

How friendship with Venezuela benefits Iran's isolated regime

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RIYADH: One seldom discussed byproduct of Iran's Islamic Revolution, which ended with the fall of the Shah and the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979, is the diplomatic, economic and strategic collusion between Tehran and several Latin American regimes – right in Washington's own backyard.

Tehran has worked hard to consolidate these friendships since the revolution, in particular its entente with fellow oil producer Venezuela during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad between 2005 and 2013.

The Iranian regime has simultaneously intensified its efforts to disrupt the international power dynamic in the Middle East and wider region in its favor through an array of secretive military interventions and its illicit nuclear program.

To curb these aspirations and malign activity across the region, the US has reimposed a raft of sanctions on Iran's economy, leaving the regime isolated and financially crippled.



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro (L) shaking hands with Iran's President Hassan Rouhani (R) before a bilateral meeting at The Convention Centre in Baku on October 25, 2019. (AFP/Miraflores Palace Presidential Office/Jhonn Zerpa/File Photo)

From this position of weakness, Tehran has looked to its friends in Caracas – another international pariah – in search of dependable allies.

Tehran's relationship with Latin America dates back to 1960, when Venezuela was among the founding members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). From here, Iran's diplomatic ties quickly branched out to include Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Cuba.

But it was not until 2005, early in Ahmadinejad's presidency, that the company Tehran was keeping in Latin America came under scrutiny. Several of these budding friendships appeared to be based on a mutual dislike for the US and its policies.

After the First World War, waves of refugees began to arrive in Venezuela from the Middle East. The trend gained more traction after the Second World War and reached a peak after the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975.

Iran and its Lebanese proxy militia Hezbollah exploited this trend, using religious and intellectual infiltration to convert Christians and Sunni Muslims to Shiite Islam and Khomeinist teachings on the Wilayat Al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist).



Iranian revolutionary guards secure the area during the inauguration ceremony of a joint petrochemical plant in the Asaluyeh industrial zone – where Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his Venezuelan counterpart Hugo Chavez sealed their anti-American alliance in 2007. (AFP/File Photo)

Keen to expand its ideological presence and confront what it viewed as Western hegemony, Iran launched a Spanish-language satellite news channel in 2011 called HispanTV, broadcasting a variety of cultural, political and religious programs targeting people across the continent.

Iran has established more than 36 Shiite cultural centers in 17 countries around the world, many of which are allegedly being used as spy rings to gather intelligence. In Latin America they act as a hub for recruiting expatriates and building popular support for Iranian policies.

After OPEC was established, political and economic relations between Iran and Venezuela were initially based on their shared oil production and price-related challenges. This relationship later flourished and expanded to include several Latin American countries through common membership of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Founded in 1961, the forum of 120 states, who do not consider themselves formally aligned with any major power bloc, claims to remain neutral and independent in world affairs.

Challenging the will of the international community, Venezuela has long hinted it will defy sanctions and supply Iran with petroleum products in an attempt to weaken US efforts to exploit Tehran's dependence on foreign refined oil.

HISPAN TV IRANIAN SOFT POWER



WHY VENEZUELA IS VITAL FOR IRAN?

- 1** Amplifies and serves as a platform for anti-American and anti-Western views of world events.
- 2** Enhances Iranian influence in Latin America.
- 3** Channels Iran's foreign policy propaganda through soft power across the continent.
- 4** Targets Muslim communities in the Latin region and exporting the Islamic Iranian revolution ideology.
- 5** Secures sympathy for its perceived victimhood and champions its self-declared 'struggle' against Western imperialist powers.

ARAB NEWS

Nicolas Maduro, Venezuela's socialist president, has maintained this stance since taking the helm following the death of Hugo Chavez in 2013.

Itself under a strict US embargo, Venezuela is grappling with its own economic crisis, causing unprecedented inflation and shortages of food, fuel and medicine. Despite possessing the world's largest proven oil reserve, the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) has nosedived and its currency has collapsed.

In December, Iran reportedly sent tankers loaded with gasoline and petroleum components to Venezuela in defiance of international sanctions. After the US

imposed its latest round of sanctions on Venezuela in 2019, Iran also supplied Caracas with tools, supplies and technical expertise to support Petroleos de Venezuela, SA – the state-run oil and gas company.

Through its warm relations with Latin American governments, Iran hopes to project the image of a global power, overcome its political and economic isolation, garner diplomatic support for its nuclear program and respond to the US from close proximity.

HISPAN TV IRANIAN SOFT POWER

WHAT IS THE IRAN-FUNDED HISPAN TV?

Launched December 2011

Owner State-owned Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting

What it does HispanTV's programming has been distributed in Venezuela, Spain, Argentina, Cuba and other countries worldwide and is intended to reinforce ties between Iran and Latin American states as well as to counter what the Iranian government sees as unfair coverage in the Western media.

ARAB NEWS



Venezuela's former president Chavez strengthened his country's ties with Iran during his time in office. In 2003, he appointed Syrian-Venezuelan Tareck El-Aissami to lead the Administrative Service of Identification, Migration and Foreigners (formerly known as ONIDEX), who is alleged to have used his powers to assist Hezbollah.

During a year-long joint investigation, CNN and CNN en Espanol exposed major anomalies in the issuance of Venezuelan passports and visas, including allegations that documents were issued to individuals with extremist ties.

According to intelligence reports, El-Aissami was involved in the issuing of 173 Venezuelan passports and IDs to individuals from the Middle East, including people affiliated with Hezbollah.

Venezuelan opposition groups also accuse El-Aissami of drug smuggling. He is listed by the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control as one of the 10 most-wanted drug traffickers.

Since April last year, he has been working in Venezuela's Ministry of Petroleum.



Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (L) and his Venezuelan counterpart Hugo Chavez review the honor guard during a welcoming ceremony in Tehran 20 May 2001. (AFP/File Photo)

In June 2008, the US Treasury named naturalized Venezuelans Ghazi Nasreddin and Faouzi Kanaan as supporters of terrorism. Nasreddin worked as charge d'affaires at the Venezuelan embassy in Syria and also held a position at the nation's embassy in Lebanon.

According to the Treasury, Kanaan owned a travel agency, organized trips and raised money in Venezuela for Hezbollah members. It also says Kanaan met senior Hezbollah officials to discuss kidnappings and potential terrorist attacks.

According to a US State Department report on terrorism in 2019, Venezuela operates a lenient framework for armed groups, including FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) rebels, the Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN), and members of Hezbollah.

The report says financial ties with FARC and ELN rebels have helped enable repression and graft schemes carried out by the Maduro administration.

Hezbollah has established close ties with drug-smuggling rings and has developed a sophisticated money-laundering scheme. An article published by Politico in 2017 revealed Hezbollah has made \$1 billion annually from drug- and weapon-smuggling, money-laundering and other criminal activities.



A handout picture released by the official website of the Centre for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, shows him (R) meeting with Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in the capital Tehran on January 10, 2015. (AFP/Khamenei.ir/File Photo)

Iranian involvement in drug smuggling in Venezuela is well documented. Detailed reports from the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reveal an extensive cocaine trade route from eastern Venezuela to western Africa and on to Europe.

It is suspected that the pipeline's supply comes from Iranian facilities located in Venezuela's Orinoco River delta, where vessels are loaded with cocaine. Some shipments end up in West Africa, Europe and the Middle East. The proceeds are laundered by various means, including the purchase of used American-made cars for export to Africa.

Launderers allegedly used their relationship with governments, particularly those in the Bolivarian countries (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela), to move their dirty money through Latin American banks, making it available to Western markets.

Iran has gained considerable influence in Latin America and has consolidated its network of allies. The regime in Tehran is actively expanding this list of friends in the hope of counterbalancing the international community's stance against its nuclear weapons program and to mobilize support for its policies.

In addition to its nuclear ambitions, Tehran's politico-economic relationship

with Venezuela and other Latin American nations is primarily a means of diversifying its means of survival and overcoming international sanctions. There is little doubt, however, that much of this illicit arrangement is handled and overseen by Hezbollah.

Twitter: [@drhamsher7](https://twitter.com/drhamsher7)





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[Lebanon PM threatens mass arrests over deadly clashes](#)

Sat, 2021-01-30 22:35

BEIRUT: Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister, Hassan Diab, broke his silence on Saturday to condemn days of violent protest in Tripoli, the country's most impoverished city, as "an assault on the state and its integrity."

"Everyone who participated in the riots will be arrested," Diab said.

His comments followed deadly clashes during the week when protests at Lebanon's extended coronavirus lockdown and worsening economic crisis turned violent.

Frustrations boiled over after 30-year-old Omar Taibi was shot by security forces during protests. The ensuing clashes left more than 220 people injured.

Protesters set fire to several buildings in Tripoli on Thursday as outrage grew.

Violence escalated quickly as molotov cocktails, hand grenades and stones were launched at the security forces, who responded with tear gas, rubber bullets and then live ammunition.

However, that did not deter others from expressing their outrage with the caretaker government as protests spread to other parts of the country.

On Saturday, groups of female protesters blocked the highway linking Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city, with Akkar. The women complained that they were no longer able to secure basic needs for their families.

SPEEDREAD

The political dispute between Saad Hariri and the Free Patriotic Movement, led by Gebran Bassil, worsened on Saturday as both men swapped accusations.

Another group of protesters marched to the Beirut home of Mohamed Fahmi, Lebanon's interior minister, to voice their anger at the security forces' handling of the Tripoli protests.

A shooting in Beirut's Hamra commercial district late on Saturday sparked fears of worsening violence in the capital.

However, security forces described the attack as "an isolated incident."

A security source told Arab News: "The problem started between a delivery driver and one of the residents. Young men from the Syrian Social Nationalist Party interfered and defended the Syrian delivery driver, then started shooting into the air."

After nearby residents appeared on the street, troops arrived and cordoned off the site, the source said.

Meanwhile, former prime minister Fouad Siniora, the leader of the Future Movement's parliamentary group, warned that the violence in Tripoli has deepened Lebanon's political divisions, making the formation of a rescue government even more difficult.

"The most dangerous thing about the current situation is the inability of the political forces to take initiative in determining a national rescue destination," he said.

"Every sectarian party is waging two battles: A fierce internal battle to impose itself as its sole representative, and a grinding battle against other sects to identify the sect's quota in the government."

The political dispute between Saad Al-Hariri, Lebanon's prime minister-designate, and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), led by Gebran Bassil, worsened on Saturday as both men swapped accusations.

Bassil urged Al-Hariri to "head immediately to the Baabda Palace and form a government in agreement and full partnership with the president – a government that enjoys broad political and national support."

The FPM described the demand for partnership in the government formation as "a right."

However, the Future Movement responded later, accusing the FPM of "reducing the rights of Christians to the rights of a few men."





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Author:

Zaynab Khojji

ID:

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Sat, 2021-01-30 20:13

CAIRO: The head of the Egyptian Suez Canal Authority, Osama Rabie, has said that new incentives, projects and services are being provided to ensure the canal remains superior to its alternatives.

"So far, no project has appeared to compete with the Suez Canal," Rabie said. "In the far future, the Ashkelon road and railway project will appear; it will take five years to construct," he said.

Israel is working to establish the Ashkelon project, which is 254 km long, from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and which will provide a parallel

route to the Egyptian Suez Canal through a network of pipelines that will transport oil and gas not only to the region but to many areas in Europe and Asia.

“Egypt is considering alternatives to this project, which will affect the oil ships passing through the Suez Canal by about 16 percent.”

He stressed that any project in maritime transport parallel to the Suez Canal would affect it.

“Egypt has entered into a partnership with China in maritime transport on the Silk Road, which consists of three land, air and sea lines. The ships passing on the Silk Road will pass through the Suez Canal.”

Rabie said that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi was in constant touch with him to keep up-to-date about developments regarding the Suez Canal due to its importance.

Speaking about the Egyptian fishing fleet, Rabie said that Egypt had not previously owned a fishing fleet. However, President El-Sisi had ordered the procurement of 100 fishing boats to be used in the employment of young people and to support the fishing fleet.

He said that the fishing boats carried equipment including a water desalination plant, an ice-production machine and an ultrasonic device to locate fish.

The cost of a ship was about 18 million Egyptian pounds (\$1.15 million) and the fleet would cost 1.8 billion Egyptian pounds, Rabie said. The first phase of the project had ended and 34 ships had been built, while work was underway for the second phase, he said.

The Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO) has praised the Suez Canal Authority as its revenue has increased by 8 percent, despite the pandemic causing the global trade to decrease by 16 percent.

The organization attributed the increase in the Suez revenue to the canal's incentive measures and management.



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Egypt has 'passed peak' of second coronavirus wave
New archeological finds made in Egypt

[New archeological finds made in Egypt](#)

Sat, 2021-01-30 19:52

CAIRO: The Egyptian-Dominican mission of the Santo Domingo University, headed by Kathleen Martinez and which has been working at the Tabosiris Magna Temple in western Alexandria, has uncovered 16 stone-carved burials.

The mission has revealed several mummies in a poor state of preservation but that nonetheless highlight the characteristics of mummification in Greco-Roman antiquity.

Amulets of gold foil in the form of tongues were placed in the mouths of the mummies as part of a special ritual to ensure the ability of the dead to speak in the other world.

Martinez said the most important finds were two mummies that preserved the remains of scrolls and parts of the cartonnage layer.

The first has remnants of gilding that depict Osiris, god of the other world, while the other wears the Atef crown, decorated with horns and a cobra on the forehead. On the chest is a wide necklace bearing a falcon head, symbol of the deity Horus.

Khaled Abu Al-Hamd, director-general of Alexandria Antiquities, said that during this season, the mission has come across several archaeological finds, the most important of which is a funeral mask for a woman, eight golden flakes, and eight marble masks dating back to classical antiquity.

The items found by the mission in the last 10 years have changed popular perception of the Temple of Tabosiris Magna, where coins bearing the name and image of Queen Cleopatra VII were found.

The foundation panels of the temple suggested it was built by King Ptolemy IV.



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Egypt prepares to transport royal mummies to Fustat Museum Egypt unveils

animal mummies of lion cubs, crocodiles, birds

[Egypt has 'passed peak' of second coronavirus wave](#)

Author:

Zaynab Khojji

ID:

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Sat, 2021-01-30 17:54

CAIRO: Egypt has recorded a significant decrease in the number of COVID-19 cases, leading officials to believe that the country has passed the peak of the second wave.

The Ministry of Health on Friday recorded 589 new cases and 48 deaths, bringing the total number of infections to 16,871, with 128,800 recoveries and 9,217 deaths.

There were 521 cases and 54 deaths recorded on Thursday.

Presidential adviser Mohamed Awad Tag El-Din said the official statistics did not reflect the actual number of infected cases and were only a general indication.

"Recorded cases by the Health Ministry first reached 1,000 and then decreased to around 500, which means the passing of the second wave of the coronavirus," he said.

He added that state-enforced strict precautionary measures, reduced gatherings, online education and other steps had contributed to a significant reduction in cases.

"Large numbers are treated outside health institutions. However, the number of deaths covers both who died inside hospitals and outside."

Egypt's Health Minister Dr. Hala Zayed said the vaccination process would have a role in reducing the number of deaths and that the vaccine would have an effect on reducing symptoms, preventing infection and limiting the outbreak.

Egypt last Sunday began treating medical workers with the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine.

Zayed said that the country was one of the first to prepare itself to combat the virus shortly after the first infections were announced. He added that Egypt's health system had experience, knowledge and information about the pandemic.

Mohamed Abdel Fattah, head of the Central Administration for Preventive Medicine Affairs at the Health Ministry, said that the number of daily cases recorded by the ministry had decreased by more than 50 percent from last December to this January, in addition to a decrease of more than 15 percent this week compared to the previous week.

This decline was not the only sign that Egypt had passed the peak, he said, as the remarkable decrease in the number of people visiting hospitals and

seeking medical services was also an indication that the country was on the right path.

The third indicator was people's commitment to precautionary measures to combat the virus. Most citizens wore masks in public places and on transport. Therefore, he added, Egypt was moving very well on its way to ride out of the crisis.

Hossam Hosni, head of the scientific committee aiming at combating the virus, said in televised statements that the virus had "come under control."

The epidemiological situation was also better than it had been in the past two weeks, as occupancy rates in hospitals, oxygen consumption and the use of ventilators had decreased.

"Recovery rates are very good and we hope the epidemic will end," he added.



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Greater cooperation between nations has been 'silver lining' of COVID-19: Egyptian minister Egyptian Health Ministry to receive 50k AstraZeneca vaccine doses in February