

**TESTIMONY OF  
AMBASSADOR ROGER F. NORIEGA**

**BEFORE THE**

**UNITED STATES SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE,  
PEACE CORPS, AND GLOBAL NARCOTICS AFFAIRS**

**HEARING ON**

**“IRAN’S INFLUENCE AND ACTIVITY IN LATIN AMERICA”**

Thursday, February 16, 2012  
Room 419, Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC

Mr. Chairman, I applaud you and other members of the Subcommittee for initiating a review of Iran’s activities in Latin America.

Since you announced your inquiry, the Director of National Intelligence, James R. Clapper, testified earlier this month that “Iranian officials” at the highest levels “are now more willing to conduct an attack in the United States....” General Clapper also reported that Iran’s so-called “supreme leader” Ali Khamenei was probably aware of the bizarre plot discovered last October to conspire with supposed Mexican drug cartel leaders to commit a terrorist bombing in the heart of our Nation’s capital.<sup>i</sup> Only because American law enforcement officials were willing to set aside conventional wisdom about how and where Iran would wage war against us were they able to thwart that attack.

Iranian officials have made no secret of the regime’s intention to carry its asymmetrical struggle to the streets of the United States and Europe. For example, in a May 2011 speech in Bolivia, Iran’s Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi promised a “tough and crushing response” to any U.S. offensive against Iran.<sup>ii</sup> In the same week in early January that Iran caught the world’s attention by threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz and brandishing shore-to-sea cruise missiles in a 10-day naval exercise, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced a five-nation swing through Latin America aimed at advancing its influence and operational capabilities on the U.S. doorstep.<sup>iii</sup>

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To comprehend what Iran is up to, we must set aside conventional wisdom about its ambitions, strategies and tactics and follow the evidence where it leads. General Clapper's public statement represents a dramatic break with the skeptics in the foreign policy establishment—including too many U.S. diplomats—who have failed to appreciate the breadth and depth of Iran's activities in the Western Hemisphere. The Intelligence Community's fresh assessment of Iran's willingness to wage an attack on our soil leads to the inescapable conclusion that Teheran's activities near our homeland constitute a very real threat that can no longer be ignored.

The next logical question is, "What is that hostile regime doing with the support of its trusted allies very close to our borders?" In my capacity as a Visiting Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI), I am coordinating an ongoing effort to answer that very question. I cooperate with a team of experienced experts who are committed to monitoring and exposing Iran's activities in Latin America in order to inform the public as well as policy makers who are responsible for protecting our national security.

To date, we have conducted dozens of interviews with experts from throughout the world and with eyewitnesses on the ground in the region. We also have obtained reams of official Venezuelan and Iranian documents, only a few of which we have published to support our conclusions.

Our exhaustive work leads us to the following conclusions:

- Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez and Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are conspiring **to wage an asymmetrical struggle against U.S. security and to abet Iran's illicit nuclear program.** Their clandestine activities pose a clear and present danger to regional peace and security.
- Iran has provided Venezuela conventional **weapon systems capable of attacking the United States** and our allies in the region.
- Iran has used \$30 billion in economic ventures in Venezuela as means to launder money and **evade international financial sanctions.**
- Since 2005, **Iran has found uranium in Venezuela, Ecuador and other countries** in the region and is conducting suspicious mining operations in some uranium-rich areas.
- **Two terrorist networks** – one home-grown Venezuelan clan and another cultivated by Mohsen Rabbani, a notorious agent of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – proselytize, fund-raise, recruit, and train operatives on behalf of Iran and Hezbollah in many countries in the Americas.
- **Hezbollah conspires with drug-trafficking networks** in South America as a means of raising resources and sharing tactics.
- The Venezuelan state-owned airline, Conviasa, operates regular service from Caracas to Damascus and Teheran – providing Iran, Hezbollah, and associated narco-traffickers a surreptitious **means to move personnel, weapons, contraband and other materiel.**

Mr. Chairman, our project has shared substantial information about these aforementioned threats with U.S. government officials—either directly or through Members of Congress. Quite frankly, too often the attitude we have encountered has been one of skepticism or indifference.

To offer just two examples, we understand that U.S. executive branch officials have continued to misinform Members of Congress about the existence of Conviasa flights between Venezuela and the terror states of Syria and Iran. Many months ago, we provided U.S. officials the name and contact information of a reliable Venezuelan source with privileged information about those ongoing flights. Unfortunately, that source was never contacted. And Congressional staff members tells us that executive branch officials continue to provide vague or misleading answers to direct questions on this relatively simple subject of whether those Conviasa flights continue.

Another example of this official indifference: Almost seven years after the first reports that Iran was seeking uranium in Venezuela, U.S. officials are still unable or unwilling to state clearly whether Iran is mining uranium in Venezuela—notwithstanding documentation revealed by our project over a year ago regarding Iranian mining in the uranium-rich Roraima Basin in eastern Venezuela. That U.S. officials do not know whether Iran is supporting its illicit nuclear program with uranium from Venezuela is incomprehensible. That they do not care enough to find out is unacceptable.

I believe that the Executive branch—beginning in the waning days of the last administration and continuing today—has been slow to recognize or respond to this multidimensional threat. At long last, it is time for our national security agencies to get smart and get busy.

Mr. Chairman, I am convinced that Congressional attention, such as this hearing, is essential to encourage Executive branch agencies to act. For example, sanctions last year against Venezuela's state-owned petroleum company for transactions with Iran were the direct result of pressure by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, acting in part on information provided by my project. Representative Jeff Duncan (R-SC) has introduced H.R. 3783, the "Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act of 2012," which will require the Executive branch to report to Congress on Iran's activities in a host of areas and to provide a strategy for countering this threat.

I believe that such a thorough, Congressionally-mandated review will require the Executive branch to apply additional needed intelligence resources to collect on subject matters in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and beyond. Once they understand the scope and depth of the problem, I hope for a whole-of-government response to protect our security, our interests and our allies against the threat posed by Iran, Hezbollah and their support network in the Americas.

Of course, my project at AEI is prepared to cooperate with this policy review by providing the Subcommittee documents and analysis regarding suspicious transactions

and installations operated by Iran in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and elsewhere in the region.

## BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION

Iran's push into the Western Hemisphere is part of a global strategy to break its diplomatic isolation, develop new sources of strategic materials, evade international sanctions and undermine U.S. influence. To these ends, Iran expanded the number of its embassies in the region from six in 2005 to ten in 2010.<sup>iv</sup> The real game-changer, however, has been the alliance developed between Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

In the last seven years, Iran has begun to take full advantage of its Venezuelan partner. Chávez's petro-diplomacy has paved the way for Ahmadinejad to cultivate partnerships with anti-U.S. regimes in Cuba, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua *et al.* Today, a shadowy network of commercial and industrial enterprises in several countries affords Iran a physical presence in relatively close proximity to the United States. Iran is well-positioned to use its relationships with these countries to pose a direct threat to U.S. territory, strategic waterways and American allies. Iran also has provided the Venezuelan military with weapon systems that give Chávez unprecedented capabilities to threaten its neighbors and the United States.

Chávez's support for terrorist groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia is notorious. In recent years, Chávez's most trusted security officials—from senior to operational levels—have provided material support to Hezbollah. Today, Venezuela's Margarita Island has eclipsed the infamous "Tri-Border Area" (TBA) in South America as the principal safe haven and center of Hezbollah operations in the Americas.

Indeed, wherever Iran goes, Hezbollah is not far behind; Latin America has been no exception. Research from open sources, subject-matter experts and sensitive sources within various governments has identified at least two parallel, collaborative terrorist networks growing at an alarming rate in Latin America. One of these networks is operated by Venezuelan collaborators, and the other is managed by the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. These networks encompass more than 80 operatives in at least 12 countries throughout the region (with their greatest areas of focus being Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina and Chile).

*The Nassereddine Network.* Ghazi Atef Nassereddine Abu Ali, a native of Lebanon who became a Venezuelan citizen about 12 years ago, is Venezuela's second-ranking diplomat in Syria. Nassereddine is a key Hezbollah asset because of his close personal relationship to Chávez's Justice and Interior Minister, Tarik El Aissami, and because of his diplomatic assignment in Damascus. Along with at least two of his brothers, Nassereddine manages a network to expand Hezbollah's influence in Venezuela and throughout Latin America.

Nassereddine's brother Abdallah, a former member of the Venezuelan congress, uses his position as the former vice president of the Federation of Arab and American Entities in Latin America and the president of its local chapter in Venezuela to maintain ties with Islamic communities throughout the region.<sup>v</sup> He currently resides on Margarita Island, where he runs various money-laundering operations and manages commercial enterprises associated with Hezbollah in Latin America. Younger brother Oday is responsible for establishing paramilitary training centers on Margarita Island. He is actively recruiting Venezuelans through local *circulos bolivarianos* (neighborhood watch committees made up of the most radical Chávez followers) and sending them to Iran for follow-on training.

*The Rabbani Network.* Hojjat al-Eslam Mohsen Rabbani, who was the cultural attaché at the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Buenos Aires, Argentina, oversees a parallel Hezbollah recruitment network.<sup>vi</sup> Rabbani is currently the international affairs advisor to the Al-Mostafa Al-Alam Cultural Institute in Qom, which is tasked with propagation of Shia Islam outside Iran.<sup>vii</sup> Rabbani, referred to by the important Brazilian magazine *Veja* as “the Terrorist Professor,”<sup>viii</sup> is a die-hard defender of the Iranian revolution and the mastermind behind the two notorious terrorist attacks against Jewish targets in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994 that killed 144 people.<sup>ix</sup>

At the time, Rabbani was credentialed as Iran's cultural attaché in the Argentine capital, which he used as a platform for extremist propaganda, recruitment and training that culminated in the attacks in the 1990s. In fact, he continues to exploit that network of Argentine converts today to expand Iran's and Hezbollah's reach—identifying and recruiting operatives throughout the region for radicalization and terrorist training in Venezuela and Iran (specifically, the city of Qom).

At least two mosques in Buenos Aires—Al Imam and At-Tauhid—are operated by Rabbani disciples. Sheik Abdallah Madani leads the Al Imam mosque, which also serves as the headquarters for the Islamic-Argentine Association, one of the most prominent Islamic cultural centers in Latin America.

Some of Rabbani's disciples have taken what they have learned from their mentor in Argentina and replicated it elsewhere in the region. Sheik Karim Abdul Paz, an Argentine convert to Shiite Islam, studied under Rabbani in Qom for five years and succeeded him at the At-Tauhid mosque in Buenos Aires in 1993.<sup>x</sup> Abdul Paz is now the imam of a cultural center in Santiago, Chile, the Centro Chileno Islamico de Cultura de Puerto Montt. Another Argentine convert to radical Islam and Rabbani disciple is Sheik Suhail Assad, who lectures at universities throughout the region and recruits young followers to the cause.<sup>xi</sup>

A key target of the Rabbani network—and Hezbollah in general—is Brazil, home to some one million Muslims. Rabbani travels to Brazil regularly to visit his brother, Mohammad Baquer Rabbani Razavi, founder of the Iranian Association in Brazil.<sup>xii</sup> Another of his principal collaborators is Sheik Khaled Taki Eldyn, a Sunni radical from the Sao Paulo Guarulhos mosque. Taki Eldyn, who is active in ecumenical activities with

the Shia mosques, also serves as the secretary general of the Council of the Leaders of the Societies and Islamic Affairs of Brazil.<sup>xiii</sup> A sensitive source linked that mosque to a TBA network cited by the US Treasury Department as providing major financial and logistical support to Hezbollah.<sup>xiv</sup> As far back as 1995, Taki Eldyn hosted al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed in the TBA region. According to Brazilian intelligence sources cited by the magazine *Veja*, at least 20 operatives from Hezbollah, al Qaeda and the Islamic Jihad are using Brazil as a hub for terrorist activity.<sup>xv</sup> The fact that Brazil is set to host the FIFA World Cup tournament in 2014 and the Summer Olympics in 2016 makes it an inviting target for international terrorism.

## WAKING UP TO A THREAT

Bracing for a potential showdown over its illicit nuclear program and emboldened by inattention from Washington in Latin America, Iran has sought strategic advantage in our neighborhood. It also is preparing to play the terrorism card—exploiting its new ties with Venezuelan operatives, reaching into Mexico, and activating a decades-old network in Argentina, Brazil and Chile.

Even as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) affirmed in a recent report that foreign support is crucial to Iran's capability of developing a nuclear weapon,<sup>xvi</sup> U.S. diplomatic, intelligence and security agencies apparently are in the dark on whether Iran is extracting ore from vast uranium basins in Venezuela, Ecuador or Bolivia or whether Argentina has resumed nuclear technology-sharing with Teheran.

An important exception to executive branch neglect of this troubling phenomenon is the work of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the Department of the Treasury to sanction numerous Venezuelan officials and entities for their complicity with and support for Iran and international terrorism. Again, according to sources in these agencies, State Department officers systematically resist the application of sanctions against Venezuelan officials and entities, despite the fact that these suspects are playing an increasingly important role in Iran's operational capabilities near U.S. territory.

## CONCLUSION

President Obama declared in December 2011, "We take Iranian activities, including in Venezuela, very seriously, and we will continue to monitor them closely."<sup>xvii</sup> Merely *monitoring* Iran's foray into Latin America is the very least the United States must now do to frustrate Teheran's plans to threaten U.S. security and interests close to home.

The dangerous activities of Iran and Hezbollah so near our borders demand a whole-of-government strategy, beginning with an interagency review to understand and assess the transnational, multifaceted nature of the problem; educate friendly governments; and insist on inspection of suspicious operations and military compounds. Our government must be prepared to implement effective measures—unilaterally and

with willing partners—to disrupt and dismantle illicit operations and neutralize unacceptable threats.

Ahmadinejad’s January visit to Venezuela and elsewhere in the region was clearly intended to shore up Iran’s interests in Latin America as Chávez loses ground in his fight with cancer. Iran can be expected to make common cause with Cuba, Russia and China to protect their Venezuelan haven—if necessary, by encouraging Chávez’s leftist movement to scuttle the October 2012 elections. If the United States were to be more vigilant at this critical post-Chávez transition phase, it might be possible to spoil Iran’s plans by supporting a peaceful, democratic solution. If not, Washington may find itself confronting a grave and growing Iranian threat that it can neither diminish nor evade.

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<sup>i</sup> “Notorious Iranian Militant has a Connection to Alleged Assassination Plot Against Saudi Envoy, by Peter Finn, *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> “Sanction shows US weakness, says Iran minister,” Iranian Students' News Agency, June 1, 2011; “Iran Warns of Street War in Tel Aviv If Attacked,” Fars News Agency, November 8, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> “Iran Seeking to Expand Influence in Latin America,” by Joby Warrick, *The Washington Post*, January 1, 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> General Douglas M. Fraser, USAF, “Posture Statement,” Testimony before the 112th Congress, House Armed Services Committee, March 30, 2011.

<sup>v</sup> This organization was founded in Argentina in 1972 to unite Muslims, namely the Syrian and Lebanese communities, in Latin America and has spread rapidly throughout Latin America, with offices in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela, Guadalupe Island, Antigua, and Uruguay. It is overtly anti-Israel; supportive of anti-American regimes in the Middle East and Latin America; and used as a platform for Hezbollah to raise money, recruit supporters, and solicit illegal visas.

<sup>vi</sup> “Reis-Jomhour-e Arzhantin Dar Sazeman-e Melal: Tehran Ba Mohakemeh-ye Maqamatash Dar Keshvar-e Sales Movafeqat Konad” [The President of Argentina: Tehran Should Accept Trial of Its Authorities in a Third Country], *Asr-e Iran* (Tehran), September 25, 2010, [www.asriran.com](http://www.asriran.com) (available in Persian, accessed September 29, 2011).

<sup>vii</sup> “Din va Siasat Dar Amrika-ye Latin Dar Goftegou Ba Ostad Mohsen Rabbani” [Religion and Politics in Latin America in Conversation with Professor Mohsen Rabbani], *Book Room* (Tehran), May 3, 2010.

<sup>viii</sup> “The Terrorist ‘Professor,’” *Veja* (Brazil), April 20, 2011.

<sup>ix</sup> Marcelo Martinez Burgos and Alberto Nisman, Office of Criminal Investigations: AMIA Case (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Investigations Unit of the Office of the Attorney General, 2006), [www.peaceandtolerance.org/docs/nismanindict.pdf](http://www.peaceandtolerance.org/docs/nismanindict.pdf) (accessed September 27, 2011).

<sup>x</sup> “Goftegou Ba Sarkar-e Khanom-e Ma’soumeh As’ad Paz Az Keshvar-e Arzhantin” [Conversation with Lade Ma’soumeh As’ad Paz From Argentina], *Ahlulbayt* (Tehran), June 13, 2011.

<sup>xi</sup> Marielos Márquez, “‘El Islam es una forma de vida’: Sheij Suhail Assad,” *DiarioCoLatino*, August 27, 2007.

<sup>xii</sup> “Sourat-e Jalaseh” [Agenda], *Iranianbrazil* (Brazil), March 17, 2010.

<sup>xiii</sup> “Aein-ha-ye Ramezani Dar Berezil” [Ramadan Traditions in Brazil], *Taghrib News* (Qom), September 5, 2010.

<sup>xiv</sup> US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Designates Islamic Extremist, Two Companies Supporting Hizballah in Tri-Border Area,” news release, June 10, 2004.

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<sup>xv</sup> “The Terrorist ‘Professor,’” *Veja* (Brazil), April 20, 2011.

<sup>xvi</sup> IAEA Says Foreign Expertise has Brought Iran to the Threshold of Nuclear Capability,” by Joby Warrick, *The Washington Post*, November 6, 2011.

<sup>xvii</sup> “El Universal Interviews President Obama on U.S.-Venezuela Relations,” by Reyes Theis, *El Universal* (Caracas, Venezuela), December 20, 2011.