with its cosmopolitan environment and picturesque beachside resorts catering to tourists from around the world.⁴ So successful did it appear that many political scientists in the US at the time hailed Lebanon as a “model of proper modernization, leading to political moderation, secularization and stability.”⁵

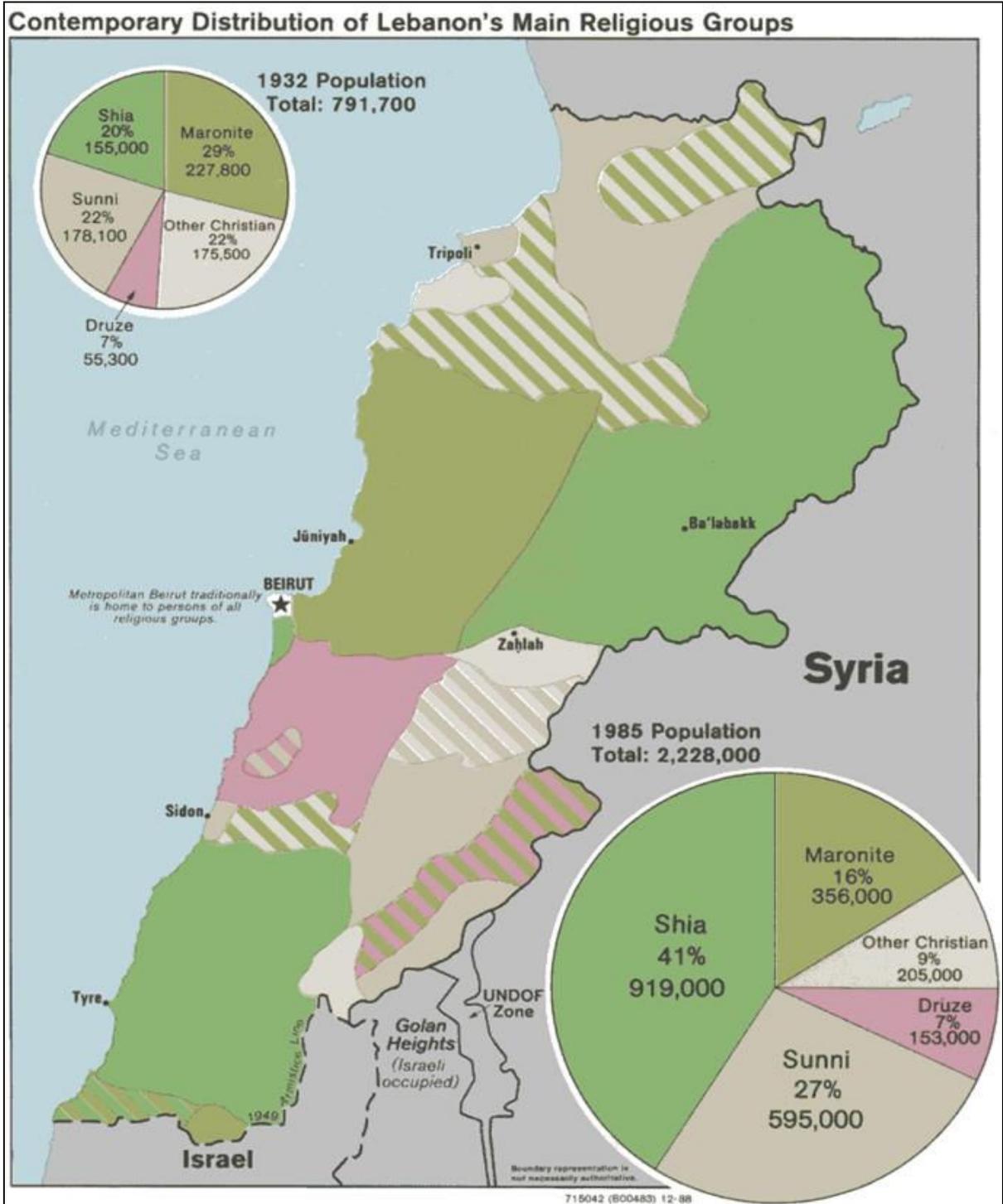
This analysis would prove to be overly optimistic because by 1970, despite the lack of a new census, it was apparent to all that the ratio of the population had drastically reversed, with Muslims now making up a solid majority. This has been attributed to both the emigration of Lebanese Christians, as well as high birthrates among the poorer Muslim population.⁶ However, political realities had not been altered to reflect this development, leading to frustration and resentment among Muslim sections of the population who felt they were underrepresented.

The Christians, who stood to lose control of Parliament as well as the presidency and control of the armed forces, resisted this movement, and refused to entertain discussions on altering the National Pact. As part of this resistance, a large Christian party known as the Phalange soon had its own armed militia of nearly 10,000 men, a development not lost on other sects who quickly followed suit. Within a very short time, nearly every sect had its own militia created to protect its respective members, tearing apart the heterogeneous nature of traditional Lebanese society and establishing conditions ripe for sectarian conflict. Lebanon had become a powder keg, requiring only a small spark to set it alight.

⁴ Karsh, Efraim. *Islamic Imperialism: A History*. p.226

⁵ Lockman, Zachary. *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History of Politics and Orientalism*. p.172

⁶ “Lebanon Civil War 1975-1991. *Globalsecurity.org*



Comparative Distribution of Lebanese Religious Groups, 1932 and 1985⁷

⁷ Globalsecurity.org. Accessed 11-15-09.

Foreign Influence in Lebanese Politics

A recurring theme in the history of Lebanon has been the often negative role of foreign influence in Lebanese internal affairs. Long ruled by the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon has consistently served as a crossroads between East and West, maintaining strong ties to the Western world despite its location in the Middle East. This Western orientation has allowed it to serve as a hub of commerce and the Lebanese have long been known as shrewd capitalists and entrepreneurs in a region typically dominated by stagnant economic conditions. Under the Ottomans, the Lebanese enjoyed a long period of relative peace and prosperity.

Given Lebanon's strategic location, it is no surprise that foreign powers have sought to assert influence over Lebanese affairs for centuries. Unfortunately for Lebanon, most of these attempts have had little to do with the well-being of the Lebanese people, and have generally been downright hostile to Lebanese interests. Following World War I and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon was governed by the French under a League of Nations mandate until independence in 1943. The transition to independence would prove to be dominated by the competing interests of foreign powers including the French and British, for whom war objectives remained a priority over Lebanese aspirations for self-rule.⁸

Early into Lebanese independence, other regional actors would attempt to assert influence. Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser would unite with Syria to form the short-lived United Arab Republic from 1958 to 1961.⁹ Lebanon's main political factions were

⁸ Thompson, Soumaya Zeine. *Anglo-Free French Relations in the Levant, 1941-1945*. Dissertation, University of Kansas, 1990. p. 7.

⁹ Aburish, Said K. *Nasser, the Last Arab*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004. p. 164.

divided over whether to support or oppose Nasser's pan-Arab movement, resulting in the 1958 Civil War that would force the intervention of US and British forces to prop up the Christian-led pro-Western government, successfully ending the crisis.¹⁰

Though this crisis was averted and would allow for Lebanon to maintain its status as a cosmopolitan conglomeration of East and West, it highlighted the undercurrent of tension between Lebanon's Western-leaning Christians and the increasingly vocal Arab-oriented Muslim population that would resurface violently in the early 1970's. The outbreak of this second Civil War would again provide ample opportunity for foreign powers to pursue their own agendas in the context of Lebanon's complex demographic and political scene. In nearly all instances, opposing factions were backed by larger geopolitical rivals, serving to further enhance the polarizing split within Lebanese society.

The most prominent of these were the Syrians, who first inserted themselves into Lebanon under the pretext of a peacekeeping force and became the dominant power broker until 2005 when they would be forced to withdraw following Lebanese opposition. Though the Syrians were the most visible, other regional neighbors would find ample opportunity to move into Lebanon. The Palestinians, who moved into southern Lebanon after being expelled from Jordan in 1970, would prove to be a major cause of conflict as well.¹¹ They operated against Israel out of refugee camps in southern Lebanon, prompting Israeli retaliations that directly impacted Lebanese. This prompted some of the first militia groups to take action against the Palestinians, who were seen to

¹⁰ Foreign Relations of the United States, Oct. 17, 1957. Vol. 13, Near East: Jordan-Yemen, Document 143. Accessed online 4-6-2010.

¹¹ Foreign Relations of the United States, Sept. 28, 1970. Vol. 24. Near East: Jordan, Document 330. Accessed online 4-7-2010.

be taking advantage of Lebanese hospitality only to be repaid in the form of Israeli reprisal attacks.

This pattern of foreign actors negatively influencing Lebanese affairs continues to the present day. The chain of events sparked by the Lebanese Civil War drew the interest and intervention of major powers like the US, and also of regional states like Israel, Syria, and Iran. While it is difficult to imagine how Lebanon might have evolved if left to its own devices, what is clear is that continual foreign intervention in the Lebanese political scene has provided a context for conflict, sectarian division, and internal strife. None of these foreign actors had, as a core priority, the interests of the Lebanese people. External meddling remains an indelible part of Lebanon's political and social fabric, and as will be seen, it continues to foment crises and foster internal division today.

Formation of Hezbollah

By the start of the Lebanese Civil War, it was clear that Shiites had come to make up a substantial proportion of Lebanese society. Though many of the other militia factions had formed in response to a feeling of being threatened as a sect, Hezbollah, or the "Party of God," is a Shiite movement that came about relatively late in the conflict in 1982 as a reaction to Israeli incursions into southern Lebanon. It was begun by a small cadre of young, dedicated and religious revolutionaries who took direct inspiration from the then-recent 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Indeed, the founding document of Hezbollah, published openly in 1985, emphasized the Iranian example as a model of what could be achieved when Muslims are committed and united under the banner of Islam.

Hezbollah identified strongly with Ayatollah Khomeini's worldview, and stressed that successful resistance to oppression can only be achieved by fighting the real enemy, which it described when stating: "Imam Khomeini, the leader, has repeatedly stressed that America is the reason for all our catastrophes and the source of all malice. By fighting it, we are only exercising our legitimate right to defend our Islam and the dignity of our nation."¹² Indeed, throughout Hezbollah strongholds in southern Lebanon and south Beirut it is not uncommon to see large banners of Khomeini displayed prominently.

At the end of the war, Hezbollah was the only signatory to the Taif Accords ending the fighting that did not relinquish its weapons as called for in the agreement. It made this claim on the basis that Israel was still occupying southern Lebanon as a buffer zone against incursions on its northern border. Hezbollah declared it would remain armed as a resistance force guarding Lebanese sovereignty against Israeli occupation, a position which received considerable support among many of the previously warring factions. Indeed, since the end of the war, Hezbollah has remained the preeminent armed force in Lebanon, surpassing the Lebanese military in many respects. In disagreements with the Lebanese government, it has at times engaged the military in street battles, and it regularly mounts cross-border attacks into Israel from its south Lebanon stronghold.

The patronage of Iran has allowed Hezbollah to maintain its viability as a credible fighting force, supplying training and financing, as well as a wide variety of weaponry. At the same time, the political wing of Hezbollah has continued to gain support among Lebanese Shiites through food banks, direct payouts, job placement, medical clinics, and other social outreach programs. These programs are not restricted to Shiites only,

¹² Norton, Richard. *Hezbollah*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. Print. p37.

however, and have indeed managed to cultivate patrons among all sections of Lebanese society and gain support for Hezbollah as a political faction. Accordingly, Hezbollah has a number of seats in the Lebanese parliament, and in 2008 elections it narrowly lost a parliamentary majority to a US-allied coalition of parties, surprising many analysts who had expected the Party of God to win.¹³

It is tempting to equate the status of Hezbollah in Lebanon to the circumstances in Northern Ireland in which the Irish Republican Army remained armed and continued attacks against British and Protestant targets, while its political wing, Sinn Fein, garnered legitimacy and a seat at the negotiating table. Though many similarities exist between the two situations, the significant difference is that, as evidenced by its founding document and the patronage of a foreign power, Hezbollah's aims do not focus solely on Lebanese internal politics alone. Indeed, despite Israel's 2000 withdrawal from South Lebanon and its significance as eliminating the *raison d'être* of Hezbollah's armed wing, the group has taken no steps towards disarmament, nor announced any plans to do so.

Far from it, Hezbollah has only increased its armed presence and activities since the Israeli withdrawal, continuing to mount attacks against Israeli forces and carry out kidnapping operations against soldiers. Illustrating this point quite clearly is the 2006 Summer War in which Hezbollah forces held off the far-superior Israeli military for several weeks. The conflict highlighted enhanced capabilities, with long-range rocket strikes into Israeli coastal towns and at times sending unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) on reconnaissance missions; a capability thought until then to be solely within the

¹³ Whittington, Mark. "2009 Lebanon Election Result a Hezbollah Defeat." *Associated Content*. 8 Jun. 2009.

purview of advanced militaries.¹⁴ Such capabilities are clear indicators of an intricate support network with funding and technology transfers on a significant scale.

Organizational Structure of Hezbollah

Hezbollah has evolved over the course of its existence from a ragtag band of dedicated activists into a highly organized bureaucratic structure. What started as purely a resistance organization against Israeli incursions during the Lebanese Civil War eventually became a group with complex and structured divisions of responsibility, with the Secretary General as its head. The current and longest-serving Secretary General is Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, who in the early 1980's was a prominent young activist in the Shiite AMAL organization, founded by the well-known Shiite cleric Musa Sadr. AMAL, which means "hope" in Arabic and is an acronym for The Lebanese Resistance Detachments, was formed in 1975 to promote Shiite representation and rights in Lebanese politics. It remained relatively secular in its agenda, and Sadr even worked closely with members of the Greek Orthodox clergy in its early stages. It is from this that a group of religious activists from AMAL split from the organization to make up the core of Hezbollah's early membership.¹⁵

Nasrallah studied religion at Najaf in Iraq under Musa Sadr, whose nephew Moqtada would rise to prominence in the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq as a leader of the resistance to occupation. Nasrallah quickly rose through the Hezbollah ranks, making friends and enemies along the way, and was appointed Secretary General

¹⁴ Singer, P.W. "Defending Against Drones." *Newsweek*. 8 Mar. 2010. Singer notes that the Israelis were so unprepared for such drones that their F-16s nearly stalled while attempting to decelerate in order to shoot them down.

¹⁵ Moos, Oliver. "Lebanon: Hizbullah, a progressive Islamic Party? – Interview with Joseph Alagha." *Religioscope*. 17 May 2007.

in 1992, where he remains today, “detested by Israel and America but widely admired in much of the Muslim world.”¹⁶ Nasrallah has been credited for much of Hezbollah’s success in garnering legitimacy for the group, and has attained near celebrity status in the Muslim world. He received foreign dignitaries like UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in Amman, Jordan in the summer of 2000, not long before ordering the kidnapping of several Israeli soldiers to hold as bargaining chips.¹⁷



Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, circa 2006.¹⁸

While Nasrallah has remained the public face of Hezbollah to the world, it has been the success of the group’s armed exploits that has propelled the group to notoriety. As shown in the diagram below, Hezbollah’s organizational structure is highly developed, with Nasrallah at the top. Below him sits the decision-making Shura Council, which oversees operations by the Executive, Judicial and Political Councils, a Political Advisor, and finally the Jihad and Military Councils. It is the latter that remain the most troubling aspect of Hezbollah’s existence. Excluding the Military and Jihad Councils, the

¹⁶ Norton, Richard. *Hezbollah*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. Print. p4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Ynetnews.com. Accessed 2-12-10.

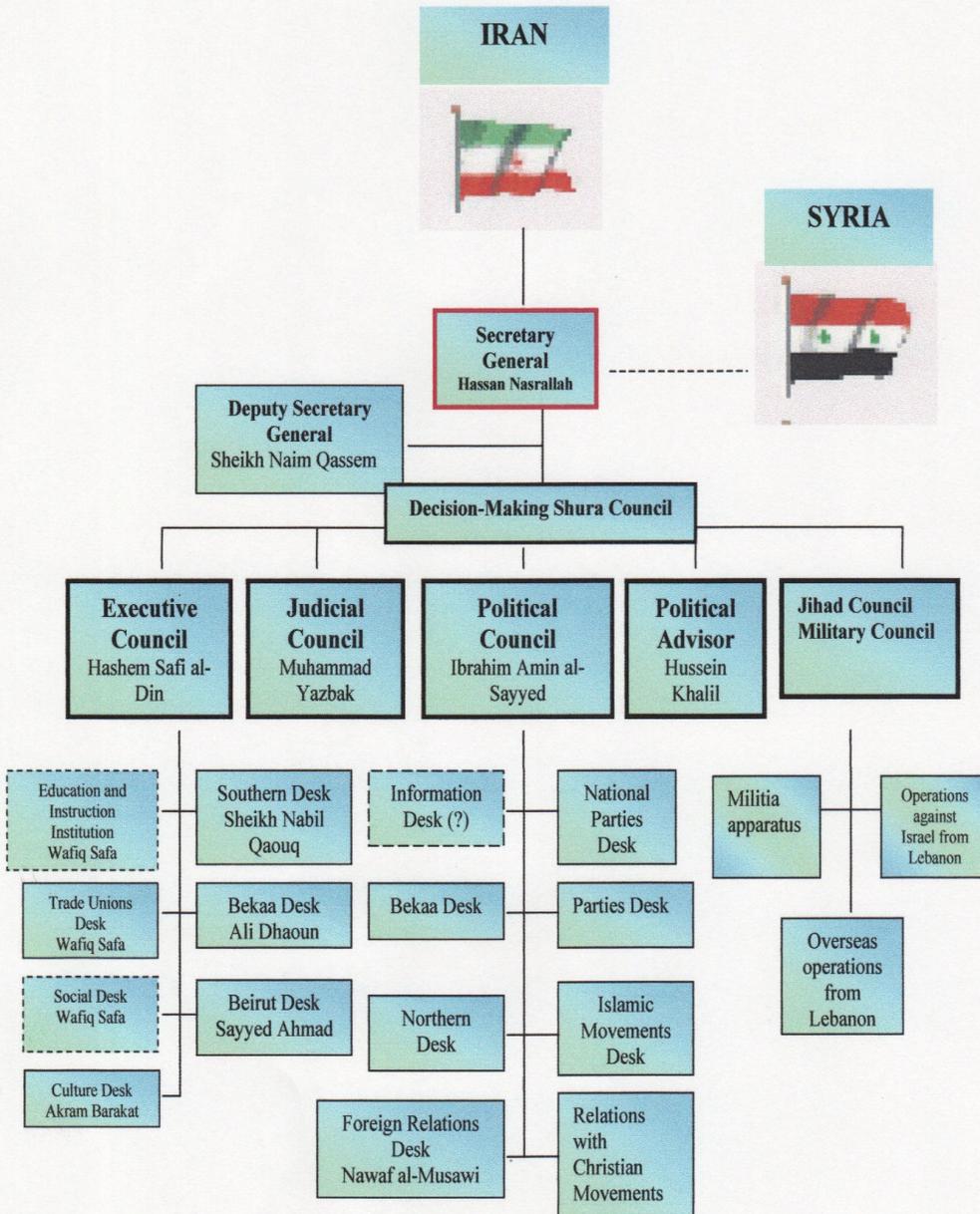
diagram clearly shows an evolved and effective political and social organization with far-reaching objectives and abilities. However, Hezbollah would not exist today without the success of its armed factions.

These armed groups are divided into three categories. Hezbollah's Militia apparatus is the most visible and well-known force consisting of thousands of trained and well-equipped fighters operating in South Lebanon and southern Beirut. It is these fighters that receive the bulk of equipment and funds from Iran, and who are so often seen parading down Beirut streets with automatic weapons and green Hezbollah banners on the evening news. These are what would be considered the foot soldiers of Hezbollah, and represent a significant military presence in Lebanon and a legitimate threat to Israel in a conventional conflict. This was clearly demonstrated by the 34-day Summer War in 2006, which drew to an inconclusive close but was claimed as a victory by Hezbollah for not suffering defeat by Israel and forcing the withdrawal of Israeli forces.

Secondly, within the Jihad and Military Councils, operations against Israel are planned and carried out. These operations have included kidnappings, rocket attacks, infiltration, and roadside bombings, usually against Israeli military targets, though they have struck civilians in the past. Such operations are typically carried out by a smaller clique of highly-skilled operatives, who are often trained by Iranian Revolutionary Guards operating in Lebanon, or in Iran itself. These groups have also claimed a number of successes, including kidnapping Israeli soldiers to hold as bargaining chips, resulting in the successful negotiation for the release of hundreds of Palestinian and Lebanese prisoners held by Israel. Such successes have served to embolden Hezbollah, which has

The Organizational structure of Hezbollah

(Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies) (ITICCS)



Hezbollah maintains a highly-organized, centrally-directed bureaucratic structure, with all lower arms working to achieve the goals set by the decision-making Shura Council.¹⁹

¹⁹ "Hezbollah." The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center. Special Information Bulletin, June 2003.

used them to great effect for propaganda purposes and to reinforce its central message that armed resistance can indeed be successful.

The final component of Hezbollah's armed operations are carried out by the most secretive and clandestine element, the External Security Organization (ESO). The most notorious of the armed factions as well as the most far-reaching, the ESO is responsible for Hezbollah's intelligence, internal security, and overseas operating cells, and has been implicated in global terrorist operations including hijackings, assassinations, and bombings. One figure that has been implicated in many such operations and was known to be the chief of the ESO was a Lebanese named Imad Mughniyeh. This mysterious figure has been alternately described as the head of ESO, a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRG), a special operative reporting directly to Iranian leader Khomeini, and a member of Hezbollah's Supreme Council.²⁰

In reality, Mughniyeh was likely something of a hybrid, as evidence points to his intimate involvement in both Hezbollah and Iranian affairs at any given time, lending credibility to the assertions of Iranian involvement in several major bombings beginning in the early 1980s. He was indicted by Argentine authorities for the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, and was personally responsible for the hijacking of TWA flight 847 to Beirut in June 1985.²¹ Mughniyeh first made his presence known to the West when he was involved in a series of kidnappings of Western hostages during the Lebanese Civil War. He was personally implicated in the kidnapping, torture,

²⁰ Hudson, Rex. "The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?" The Library of Congress. Sept. 1999.

²¹ *Ibid.*

and killing of William Buckley, the CIA station chief in Beirut in 1984, and was allegedly “the last person Buckley saw before he died.”²²

Mughniyeh was killed under mysterious circumstances in Damascus in 2008, alternately reported to have been killed while attempting to assemble a car bomb and also that he was assassinated by unknown forces, presumably Israel. Until his death, Hezbollah leadership had repeatedly stuck to the line that Mughniyeh was not a member of the organization, and never had any contacts with Hezbollah officials. After his death, however, Mughniyeh was given a lavish and official funeral by Hezbollah, attended by none other than Sheik Hassan Nasrallah himself, who threatened in his eulogy to commence “open war” with Israel outside the Israel-Lebanon theater in a clear reference to the global reach that Mughniyeh helped to create.²³



From left: Imad Mugniyeh in 1985 holding TWA 847 hostage; Mugniyeh around the time of his death.

An Iranian Proxy

Iran has played an inseparable role in the formation and function of Hezbollah from the very beginning. As was noted above, Hezbollah continues to collect significant financial and logistical support from Iran, ideological inspiration aside. US officials believe that Iran and Hezbollah are interlinked at nearly every level, to include training,

²² Kramer, Martin. “Imad Who?” *Middle East Strategy at Harvard*. 14 Feb. 2008

²³ *Ibid.*

funding, equipment, and logistical support to all aspects of the group's operations. Before his death, Hezbollah External Security Organization chief Mughniyeh was also known to have maintained very close connections to the Iranian government.

As recently as 2006, US intelligence officials claimed that Mughniyeh attended a meeting in Damascus along with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, with the leadership of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad also alleged to have been present. These reports indicated that Ahmadinejad was tapping Mughniyeh to ready any reprisals against Western targets in the event of a US or Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.²⁴ Given Mughniyeh's history with both Hezbollah and the Iranian government, it is quite plausible that these reports are at least partially accurate.

Although it denies involvement in terrorist operations like those allegedly carried out by Mughniyeh, the Iranian government makes no apologies for its support to Hezbollah. As has been widely reported, current president Ahmadinejad has called for the elimination of the state of Israel. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, successive Iranian governments have made it official policy not to acknowledge Israel's existence, and to support groups opposed to Israel, with Hezbollah as the most notable example. Some estimates contend that the Iranian government sends Hezbollah nearly \$10 million a month. As the example of Imad Mughniyeh shows, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and in particular the secretive Al-Quds (Jerusalem) Force of the Guards, has been pointed to as a primary provider of this support.

²⁴ Baxter, Sarah. "Iran's President Recruits Terror Master." *The Sunday Times*. London. 23 Apr. 2006.

Historical Foundations of Hugo Chavez and Bolivarian Venezuela

Chavez the Revolutionary Conspirator

Before entering politics, Hugo Chavez led and helped organize an attempted coup against the elected government in 1992, as a member of the underground opposition group called the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement (MBR-200).²⁵ Chavez and several fellow military officers founded the MBR-200 as a secretive assembly of like-minded officers who had become disenchanted with Venezuelan politics, and especially with the government led by President Carlos Andres Perez. Chavez and other conspirators within the MBR-200 felt that their government was simply unable to deal with the problems that many Venezuelans faced, especially the poorer classes. It became the mission of the MBR-200 to remedy this through whatever means necessary to fulfill what they perceived to have been intentions of their namesake, Simon Bolivar, for Latin America. These included a sound rejection of the dominance of free-market capitalism and what was seen as American “imperialism” and dominance of the Western hemisphere. Throughout the 1980’s, this underground group of officers made it their mission to indoctrinate as many members of the military as possible in order to secure a foundation for a future coup.

The MBR-200 doctrine rejected status-quo Venezuelan politics, which they believed to have been corrupted beyond repair. As the group’s name suggests, members placed a heavy emphasis on the philosophy and objectives of “the liberator” -- famed Latin American general Simon Bolivar. Bolivar was responsible for leading an army in revolt against Spanish rule across a large swath of the continent during the early 1800’s.

²⁵ “Movement of the Fifth Republic (MVR).” Encyclopedia Britannica. 2010. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Accessed 17 Feb. 2010.

It was Bolivar who conceived the notion of a continent-wide crusade against the Spanish, and his success was predicated upon uniting the disparate Latin American states against a common outside enemy. Indeed, he found considerable success, defeating Spanish forces in Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, though that success was often threatened and would prove to be relatively short-lived. However, Bolivar has retained his place in the popular imagination of Latin American leaders and citizens alike. Chavez, along with much of the revolutionary left at the time, was quick to grasp the value of identifying with Bolivar, and seems to truly believe in many of Bolivar's initial goals. Namely, Chavez seeks the political unification of the aforementioned Latin American states, claiming that it would be "a valid project for the 21st century.... to bring together the Balkanized countries of Latin America."²⁶

Among the myriad reasons that MBR-200 plotted against the government was the perception, in many cases accurate, that the government was overburdened, corrupt, inefficient, and in the pocket of the wealthy elite. In the late 1980's, Venezuela's economy was in a shambles, and President Carlos Andres Perez had found it necessary to institute wide-ranging neo-liberal structural adjustment programs to the economy under the direction of the IMF and World Bank. On February 16, 1989 Perez announced the changes which included many free-market reforms to Venezuela's highly-subsidized economy. The first changes to be instituted included an increase in the price of gasoline by nearly 100 percent over a several-month period. However, many public transit operators in Caracas simply increased it by the full percentage all at once on February 26, passing the increase on to passengers and nearly doubling bus fares overnight.²⁷ This

²⁶ Gott, Richard. *Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution*. London: Versa Books, 2005. Print. p. 93

²⁷ Gott, Richard. *In the Shadow of the Liberator*. London: Versa Books, 2001. Print. p. 47.

outraged transit riders, and quickly led to a spontaneous public revolt and to what came to be known as the *caracazo* uprising of mass protest, rioting, and rebellion.

With uprisings spreading via television to other cities, the government became unable to quell the violence with police, and as National Guard units were sent in to assist, it quickly became clear that many were not willing to use force against fellow citizens. This led Perez to call on the military to quell the violence, brutally putting down the uprising and resulting in numerous deaths. Despite the violence and the military success, the specter of soldiers firing on their own countrymen led many officers to question their loyalties, causing a major upheaval within the ranks. Throughout the turbulence, Chavez remained ill at home, though several of his co-conspirators had been obliged to participate in the crackdown, hardening their anti-government positions.

In February 1992, the MBR-200 attempted to seize power in a military coup, and though meeting some success in smaller towns, Chavez' group in Caracas eventually was surrounded and he found himself without communication equipment with which to direct his forces and carry out the plan. Though popular support for the government was certainly not high, the majority of military commanders remained loyal to the democratically-elected president. This, combined with a series of logistical and preparatory blunders (as well as several conspirators' cold feet), led Chavez to the rapid realization that the coup had no chance of success and would likely result in major bloodshed should it continue. Surrounded in Caracas, Chavez surrendered without firing a shot. Forty people died in the clashes resulting from the coup, and several hundred were injured. After giving up, Chavez was allowed to go on national TV to convince his supporters that the coup had failed and that resistance would only hurt the long-term

success of their cause. Though Chavez' appeal likely spared many an otherwise violent fate, had the government been aware of Chavez' choice of words during his brief television appearance, they may well have not allowed it. Indeed, Chavez made his intentions for a future comeback perfectly clear during his announcement of the coup's failure, notably maintaining his belief in its underlying philosophy and righteousness of purpose:



“Comrades: unfortunately, for the moment the objectives that we had set for ourselves have not been achieved in the capital. That's to say that those of us here in Caracas have not been able to seize power. Where you are, you have performed well, but now is the time for a rethink; new possibilities will arise again, and the country will be able to move definitively towards a better future.”²⁹

Important in this admission of failure was Chavez' off-the-cuff inclusion of the phrase “for the moment” – an implicit promise to a newly-smitten public that Chavez would continue his Bolivarian struggle at some point in the future. As noted by author Richard Gott, “No one in Venezuela had ever heard a politician apologize for anything before...and now here was a military officer saying he accepted responsibility for something that had gone wrong...the great mass of the population was solidly lining up

²⁸ Image from: http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Hugo_Chávez

²⁹ Gott, Richard. *Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution*. Versa Books, 2005. Print. p. 67.

behind the coup leader.”³⁰ In hindsight, it does appear that Chavez’ calculated surrender at the time has paid massive political dividends. After being released from prison in 1994 following a pardon by President Perez, Chavez set about to reconstitute the MBR-200, and transform it from an underground military movement into a political party. Chavez called it the Fifth Republic Movement, as he believed that sweeping changes across the social and political landscape of the country were necessary, changes that would require a drastic alteration of the government of Venezuela. His message on the TV in those few minutes transformed him from the leader of a failed coup and a relatively unknown military officer into a national figure that captivated the public imagination.

Chavez the Politician

Hugo Chavez’ turned this overnight publicity into political capital that he intended to spend by cultivating a large base of support from a platform of populist reform. The platform of his Fifth Republic Movement espoused a unique blend of nationalism, socialism and populism that won many supporters, in particular among the country’s poor and working-class for whom the recent and dramatic neo-liberal economic programs had proved especially harmful. By 1998, Chavez had built up a large enough base of support to run for president, a post he won with over 56% of the vote.³¹ Once in office, Chavez called for a new Constitutional Assembly in line with his vision for the new Venezuela and its rejection of the neo-liberal economic order. Like any incoming administration, Chavez filled key posts with his own political advisors and benefactors. In this, though, Chavez began to veer away from any of his predecessors with the

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 68.

³¹ Romero, Juan Eduardo. “The Political Process in Venezuela in the Late 20th Century: The Construction of a New Order.” *Sincronia*. Winter Issue, 2001.

creation of entirely new cabinet positions, ministries, and government agencies, all designed to promote his vision of a radical social transformation.

Making many of his cabinet ministers nervous was the introduction of military officers into nearly all senior levels of government. As one economic advisor put it, “The military are everywhere...it sometimes seems as though there is a secret project that you don’t quite know about. There really is a military party and in some cases, it’s a case of dual power.”³² Thanks to a law written specially for him in the new constitution of 1999, Chavez remains an active-duty military officer, as do nearly one-third of all regional governors.³³

Chavez was keen to maintain the loyalty of the military, many of whom had participated in quelling his failed 1992 coup. Despite this, Chavez was a freely elected president and the officer corps had no choice but to accept his leadership. Many officers who participated in suppressing the 1992 coup or were thought to be sympathetic to it were forced out of the armed forces in short order.³⁴ After all, few knew better than Chavez the possible consequence of discontent in the officer corps.

Despite these radical changes, Chavez was careful to avoid alienating any large sections of the public. He took an incremental approach, and at first some economic analysts believed his changes to be more cosmetic than anything else. Venezuela is a major oil producer - a primary supplier of crude to the US that relies heavily on foreign investment in this large sector of its economy. It would have been foolish to promote instability and uncertainty at such an early stage of his administration, and Chavez acted

³² Gott, Richard. *Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution*. Versa Books: 2005. Print. p. 177.

³³ Shifter, Michael. “In Search of Hugo Chavez.” *Foreign Affairs*. 85.3. (Jun. 2006): 45-59.

³⁴ Personal Correspondence: Jesus Dagoberto Rodriguez Lozada, General of the Venezuelan Army (ret.) Venezuela. 4 March. 2010.

cautiously in balancing the concerns of foreign investors with the needs of his new economic program.

His initial economic and political reforms and the popularity of his leadership matched well with the bold aspirations of his foreign policy agenda. However, like his idol Bolivar, Chavez set out with goals far more ambitious than his ability to achieve them. Chavez' plans for the unification of the continent and the formation of a Latin American bloc of states have so far been met with relative silence by other Latin American leaders, who have never "perceived Venezuela as a natural political leader on the continent."³⁵

Many of Chavez' Latin American counterparts were also wary of his radical economic and political agenda and were unwilling to risk their good relations with the United States – "the empire to the north" whom Chavez had already identified as his primary antagonist and chief geopolitical and ideological rival. His election was greeted by the US with growing concern as he made clear his views on the creation of an "open and multi-polar world," which did not follow "the neo-liberalism that had been such a disaster in the third world and had tried to impose economic models from the center of power in the West; it had resulted in millions of people leading lives of poverty, and had led to unemployment, misery, and death."³⁶

By contrast, Bolivarian socialism was to emphasize the poor and lower class, which by the time of his candidacy made up a considerable portion of the electorate and played no small part in his victory. As a populist, Chavez highlighted Venezuela's growing levels of wealth disparity despite its relatively high national income and oil

³⁵ Gott, Richard. *Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution*. Versa Books: 2005. p. 190.

³⁶ Gott, Richard. *In the Shadow of the Liberator*. Versa Books: 2001, Print. p. 197.

wealth. By 1995, estimates contended that of a population of 23 million, nearly half of the national income was held by only 10 percent of the population, that 40 percent lived in “critical poverty,” and that 80 percent earned the minimum wage or less.³⁷ Chavez vowed to change this, and though he has not explicitly outlined his economic philosophy, he has characterized it as “neither statist nor neo-liberal; exploring the middle ground, where the invisible hand of the market joins up with the visible hand of the state: as much state as necessary, and as much market as possible.”³⁸ While vague, Chavez has so far managed to reassure foreign investors and oil companies that no drastic action would be undertaken and that their investments would be protected, while also persuading the public that he sought to utilize state power to steer the market in support of advancing all citizens’ interests – a balance that initially succeeded in quelling major opposition.

To that end, Chavez has been remarkably effective, though not without his critics. Actions to nationalize foreign companies have not sat well with foreign firms, and many in the Venezuelan elite have protested strongly at his wealth redistribution plans. In a worrisome move, his government began finding (and creating) laws by which to shut down opposition media and stifle dissent. Laws passed by Chavez loyalists have made it a crime to publicly show disrespect for the president and other governmental authorities, punishable by up to 20 months in prison. Likewise, the 2004 Social Responsibility Law gave the government the authority to censor media content by imposing “administrative restrictions” on radio and television broadcasts.³⁹

Much of the Venezuelan elite despised Chavez’ radical changes. Especially hated were his land reform policies that gave the government power to take over land that was

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 172.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 174.

³⁹ Shifter, Michael. “In Search of Hugo Chavez.” *Foreign Affairs*. 85.3 (Jun. 2006): 45-49.

either idle or unproductive as well as his reversal of oil privatization programs initiated by previous governments.⁴⁰ By late 2001, opposition had spilled from the airwaves to the streets, and the weeks progressed marked by escalating street demonstrations by Chavez supporters and the opposition. By April of 2002, members of the country's elite as well as several high-ranking generals set in motion an attempted coup, similar in many ways to the one Chavez undertook in 1992.

However, the coup plotters, despite briefly deposing Chavez, did not count on huge numbers of the country's poor streaming into the city to protest the coup, nor did they foresee the resistance of much of the officer corps to the attempt. Chavez' success in purging his officer corps had paid off, as had his populist message. In the aftermath, Chavez accused the US of orchestrating and backing the attempt -- charges not without some merit.⁴¹ This marked a turning point for US-Venezuela relations. Chavez defeated a 2002 recall referendum orchestrated by opposition groups that cemented his domestic popularity and enhanced his anti-American rhetoric and credentials. It also hastened his embrace of Iran, which he saw as a natural ally whose leadership shared many similarities in its geopolitical outlook. Like Venezuela, Iran sought a global opposition movement to the US, and it felt strategically threatened by the presence of American forces in its US-allied regional neighbors. This well-calculated marriage of convenience would enhance Chavez' global exposure. He quickly became a polarizing world figure, a position from which he has not shied away and indeed appears to relish.

⁴⁰ Gott, Richard. *Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution*. Versa Books: 2005. p. 219.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 233. Several of the coup plotters were in communication with the US government, and evidence indicates the US had foreknowledge of the attempt and failed to warn Venezuela. The US also had a prepared response sent out immediately following the coup that called for "a national consensus and the guarantee of fundamental liberties," rather than for the return of the democratically-elected Chavez to power.

Resistance Ideology

Radical Islam and Resistance as Doctrine

As evidenced by Hezbollah remaining armed after the Taif Accords, the concept of resistance has been a recurring theme in radical Islamic thought. From the Crusades in the middle ages through today, examples abound of Islamic leaders rallying around a banner of resistance to invasion, imperialism, religious persecution, and foreign domination. Among the most prominent founding fathers of this school of thought was 13th century Islamic scholar Taqi-ud-Deen Ahmad ibn Tamiyyah. He remains one of the most influential writers on the concept of jihad as an offensive struggle against all enemies of Islam: “Since lawful warfare is essentially jihad and since its aim is that the religion is Allah’s entirely and Allah’s word is uppermost, therefore, according to all Muslims, those who stand in the way of this aim must be fought.”⁴²

Ibn Tamiyyah lived during the period of Mongol rule throughout much of the Muslim world. He was a vocal opponent of subjugation by outsiders whom he considered to be unbelievers and apostates.⁴³ It was in this context that ibn Tamiyya formulated some of his most notable philosophical ideas, many of which have been adapted by today’s jihadist movements and expanded upon. In the 1950’s, an Egyptian named Sayyid Qutb would seize on many of the same principles to write several highly influential works on jihad and resistance.⁴⁴ Like ibn Tamiyya, Qutb would become

⁴² Taqi-ud-Deen Ahmad Ibn Tamiyyah, “The Religious and Moral Doctrine of Jihad.” *Voices of Terror: Manifestos, Writings and Manuals of al Qaeda, Hamas, and other Terrorists from Around the World and Throughout the Ages*. Edited by Walter Laqueur. 2004. p. 393

⁴³ Laoust, H. "Ibn Taymiyya , Taḳī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya." *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. 06 April 2010.

⁴⁴ Qutb, Sayyid. *Social Justice in Islam*. New York: Islamic Publications International, 1953. Reprinted 2000. Print.

required reading for modern jihadist thought. Indeed, it is difficult to find a modern jihadist work without reference to the ideas originally formulated by ibn Tamiyya and elaborated by Qutb. The concept of jihad as an obligation, especially in cases when non-Muslims or apostates are seen to be the aggressor, has remained an enticing justification for groups like Hezbollah to promote armed resistance today.

Though the concept is certainly not unique to Islamists, radical Islamic groups in recent years have taken center stage in highlighting the plight of the downtrodden and the need to assign blame upon a larger foe. In some cases, that enemy is identified as the West, the United States, Israel, or a combination of the three. In others, it is more broadly defined as an anti-imperialist movement. In most Arab and many European countries, a distinction is made between Hezbollah's political and social organizations and its violent activities, and thus it is not classified as a terrorist group.⁴⁵

Both states and non-state actors opposed to the current geopolitical order find inspiration in Hezbollah's success, and have made attempts in recent years to organize into a more coherent body politic. In January 2009, 400 delegates from around the world attended the Beirut International Forum for Resistance, Anti-Imperialism, Solidarity between Peoples and Alternatives. The stated purpose of this forum was to bring together anti-imperialist forces from around the world to help establish a unity of purpose among both secular left-leaning forces and Islamic and other religious groups.

The conference included representatives from numerous fringe groups in several Western nations including the United States and Europe, but was also attended by an official delegation from Hezbollah as well as nearly 30 representatives of the government

⁴⁵ www.arabmediawatch.com. Arab Media Watch notes that the UK and Dutch governments make distinctions between Hezbollah and its External Security Organization, and the EU and UN do not list it as a terrorist organization in any form. Accessed online 4-7-2010.

of Venezuela. Included among those were members of the Venezuelan parliament, as well as union delegates and members of left-leaning youth groups.⁴⁶ At the opening session of the conference, Hezbollah deputy general secretary Sheik Naim Qassem declared, “There are two camps in the world, that of imperialism, led by the United States, and that of resistance.”⁴⁷

Hezbollah has recently been looked upon by anti-imperialist factions as a poster child for modern resistance to many of the aforementioned foes. It has been identified as one of the only “example[s] of successful, targeted and organized resistance,” in part because it was credited with forcing the withdrawal of Israeli forces from south Lebanon in 2000.⁴⁸ A key problem with this outlook is that it attempts to legitimate and elevates the use of armed struggle and terrorism to achieve a desired political end, in this case a perceived victory against Israel. This newfound credibility throughout the wider sphere of anti-imperialists across the globe has given Hezbollah significant political capital in Lebanon and elsewhere. Hugo Chavez’ Bolivarian revolutionaries see in Hezbollah’s success a model of resistance to be praised and indeed emulated.

Hugo Chavez’ Identification with Resistance

Hugo Chavez and his Bolivarian revolutionary ideology share many of the underlying social and anti-imperialist views of radical Islam. The Bolivarian 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 neocolonial world order. While the Iranian revolution took place under

⁴⁶ Cecil, Bill. “Anti-Imperialists Unite at Beirut Forum.” *International Action Center*. 21 Jan. 2009.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

vastly different circumstances and with a specific religious emphasis, a fundamental similarity between the two remains the rejection of American influence in each state's respective affairs.

Central to both Iranian and Bolivarian ideologies is the concept of social justice. It emphasizes the need to strive for the equality of all mankind, especially with regard to the poor and otherwise underserved for whom no real political voice has been previously granted.⁴⁹ In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini led the Iranian revolution with calls for an Islamic state in which justice would prevail and the oppressive forces of the US-backed shah would be vanquished. Hugo Chavez found similarly fertile ground among Venezuela's poor by projecting his revolutionary ideology as a solution to many years of neglect at the hands of the elite and powerful. Both instances similarly held that the new revolutionary force would sweep away all vestiges of the old and corrupt power. Necessary for this transition, though, was the identification of a central foe over which to triumph. In both cases, this fundamental enemy was held up as the United States. The US was portrayed as the source of each state's problems that only the respective revolutions could successfully overcome.

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 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 that may come home to roost for Chavez domestically.

⁴⁹ Qutb, Sayyid. *Social Justice in Islam*. New York: Islamic Publications International, 1953. Reprinted 2000. Print.

Chavez' Venezuela and Iran share status as pariahs of 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 revolutionary nations by strengthening ties between the two nations."⁵⁰ 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."⁵¹

In July 2008, the pro-government Venezuelan newspaper *Diario Vea* ran an editorial highlighting 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."⁵² 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.⁵³

⁵⁰ "Sayeed Khamenei Urges Chavez to Boost Economic Ties." Islamic Resistance in Lebanon. 9 Jul. 2009: Web. 8 Nov. 2009.

⁵¹ "Chavez Visits 'Brother' Ahmadinejad." *Al Jazeera*. 2 Jul. 2007: Web. 6 Nov. 2009.

⁵² Tajeldine, Basem. "Libano y Latinoamérica Talladas en el Mismo Molde." *Diario Vea*. 7 Jul. 2008: Web. 16 Nov. 2009.

⁵³ "Chavez: Colombia Has Become the Israel of Latin America." *Haaretz*. 3 Mar. 2008.



Warm greetings between Chavez and Ahmadinejad⁵⁴

One can view Chavez and the FARC as a parallel to Iran and Hezbollah, highlighting Chavez' stance against "imperialist" U.S.-backed Colombia, much as Hezbollah stands against U.S.-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.

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. The labeling of Colombia appears to be 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 can very clearly relate.

⁵⁴ Associated press archive photos. Accessed online.

Latin American Support to Terrorist Groups

Chavez and the FARC

Hugo Chavez has consistently emphasized his opposition to American military support for 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.”⁵⁵ 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. The group aims to place its members in positions of power in Latin America in order to counter the expansion of free trade regimes and neo-liberal economic trends in the region by emphasizing socialism as an alternative economic model.⁵⁶

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 FARC. Chavez’ support of FARC has also caused considerable tension within the Venezuelan armed forces, not least because of his role in the 1992 coup attempt. One high-ranking former Venezuelan military officer 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, and he has since fled the country for the safety of his family. At the beginning of Chavez’ presidency, however, Gen. Dagoberto

⁵⁵ Pena-Esclusa, Alejandro. “The Foro De Sao Paulo: A Threat to Freedom in Latin America.” UnoAmerica.org. Feb. 2009.

⁵⁶ Personal Correspondence: Jesus Dagoberto Rodriguez Lozada, General of the Venezuelan Army (ret.) Venezuela. 4 March. 2010.

Rodriguez Lozada regularly toured military operations across the country as part of his duties as Deputy Inspector General of the National Armed Forces.



Map of FARC-controlled territory. Note that much of it borders Venezuela in La Guajira region.⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸ As if to reinforce the point, Chavez' former top military advisor, Gen. Alberto

⁵⁷ "Just How Much Help has Hugo Chavez Given to Colombia's Guerrillas?" *The Economist*. 22 May 2008. Accessed online 4-1-2010.

⁵⁸ Personal Correspondence: Jesus Dagoberto Rodriguez Lozada, General of the Venezuelan Army (ret.) Venezuela. 4 March. 2010.

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.”⁵⁹

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 FARC 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.⁶⁰

During the raid on the FARC camp in Ecuador, electronic documents were found that detailed campaign contributions by FARC to Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa, a Chavez ally.⁶¹ Video seized by Colombian police in Bogota from a FARC operative's home shows FARC second-in-command Jorge Briceño giving a speech lamenting the loss of FARC secrets in the raid in which documents allude to agreements between FARC and the Venezuelan and Ecuadorian governments.⁶² Though both governments

⁵⁹ Kraul, Chris. “Slayings Cast Light on Border Intrigues in South America.” *Los Angeles Times*. 15 Jun. 2007.

⁶⁰ Escarguel, Olivier. “Chavez, Uribe y Las FARC.” *El Tiempo*. 5 Jan. 2009.

⁶¹ “Colombia Alleges FARC-Correa Link.” *Al Jazeera*. 18 Jul. 2009; Web. 5 Nov. 2009.

⁶² *Ibid.*

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 FARC to be a terrorist organization. The Venezuelan legislature has recently backed Chavez' call to afford belligerent status to FARC. This would recognize the group as a legitimate fighting force within Colombia and would afford FARC certain rights under international law and the laws of armed conflict.⁶³ 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

Accusations of direct state support to terrorist groups have in the past involved states in the Middle East like Iran or Libya. However, recent activity by members of Hugo Chavez' government has provided concrete evidence that within the ranks of his administration are individuals with radical Islamist sympathies and connections. Venezuelan diplomat Ghazi Nasr al-Din spent several years as ambassador to Damascus and Beirut. In 2008, the U.S. Treasury Department alleged that Nasr 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

⁶³ Janicke, Kiraz. "Venezuelan Legislature Supports Belligerent Status for Colombian Rebels." Venezuela Analysis, Inc. 19 Jan. 2008.

military training in Hezbollah-run camps.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹

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.

⁶⁴ "Treasury Targets Hizballah in Venezuela." United States Department of the Treasury. 18 Jun. 2008.

⁶⁵ Logan, Samuel. "Iran's Latin America Inroads." 29 Apr. 2009. ISN Security Watch, International Relations and Security Network.

⁶⁶ Spencer, Robert. "Jihad in Venezuela?" *Jihad Watch*. 29 Nov. 2003.

⁶⁷ "Venezuelan Ties to Hezbollah." ICT Database Staff Commentaries. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism. 14 Aug. 2008.

⁶⁸ Ferrand, Nicole. "Venezuela's Tarek El-Aissami." *The Manges Hemispheric Security Report*. Center for Security Policy. 2 Oct. 2008. Vol. 5:1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

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.”⁷⁰ 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.”⁷¹



Venezuelan Interior Minister Tarek El-Aissami, addressing a Caracas mosque in January 2009 on Venezuelan solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

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 Assami 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 responsible for Venezuelan internal state

⁷⁰ “El Aissami: Toda Venezuela Lucha por Unidad Mundial en Busca de la Paz.” *Radio Nacional de Venezuela*. 6 Jan. 2009

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Ferrand, Nicole. “The Venezuelan Tarek El Aissami.” *Noticias Centro*. 28 Feb. 2009.

security.⁷³ 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 US and drove a car all the way to Dearborn, Michigan. Kourani was later convicted of providing “material support and resources” to Hezbollah.⁷⁴ 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 US 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.⁷⁵ 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 operative Imad Mughniyehh as well as eight Iranian government officials.⁷⁶ None have been subsequently arrested or brought to trial.

⁷³ “Rodriguez Chacin leaves the Ministry of Interior and Justice.” *El Universal*. 8 Sep. 2008.

⁷⁴ Carter, Sarah. “Hezbollah Uses Mexican Drug Routes Into U.S.” *Washington Times*. 27 Mar. 2009

⁷⁵ Sullivan, Mark. “Latin America: Terrorism Issues”. *CRS Report For Congress*. 9 Jan. 2008.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Hezbollah Activities in Latin America

Apart from the significant Iranian financial contributions to Hezbollah, allegations of alternative funding methods have become increasingly numerous and widespread.⁷⁷ The large Lebanese expatriate community around the world has been pointed to as a primary source of this additional funding. Hezbollah channels expatriate donations through sympathetic charity organizations as well as through large-scale smuggling operations and cooperation with drug cartels. The wide variety of organizations and mechanisms designed to send money to Hezbollah from overseas is quite staggering. In the Western Hemisphere alone, authorities have made arrests in dozens of cases involving illegal schemes in which profits were funneled back to Hezbollah.

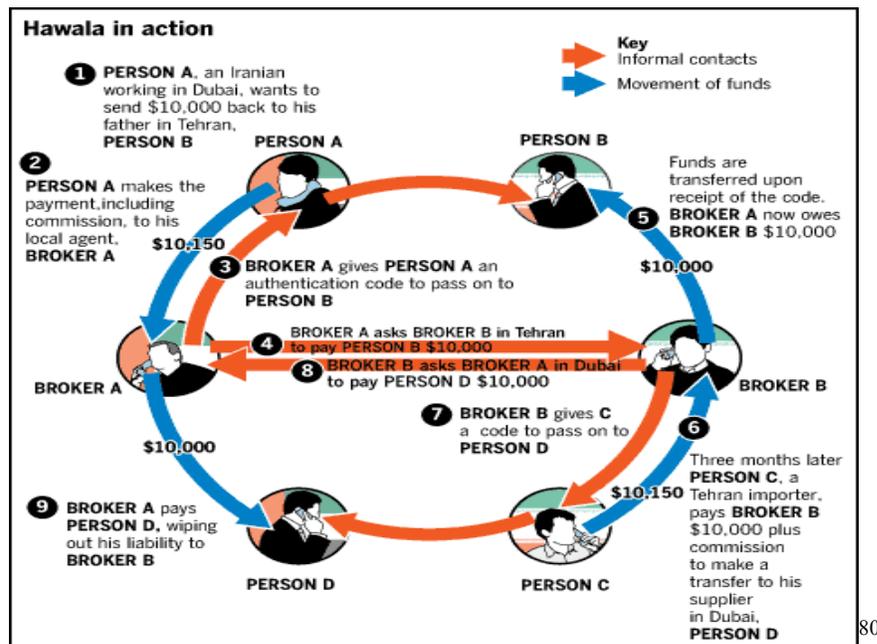
These included money laundering, drug trafficking, racketeering operations, and smuggling. In several notable instances, evidence points to the intermixing of Hezbollah operatives and fundraisers with drug cartels, organized crime, and paramilitary rebel groups in neighboring states. Links can be found to the highest levels of the Venezuelan government, with some evidence pointing to the tacit support of Chavez himself to Colombian rebel groups operating near or in Venezuelan territory. As will be explored further, evidence indicates that some of these groups actively cooperate with Hezbollah on multiple levels.

The Hawala System of Money Transfer

One instrument which plays a significant role in these transactions is the traditional Islamic system of hawala, which in its basic form amounts to an informal

⁷⁷ Berman, Ilan. "No Diplomatic Relations Until Terrorist Funding Stops." *Mclatchy-Tribune News Service*. 12 Feb. 2009.

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.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ 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.



The Hawala System is ideal for those wishing to send money discreetly.

⁷⁸ İnalçık, Halil. "Hawāla." 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.

⁷⁹ Jost, Patrick and Harjit Sandhu. "The Hawala Alternative Remittance System and its Role in Money Laundering." *Interpol General Secretariat*. Lyon: Jan. 2000.

⁸⁰ Fifield, Anna. "How Iranians are Avoiding Sanctions." *The Financial Times*. 14 Apr. 2008.

Unintentional Donors

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% of Lebanon's GDP by 2008.⁸¹ 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.⁸² As a result, 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. It is thus imperative to highlight those individuals and organizations that do so intentionally as well as those that facilitate such actions.

⁸¹ Abdih, Yasser, Ralph Chami, Michael Gapen and Amine Mati. "Fiscal Sustainability in Remittance-Dependent Economies." *IMF Working Paper*. International Monetary Fund. Sep. 2009.

⁸² Barham, John. "Hezbollah's Latin American Home." *Security Management*. Feb. 2008.

Documented Deliberate Support

Of course, not all individual donations to Hezbollah are collected and sent unintentionally, and these are of primary concern. These donors make it their mission to support Hezbollah, 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 which funneled large sums of money to Hezbollah.⁸³ 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 Barakat has sent from the Triple Border,” a reference to the so-called tri-border area between Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina. Though the authenticity of this letter has not been clearly established, Barakat’s arrest highlights the ability of Hezbollah support networks to operate in Latin American territory.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ In July 2009, the Israeli foreign ministry publicly

⁸³ Karmon, Ely. “Iran and its Proxy Hezbollah: Strategic Penetration in Latin America.” *Working Paper 18*. Real Instituto Elcano. Madrid. 4 Aug. 2009.

⁸⁴ 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.

⁸⁵ “Venezuelan Ties to Hezbollah.” ICT Database Staff Commentaries. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism. 14 Aug. 2008.

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.⁸⁶

For its part, Margarita Island is a small 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 an isolated 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.⁸⁷ In prepared testimony, US Southern Command Gen. James Hill noted that Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic militant group Islamiyya al Gammat all operate cells on Margarita.⁸⁸

Precise levels of alleged financial support have not been made 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 apparent 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. Clearly, 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?

⁸⁶ “Israel Alerta Sobre Creación de Células de Hezbolá en La Guajira.” *El Tiempo*. 18 Jul. 2009.

⁸⁷ Robinson, Linda. “Terror Close to Home.” *US News and World Report*. 6 Oct. 2003.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*



A map depicting areas of suspected Hezbollah support in Colombia and Venezuela.

Links between Hezbollah, Drug Cartels, and Organized Crime

Hezbollah has been linked to Latin American 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 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.⁸⁹ While these sorts of arrests may be relatively common within the wider context of the drug war in Latin America, Dutch authorities accuse the

⁸⁹ Zambellis, Chris. "Mystery Surrounds Alleged Hezbollah Links to Drug Arrests In Curacao." *Terrorism Monitor*. 25 Jun. 2009. 7:18.

organization of funneling part of their profits directly to Hezbollah through informal banking mechanisms such as the Hawala system.⁹⁰

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.⁹¹

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.⁹² 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

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ “La Conexión Libanesa Con la Oficina de Envigado.” *El Espectador*. 9 Mar. 2009.

⁹² Alsema, Adriaan. “Authorities Smash Drug Ring with Hezbollah Ties.” *Colombia Reports*. 21 Oct. 2008:

imperialist campaign” to slander it.⁹³ 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, including cannabis and poppy plants that are grown in abundance and sold both locally and abroad to European consumers.⁹⁴ 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.”⁹⁵

Iran has also been linked to similar operations. In 2008 *El Universal* reported that the Mexican Sinaloa drug cartel was sending elite assassins to train on weapons and explosives with Islamic radicals in Iran.⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷ This mutually beneficial arrangement allowed the assassins to receive training in guerilla tactics, while the extremists gained entry into Latin America, and possibly 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 US.⁹⁸ Taken together, these reports indicate extensive associations between Iran, Hezbollah and drug cartels,

⁹³ Goodenough, Patrick. “Hezbollah Denies Link to Latin American Criminals.” *CSN News*. 24 Oct. 2008.

⁹⁴ “Hezbollah.” Executive Summary. Center for Policing Terrorism. p.23.

⁹⁵ Bodansky, Yossef. *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America*. New York: Random House, 2001. p.322.

⁹⁶ Gomora, Doris. “Aprenden Narcoterror con Extrimistas: EU.” *El Universal*. 17 Jul. 2008

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

highlighting the potential for Hezbollah to utilize these groups' existing support networks and infrastructure.

Hezbollah Venezuela: Clear Threat or Wannabe Terrorists?

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.⁹⁹ The leader of this group, Teodoro Darnott, initially did not claim that his group was a cell of Lebanese Hezbollah. However, 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 oppression laid a foundation for radical Islamist thought and indoctrination.¹⁰⁰

This underlying ideology of resistance is shared not only by the revolutionary philosophy espoused by Hugo Chavez and his Bolivarian socialists, but also by many Muslims already in Latin America. Many Muslims in Colombia adhere 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. They emphasize what they consider to be “natural cultural and even ethnic links to Arabs and Muslims, stemming from Spain’s Islamic Moorish

⁹⁹ 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.

¹⁰⁰ Karmon, Ely. “Hezbollah America Latina: Strange Group or Real Threat?” Institute for Counter-Terrorism. 14 Nov. 2006.

heritage.”¹⁰¹ 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 away to regain a lost culture, and reassert an identity long-suppressed by colonial forces.

A closer examination of Hezbollah Venezuela’s websites demonstrates a rather inept and elementary attempt to mirror the success of Lebanese Hezbollah, with limited success. The aforementioned lack of an indigenous Islamic community in Latin America may explain some of these website incongruities. The group’s websites very perceptibly lacked a basic knowledge of Islam, going so far as to post Bible verses rather than quotations from the Koran.¹⁰² Far from the polish and professionalism of official Hezbollah websites, which resemble established news outlets in their sophistication, Hezbollah Venezuela’s amateurish website design nevertheless is significant in that it shares some of the same basic rhetoric and symbolism with other jihadist groups as well as a strong anti-American message.¹⁰³

Hezbollah Venezuela under Darnott lasted only a few months before he was arrested November of 2006 by Hugo Chavez’ government. He was 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’ literature into the streets.¹⁰⁴ The attack failed when the man who placed the explosives panicked and was arrested, and the bombs were defused before they could be set off. Regardless of the failure, Hezbollah Venezuela took public

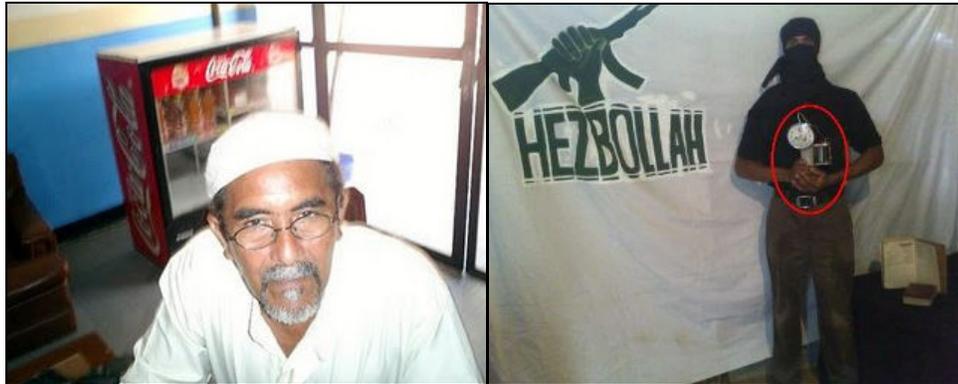
¹⁰¹ Zambellis, Chris. “Al-Qaeda in the Andes: Spotlight on Colombia.” *Unmasking Terror: A Global Review of Terrorist Activities*. Vol. 7. Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation. 6 Apr. 2006.

¹⁰² 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.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Taylor, Clinton. “Hezbollah in Latin America.” *The American Spectator*. 30 Nov. 2006.

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.”¹⁰⁵



From left: Teodoro Darnott; Hezbollah Venezuela member holding what appears to be an explosive device.

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.”¹⁰⁷ Before acknowledging his groups’ responsibility in the explosive plot, Darnott carried on his activities in the open, including registering his websites with free web services like MSN Groups under his own name and prominently displaying photos of himself on them. 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 under a homemade Hezbollah banner.

¹⁰⁵ Karmon, Ely. “Hezbollah America Latina: Strange Group or Real Threat?” Institute for Counter-Terrorism. 14 Nov. 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Darnott, Teodoro. “My Political and Spiritual Legacy.” 28 Dec. 2008. Web: <http://teodoro-darnott.blogspot.com>.

¹⁰⁷ 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.

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.¹⁰⁸ Public exposure of that nature would certainly serve as a propaganda victory for Chavez' opponents, including the United States. They would undermine Chavez' ability to deny support to terrorist groups, despite any ideological affinities he might share. The only surprise surrounding Chavez' pragmatic need to distance himself publicly from such radicalism after the attempted attack in Caracas is that he allowed the group to get to that point in the first place.

Though Hezbollah Venezuela itself does not represent a true threat to security and stability, it does represent the potential for ideological indoctrination of radical Islamic thought to subgroups of Latin American society. The ability of this group to spawn out of an indigenous community is indicative of the radical Islamic influence permeating La Guajira. As Hezbollah Venezuela's website indicates, the group was supportive of many aspects of Chavez' Bolivarian socialist project, notably its emphasis on social justice and giving voice to the poor and oppressed. Many of the ideological underpinnings that found fertile minds among Wayuu converts to Hezbollah Venezuela are nearly identical to those espoused by Hugo Chavez. The primary difference between the two is merely the nationalistic aspirations of one, and the specific religious connotation of the other. Beyond these differences, both share a strong anti-American, anti-neoliberal, anti-imperialist ideology of victimization. Hezbollah Venezuela demonstrates how the transition from one to the other is possible, and stands as a warning of the potential for similar indoctrination and conversion.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Implications for US and Regional Security

Iranian Political Instability

Recent events in Iran carry a potential impact on Hezbollah's global outreach. Iran's current international standoff with the West over its nuclear program presents an opportunity for the Iranian regime to strengthen its support for Hezbollah. As noted earlier, reporting indicates that before Hezbollah operative Imad Mughniyeh's death, he was given the task of preparing Hezbollah-led reprisals outside of Iran in the event of any attack against Iranian nuclear facilities. Such a strike would mobilize popular support for the regime. It would also serve as a pretext for the regime to severely stifle the nascent opposition movement indefinitely. This possibility presents a beneficial outcome to Hezbollah and other groups receiving Iranian assistance. Iranian support to these groups would increase in tandem with the damage wrought by any Western-led attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

On the contrary, any significant political turmoil in Iran that threatens to destabilize the regime, such as ongoing opposition protests throughout the country, represents a significant threat to Hezbollah's financial and logistical support base. The opposition movement, sparked by the disputed June 2009 presidential elections has yet to dissipate entirely. Opposition protesters have continued to use any public gathering or holiday as a pretext to voice disagreement with the government. It is much too early to tell what the outcome of the opposition movement will be. Should the movement gain traction and effect a change in the posture or structure of the government of Iran, these changes could include a moderation of the harsh anti-Western rhetoric that has long been a staple of the regime. This would certainly represent a strategic threat to Hezbollah.

These challenges to the Iranian regime should put Hezbollah on notice that its primary financial and ideological backer may not always be there. Hezbollah's close cooperation with criminal enterprises and drug cartels in Latin America demonstrate an attempt to diversify its financial support base and increase its global outreach.

The 1992 and 1994 bombings of Jewish targets in Argentina demonstrated the ability of Hezbollah to act far from its traditional theater of operations. Unknown is how far Hezbollah and Iran would go in retaliation for any strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Western conflict with Iran allows Hezbollah to strengthen and consolidate its base of support and expand its operational scope. Thus Hezbollah is keen to see Iran drawn into conflict so as to retain this financial and ideological support structure. On the contrary, Iranian political instability represents a continual threat to Hezbollah's security. Hezbollah has thus pragmatically sought global financial diversification, in a twist of capitalist irony likely lost on its anti-neoliberal leadership.

Implications for Policymakers

The US has been aware of the threat posed by Hezbollah since the 1983 suicide attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut killed 231 US 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."¹⁰⁹ 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

¹⁰⁹ Leung, Rebecca. "Hezbollah: 'A-Team of Terrorists.'" *CBS News, 60 Minutes*. 18 Apr. 2003.

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.¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹

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 US 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.¹¹² This report presented the overall assessment of the Hezbollah threat to the US as “moderate.” It also concluded in 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 to avoid association with the near-universal revulsion of al Qaeda methodology since September 11.

¹¹⁰ Ali Mohamed plea agreement: “Excerpts from Guilty Plea in Terrorism Case.” *The New York Times*. 1 Oct. 2000.

¹¹¹ *U.S.A. v. Usama bin Laden*, Testimony of Jamal al-Fadl, February 6-7, 2001.

¹¹² “Hezbollah’s Global Reach.” Presented to a Joint Hearing of the Committee on International Relations of the House of Representatives.” Sept. 2006.

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 US, 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.¹¹³ Venezuela exports roughly a million barrels per day to the US and is its fifth-largest supplier of oil.¹¹⁴ Likewise, the US is the primary consumer of Venezuelan crude, accounting for nearly 63% of Venezuelan exports.¹¹⁵ A loss of the US market would be catastrophic 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, Chavez' Achilles heel remains his dependence on the US 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 and others to praise Hezbollah as a successful model of resistance without explicitly advocating violence. This rationale, however, ignores a very

¹¹³ Romero, Simon. "Chavez Backs off Threats to Halt Oil Exports to U.S." *New York Times*. 18 Feb. 2008. Accessed online 2-12-2010.

¹¹⁴ "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.

¹¹⁵ U.S. Dept. of Energy, Energy Information Administration. Accessed online 3-28-2010.

fundamental premise to Hezbollah's organizational structure and should be re-evaluated by many of the states that currently do not list Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

As the organizational chart shows, Hezbollah is organized in 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.”¹¹⁷

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

¹¹⁶ Picture of Sheik Naim Qassem from www.islamidavet.com/english. Accessed online 4-12-2010.

¹¹⁷ “Hezbollah.” The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center. Special Information Bulletin, June 2003. Accessed online 3-15-2010.

Hezbollah's armed activities and its aboveboard political and social operations. It is a mistake for governments and policymakers to 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 the deceit. It is the latter who represent the core of support and who manage the infrastructure necessary for these 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. By all reporting, the US has been aware of Hezbollah's presence in Latin America for some time. The US Treasury Department has already taken direct action against Hezbollah interests in the region. It has conducted operations against small- and large-scale money laundering and drug smuggling organizations who funneled portions of their profits Hezbollah.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ "Treasury Targets Hizballah in Venezuela." United States Department of the Treasury. 18 Jun. 2008. Accessed online 11-13-2009

Testimony given by Israeli Dr. Col. Eitan Azani 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.”¹¹⁹

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. 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.¹²⁰ The establishment of direct Venezuela – Iran flights, allegations of the issuance of false travel documents, and the myriad connections between members of Hezbollah, the Iranian establishment, and at the very least benign neglect on the part of Venezuelan government officials make clear that such a “rapid breakout” capacity is easily possible.

¹¹⁹ “Hezbollah's Global Reach.” Presented to a Joint Hearing of the Committee on International Relations of the House of Representatives.” Sept. 2006.

¹²⁰ Logan, Samuel. “Iran's Latin America Inroads.” 29 Apr. 2009. ISN Security Watch, International Relations and Security Network.

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 as seen of late could well turn out to be little more than a 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 US. 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 US is Venezuela's primary consumer of oil, it is reasonable to conclude that despite his harsh rhetoric, Chavez does not seek conflict with the US.

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 actual 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 US, 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 possible response options Chavez would have 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 US as well as a blow to Chavez' credibility. The second option would be to maintain the status quo. This presents no good

alternatives 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 the path he has chosen.

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. The potential for groups like Hezbollah to utilize 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 heightens this danger.

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 labeling of US-backed Colombia the "Israel of Latin America," should be seen 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. Should Hezbollah or Iran seek to exploit their ability to function in Venezuela by pursuing specific operational goals, the probability of future confrontation with the U.S. will most certainly increase, inviting the only scenario in which Chavez is nearly guaranteed to lose.

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