



THE MIDDLE EASTERN-LATIN AMERICAN TERRORIST CONNECTION

By Vanessa Neumann

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In a global triangulation that would excite any conspiracy buff, the globalization of terrorism now links Colombian FARC with Hezbollah, Iran with Russia, elected governments with violent insurgencies, uranium with AK-103s, and cocaine with oil. At the center of it all, is Latin America—especially the countries under the influence of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

The most publicized (and publicly contested) connection between Hugo Chávez and the Colombian narcoterrorist organization Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was revealed after the March 2008 Colombian raid on the FARC camp in Devía, inside Ecuador, where a laptop was discovered that apparently belonged to Luis Edgar Devía Silva (aka, “Raúl Reyes”), head of FARC’s International Committee (COMINTER). The Colombian government under then-President Álvaro Uribe announced that Interpol had certified the authenticity of the contents of the computer disks, whose files traced over US\$ 200 million funneled to the FARC through the Venezuelan state-owned, and completely Chávez-dominated, Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA). On May 10th, 2011, the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) will publish one of its strategic dossiers based on a study of the computer disks entitled *The FARC Files: Venezuela, Ecuador and the Secret Archives of ‘Raúl Reyes’* that purports to elucidate the organization’s development and internationalization.

According to some already leaked documents, Venezuelan General Hugo Carvajal and other members of the armed forces were in direct contact with and lending financial support to the late FARC leader Antonio Marín, aka “Tirofijo” (“Sure Shot”) and “Manuel Marulanda.” Of the fact that the FARC enjoys at least ideological support from the governments of Ecuador and Venezuela, there can be no doubt: Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa have both argued that the FARC should not be considered a terrorist organization.

While support of the insurgents next door is certainly nothing new, Venezuelan military and terror alliances are spanning the globe and expanding at a worrying rate for all, especially US interests in the region.

As I wrote in *The Weekly Standard* last October¹, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev jointly announced that they had reached an agreement for Russia to build two 1200-megawatt nuclear reactors in Venezuela. Also part of the deal was the latest installment of \$6.6 billion of conventional weapons purchases since 2005: ninety-two T-72 and T-90 tanks that will replace the aging French MX-30s, ten Ilyushin Il-76MD-90 planes, two Il-78MK refueling aircraft, as well as five S-300 missile systems. Iran had also sought the S-300 but Medvedev banned the sale for fear of violating U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929, concerning sanctions on Iran. The S-300 missiles and their attendant Smerch multiple rocket launchers are considered far more powerful than the Tor M-1 missile systems that both Venezuela and Iran have previously purchased in the past five years. Caracas has also confirmed plans to purchase up to 10 Mi-28NE attack helicopters on top of the 10 Mi-35M helicopters purchased in the past half-decade. That is an awful lot of weaponry for a country that has not fought a war since its independence from Spain in 1821.

While Chávez has said that he is arming his citizen militias, known as Bolivarian Circles, rumor has it that the weapons may also be going to agents and fighters from the Colombian FARC, the Iranian-backed terrorist group Hezbollah and Cuban security and intelligence services, whose numbers, according to many think tanks and U.S. security sources, have swelled in Venezuela. Interpol has confirmed evidence that Venezuela has funneled well over \$300 million to the FARC and has built an ammunition plant to supply AK-103s, the FARC weapon of choice.

¹ http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/hugo-ch-vezs-military-buildup-and-iranian-ties_511234.html

That is only one piece of the puzzle; the other is Iran, where Venezuelan money has also been flowing.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad publicly call each other “brothers” and last year signed 11 memoranda of understanding for, among other initiatives, joint oil and gas exploration, as well as the construction of tanker ships and petrochemical plants. Chávez’s assistance to the Islamic Republic in circumventing U.N. sanctions has got the attention of the new Republican leadership of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Connie Mack (both R-FL) have said they intend to launch a money-laundering investigation into the Venezuelan state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)*. In July 2010, the EU ordered the seizure of all the assets of the Venezuelan International Development Bank, an affiliate of the Export Development Bank of Iran (EDBI), one of 34 Iranian entities implicated in the development of nuclear or ballistic technology and sanctioned by the Treasury Department. In the meantime, Tehran and Caracas have announced that PDVSA will be investing \$780 million in the South Pars gas field in southern Iran.

Uranium, sought by both Iran and Russia, is a key aspect of the two countries’ strategic relationship: Iran is reportedly helping Venezuela find and refine its estimated 50,000 tons of uranium reserves.

So, on one side Venezuela is funding and arming the FARC; on the other it is purchasing nuclear reactors and weapons from the Russians; on yet another, it is sending money to Iran and helping it find and enrich uranium. And then there is Hezbollah, Iran’s Lebanon-based asset.

Reports that Venezuela has provided Hezbollah operatives with Venezuelan national identity cards are so rife, they were raised in the July 27, 2010, Senate hearing for the recently nominated U.S. ambassador to Venezuela, Larry Palmer. When Palmer answered that he believed the reports, Chávez refused to accept him as ambassador in Venezuela. Meanwhile, Iran Air, the self-proclaimed “airline of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” operates a Tehran-Caracas flight commonly referred to as “Aeroteror” by intelligence officials for allegedly facilitating the access of terrorist suspects to South America. The Venezuelan government shields passenger lists from Interpol on that flight.

Iran, meanwhile, has developed significant relationships elsewhere in Latin America – most prominently with Chávez’s allies and fellow Bolivarian Revolutionaries: Bolivian President Evo Morales, Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

In December 2008 the EDBI offered to deposit \$120 million in the Ecuadorean Central Bank to fund bilateral trade, and Iran and Ecuador have signed a \$30 million deal to conduct joint mining projects in Ecuador through the Chemical-Geotechnical-Metallurgical Research Center in Ecuador. Even as that deal carefully avoids mentioning uranium, the IAEA’s March 2009 plans to help Ecuador explore its vast uranium reserves were largely intended to highlight and preclude Iranian involvement. In February 2010 the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force, a multilateral organization that combats money laundering and terrorist financing, placed Ecuador on a list of countries that failed to comply with its regulations.

Middle Eastern terrorism, however, is not new to Latin America and has been on the US Army’s radar for many years.²

Latin America’s Tri-Border Area (TBA), bounded by Puerto Iguazu, Argentina; Ciudad del Este, Paraguay; and Foz do Iguacu, Brazil, has long been an ideal breeding ground for terrorist groups. The TBA, South America’s busiest contraband and smuggling center, is home to a large, active Arab and Muslim community consisting of a Shi’a majority, a Sunni minority, and a small population of Christians who emigrated from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and the Palestinian territories about 50 years ago. Most of these Arab immigrants are involved in commerce in Ciudad del Este but live in Foz do Iguacu on the Brazilian side of the Iguacu River.

In 2005, six million Muslims were estimated to inhabit Latin American cities. However, ungoverned areas, primarily in the Amazon regions of Suriname, Guyana, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil, present easily exploitable terrain over which to move people and material. The Free Trade Zones of Iquique, Chile; Maicao, Colombia; and Colón, Panama, can generate undetected financial and logistical support for terrorist groups. Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru offer cocaine as a lucrative source of income. In addition, Cuba and Venezuela have cooperative agreements with Syria, Libya, and Iran.

Argentine officials believe Hezbollah is still active in the TBA. They attribute the detonation of a car bomb outside Israel’s embassy in Buenos Aires on 17 March 1992 to Hezbollah extremists. Officials also maintain that with Iran’s assistance, Hezbollah carried out a car-bomb attack on the main building of the Jewish Community Center (AMIA) in Buenos Aires on 18 July 1994 in protest of the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement that year.

Today, one of the masterminds of those attacks, the Iranian citizen and Shia Muslim teacher, Mohsen Rabbani, remains not

² http://www.army.mil/professionalWriting/volumes/volume3/january_2005/1_05_4.html

only at large, but extremely active in recruiting young Brazilians, according to reports in Brazilian magazine *Veja*.³ “Now based in Iran, he continues to play a significant role in the spread of extremism in Latin America,” prosecutor Alberto Nisman, head of the special unit of the Argentine prosecutors charged with investigating the attacks, said to *VEJA*. The enticement of Brazilians for courses abroad has been monitored for four years by the Federal Police and the ABIN, the government’s secret service.

One hundred eighty kilometers away from Recife, in rural Pernambuco, the city of Belo Jardim remains the most active center for the recruitment of extremists in Latin America.⁴ Along with the recruits in Belo Jardim, youth from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Mexico also travel to Iran for religious instruction under Rabbani.

The Federal Police has information that Rabbani has been to Brazil several times in recent years. In one of those visits, almost three years ago, he boarded the Iran Air flight from Tehran to Caracas, Venezuela and then from there, entered Brazil illegally.

So while ungovernability through either government weakness (or lack of will) to exert controls over immigration and the flows of money, drugs and weapons has always been an issue, it is the new government complicity that makes it all the more dangerous.

Even ahead of the IISS dossier’s publication, the most shocking revelations into the global interconnectedness of Latin American governments and Middle Eastern terrorist groups have come from Walid Makled, Venezuela’s latter-day Pablo Escobar, who was arrested on August 19, 2010 in Cúcuta, a town on the Venezuelan-Colombian border. A Venezuelan of Syrian descent known variously as “El Turco” (“The Turk”) or “El Arabe” (“The Arab”), he is allegedly responsible for smuggling 10 tons of cocaine a month into the US and Europe – a full 10% of the world’s supply and 60% of Europe’s supply. His massive infrastructure and distribution network make this entirely plausible, as well as entirely implausible the Venezuelan government did not know. Makled owned Venezuela’s biggest airline, Aeropostal, huge warehouses in Venezuela’s biggest port, Puerto Cabello, and bought enormous quantities of urea (used in cocaine processing) from a government-owned chemical company.

Indeed since his arrest and incarceration in the Colombian prison La Picota, Makled has given numerous interviews to various media outlets, in which he has claimed that he paid more than a million dollars a month to various high-ranking Venezuelan government officials who were his partners in trafficking FARC cocaine – amongst the named: Venezuelan Minister of the Interior and also Minister of Justice, Tarek El Aissami, the General-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Unified Command, General Henry Rangel Silva, and the Director of Military Intelligence, General Hugo Carvajal.

Although the US had issued an arrest warrant and subjected him to sanctions under the Kingpin Act, Makled is being extradited to Venezuela, not the US. While the US dithered on Colombia’s offer of extradition to the US, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez requested Makled’s extradition to Venezuela, where he is (in the ultimate ironic twist) wanted for cocaine trafficking and at least two murders.

When asked on camera by a Univisión television reporter whether he had any relation to the FARC, he answered: “That is what I would say to the American prosecutor.” Asked directly whether he knew of Hezbollah operations in Venezuela, he answered: “In Venezuela? Of course! That which I understand is that they work in Venezuela. [Hezbollah] make money and all of that money they send to the Middle East.”⁵

Makled’s extradition to Venezuela rather than the US is thus a terrible loss for both the United States’s Global War on Terror (GWOT) and the world’s intelligence communities: in Venezuela’s heavily politicized judicial system Makled will never receive a fair trial and any testimony he might give will certainly be concealed.

The problem now is that Latin American support for terrorism has growing state support—and this should worry everyone.

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³ <http://veja.abril.com.br/blog/reinaldo/geral/brasil-vigia-suspeitos-de-elo-com-extremistas-no-ira/>
<http://veja.abril.com.br/blog/reinaldo/geral/quantos-sao-os-aneis-que-separam-o-pt-dos-terroristas-islamicos-que-atuam-no-brasil/>
<http://veja.abril.com.br/blog/reinaldo/geral/acordem-senhores-congressistas-ja-o-governo-nao-da-bola-terrorista-alicia-homens-pobres-do-interior-do-brasil-para-fazer-%E2%80%9Ccurso-de-religiao%E2%80%9D-no-ira/>

⁴ <http://interamericansecuritywatch.com/2011/04/20/the-terrorist-%E2%80%9Cprofessor%E2%80%9D/>

⁵ <http://colombiareports.com/colombia-news/news/15355-venezuela-houses-farc-and-hezbollah-drug-lord.html>