



**THE NEW NEXUS OF NARCOTERRORISM:
HEZBOLLAH AND VENEZUELA**

By Vanessa Neumann

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Press stories, as well as a television documentary, over the past two months have detailed the growing cooperation between South American drug traffickers and Middle Eastern terrorists, proving that the United States continues to ignore the mounting terrorist threat in its own “backyard” of Latin America at its own peril. A greater portion of financing for Middle Eastern terrorist groups, including Hezbollah and Al Qaeda, is coming from Latin America, while they are also setting up training camps and recruiting centers throughout our continent, endangering American lives and interests globally. Some Latin American countries that were traditional allies for the U.S. (including Venezuela) have now forged significant political and economic alliances with regimes whose interests are at odds with those of the U.S., particularly China, Russia and Iran. In fact Iran and Iran’s Lebanese asset, “the Party of God,” Hezbollah, have now become the main terror sponsors in the region and are increasingly funded by South American cocaine.

Venezuela and Iran are strong allies: 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, resulting in the May 23rd, 2011 announcement by the US State Department that it was imposing sanctions on the Venezuelan government-owned oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)* as a punishment for circumventing UN sanctions against Iran and assisting in the development of the Iran’s nuclear program.

Besides its sponsored terrorist groups, Iran also has a growing direct influence in Latin America, spurred by three principal motivations: 1) a quest for uranium, 2) a quest for gasoline, 3) a quest for a base of operations that is close to the US territory, in order to position itself to resist diplomatic and possible military pressure, possibly by setting up a missile base within striking distance of the mainland US, as the Soviets did in the Cuban Missile Crisis. FARC, Hezbollah and Al Qaeda all have training camps, recruiting bases and networks of mutual assistance in Venezuela as well as throughout the continent.

I have long argued that Latin America is an increasing source of funding for Middle Eastern terrorism and to overlook the political changes and security threats in the region with such geographic proximity to the US and its greatest source of immigrants is a huge strategic mistake. It was inevitable that South American cocaine traffickers and narcoterrorists would become of increasing importance to Hezbollah and other groups. While intelligence officials believe that Hezbollah used to receive as much as \$200 million annually from its primary patron, Iran, and additional money from Syria, both these sources have largely dried up due to the onerous sanctions imposed on the former and the turmoil in the latter.

A recent *New York Times* front-page article (December 14, 2011) revealed the extensive and intricate connections between Hezbollah and South American cocaine trafficking. Far from being the passive beneficiaries of drug-trafficking expats and sympathizers, Hezbollah has high-level officials directly involved in the South American cocaine trade and its most violent cartels, including the Mexican gang *Los Zetas*. The “Party of God’s” increasing foothold in the cocaine trade is facilitated by an enormous Lebanese diaspora. As I wrote in my May 2011 e-note, 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.

Some 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 percent of the world's supply and 60 percent 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.

After his arrest and incarceration in the Colombian prison La Picota, Makled gave numerous interviews to various media outlets. 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." A prime example of the importance of the Lebanese diaspora in triangulating amongst South American cocaine and Middle Eastern terrorists, is Ayman Joumaa, a Sunni Muslim of the Medellín cartel with deep ties with Shiites in the Hezbollah strongholds of southern Lebanon. His indictment made public on Tuesday "charges him with coordinating shipments of Colombian cocaine to Los Zetas in Mexico for sale in the United States, and laundering the proceeds" (NY Times, Dec. 14, 2011).

The growing routes linking South American cocaine to Middle Eastern terrorists are primarily from Colombia through Venezuela. According to an April 2011 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is the most prominent country of origin for direct cocaine shipments to Europe, with the cocaine coming mainly from Colombia, primarily the FARC and ELN terrorist groups. Shipments to Africa, mostly West Africa, gained in importance between 2004 and 2007, resulting in the emergence of a new key trans-shipment hub: centered on Guinea-Bissau and Guinea, stretching to Cape Verde, The Gambia and Senegal, thus complementing the already existing trafficking hub of the Bight of Benin, which spans from Ghana to Nigeria. As the cocaine is transported through Africa and into Europe, its safe passage is guaranteed (much as it was in Latin America) by terrorist groups—most prominently, Al Qaeda and Hezbollah. The cocaine can also travel from Latin America's Tri-Border Area (TBA)—bounded by Puerto Iguazu, Argentina; Ciudad del Este, Paraguay; and Foz do Iguazu, Brazil—to West Africa (particularly Benin, Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, with its poor governance and vast archipelagos) and then north into Europe through Portugal and Spain or east via Syria and Lebanon.

Hezbollah's traditional continental home has been the TBA, where 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. The TBA, South America's busiest contraband and smuggling center, has long been an ideal breeding ground for terrorist groups, including Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Al Qaeda—the latter since 1995 when Osama bin Laden and Khalid Sheikh Mohammad first visited.

Hezbollah is still active in the TBA, according to Argentine officials. They 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 July 18, 1994, protesting 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 only at large, but extremely active in recruiting young Brazilians, according to reports in Brazilian magazine *Veja*. This region, the third in the world for cash transactions (behind Hong Kong and Miami), continues to be an epicenter for the conversion and recruitment of a new generation of terrorists who then train in the Middle East and pursue their activities both there and in the Americas.

According to Lebanon's drug enforcement chief, Col. Adel Mashmoushi, as cited in *The New York Times*, a main transportation route for terrorists, cash and drugs was aboard a flight commonly referred to as "Aeroterror," about which I wrote in my May 2011 e-note for FPRI. According to my own secret sources within the Venezuelan government, the flight had the route Tehran-Damascus-Caracas-Madrid, where it would wait for 15 days, and flew under the direct orders of the Venezuelan Vice-President, according to the captain. The flight would leave Caracas seemingly empty (though now it appears it carried a cargo of cocaine) and returned full of Iranians, who boarded the flight in Damascus, where they arrived by bus from Tehran. The Iranian ambassador in Caracas would then distribute the new arrivals all over Venezuela.

I wrote in my May 2011 e-note that 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. Thousands of foreign terrorists have in fact been given national identity cards that identify them as Venezuelan citizens and give them full access to the benefits of citizenship. In 2003, Gen. Marcos Ferreira, who had been in charge of Venezuela's Department of Immigration and Foreigners (DIEX) until he decided to support the 2002 coup against Chávez,

said that he had been personally asked by Ramón Rodríguez Chacín (who served as both deputy head of DISIP—Venezuela’s intelligence service, now renamed SEBIN—and Interior Minister under Chávez) to allow the illegal entry of Colombians into Venezuela thirty-five times and that the DISIP itself regularly fast-tracked insurgents including Hezbollah and Al Qaeda. The newly-minted Venezuelan citizens during Ferreira’s tenure include 2,520 Colombians and 279 “Syrians.” And that was only during three of the past twelve years of an increasingly radicalized Chávez regime.

While Chávez has done more than anyone to strengthen these relationships with Middle Eastern terrorists, in an attempt to use what he calls “the International Rebellion” (including Hezbollah, Hamas and ETA) in order to negotiate with the US for power in Latin America, the coziness of the seemingly strange bedfellows dates back to the fall of the Soviet Union, when the USSR abandoned Cuba. At the Sao Paulo Forum of 1990, prominent Venezuelans and international terrorists were all in attendance, including: then-Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez (against whom Chávez attempted a coup in 1992); Alí Rodríguez, then-President of PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela, the government-owned oil company); Pablo Medina, a left-wing Venezuelan politician who initially supported Chávez, but has now moved to the opposition; as well as Fidel Castro, Moammar Qaddafi and leaders of the FARC, Tupamaros and Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path). The extent to which these alliances have deepened and become institutionalized is exemplified by the Continental Bolivarian Coordinator, the office that coordinates all the Latin American terrorists. According to a well-placed Venezuelan military source of mine, they are headquartered in the Venezuelan state of Barinas—the same state that is effectively a Chávez family fiefdom, with their sprawling family estate, La Chavera, and their total control of local politics. Their extreme anti-Semitism is not ideological, but simply out of convenience: to court and maintain Iranian support.

According to the Congressional Research Service, with enactment of the sixth FY2011 Continuing Resolution through March 18, 2011, (H.J.Res. 48/P.L. 112-6) Congress has approved a total of \$1.283 trillion for military operations, base security, reconstruction, foreign aid, embassy costs, and veterans’ health care for the three operations initiated since the 9/11 attacks: Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Afghanistan and other counter terror operations; Operation Noble Eagle (ONE), providing enhanced security at military bases; and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

Yet for all this massive spending on fighting terrorists and insurgents in the Middle East, we are leaving ourselves vulnerable to them here, on a number of fronts. First and foremost, the United States is under territorial threat through its Mexican border. Hezbollah operatives have already been smuggled, along with drugs and weapons, in tunnels dug under the border with the US by Mexican drug cartels. Only a week after my October 5th interview by KT McFarland on Fox, where I specifically warned of a possibility of this resulting in a terrorist attack carried out inside the US with the complicity of South American drug traffickers, the global press revealed a plot by the elite Iranian Quds Force to utilize the Mexican gang Los Zetas to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to Washington in a bombing that would have murdered many Americans on their lunch hour.

Second, American assets in Latin America are under threat. Embassies, consulates, corporate headquarters, energy pipelines and American- or Jewish-sponsored community centers and American citizens have already been targeted by terrorist groups all over Latin America for decades: FARC in Colombia, Sendero Luminoso and Tupac Amaru in Peru and Hezbollah in Argentina. Al Qaeda is also rumored to have a strong presence in Brazil.

Third, while American soldiers give their lives trying to defeat terrorists and violent insurgents in the Middle East, these same groups are being supported and strengthened increasingly by Latin America, where they receive training, weapons and cash. This makes American military engagement far more costly by any metric: loss of life and financial cost.

Indeed over the last decade, Latin America is a region spiraling ever more out of American control. It is a region with which the United States has a growing asymmetry of power: it has more importance to the United States, while the United States is losing influence over Latin America, which remains the largest source of oil, drugs and immigrants, both documented and not. Latinos now account for 15 percent of the US population and nearly 50 percent of recent US population growth, as well as a growing portion of the electorate, as seen in the last presidential elections. The discovery of huge new oil reserves in Brazil and Argentina, that might even challenge Saudi Arabia, and the 2012 presidential elections in Venezuela, make Latin America of increasing strategic importance to the U.S., particularly as the future political landscape of the Middle East becomes ever more uncertain, in the wake of the Arab Spring and the political rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in previously secular Arab governments. The growth of transnational gangs and the resurgence of previously waning terrorist organizations pose complicated new challenges, as violence and murder cross the U.S. border, costing American lives and taking a huge toll on U.S. law enforcement. The United States needs to develop a smart policy to deal with these challenges.

So while the US is expending vast resources on the GWOT, the terrorists are being armed and reinforced by America’s southern neighbors, making the GWOT far more costly for the US and directly threatening American security. Even though Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez may be removed from the presidency either through an electoral loss in the October 7, 2012 presidential elections or through his battle with cancer, certain sectors of the Venezuelan government will continue to

support international terrorism, whose activities, bases and training camps have now spread throughout this region. By understanding the dynamics of the increasingly entrenched narcoterrorist network, the U.S. can develop an effective policy to contend with these, whether or not President Chávez remains in power.

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