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ARTICLE

## Iran' Re-engagement with Latin America

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Robert Evan Ellis

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2646-9571>

 [robert.e.ellis78.civ@army.mil](mailto:robert.e.ellis78.civ@army.mil)

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## Iran' Re-engagement with some Latin America Countries

Robert Evan Ellis

### Abstract

*The article presents the resumption of Iran's relations with Latin America and the opportunities this offers for political and economic interaction. It highlights Iran's acceptance into the BRICS during the organization's summit in Johannesburg in 2023, which accelerated the reestablishment of Iran's contacts with the international community. In addition, China's role in its economic strengthening is mentioned, as well as its encouragement to Latin American and Caribbean governments to collaborate without concern for the U.S. Overall, a broad view is offered on the current state of Iran-Latin America relations and the challenges and opportunities that this entails.*

**Keywords:** *Iran, Latin America, BRICS, China, USA, International relations, Opportunities, Sanctions.*

### Introduction

The acceptance of Iran into the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, south Africa)<sup>1</sup> during the organization's August 22-24 2023 summit Johannesburg South Africa highlights Iran's accelerated reengagement with the international community,<sup>2</sup> and with it, renewed opportunities for it not only to normalize its political and economic engagements, but to more completely circumvent sanctions and pursue activities to the detriment of the United States. In Latin America, Iran's inclusion in the BRICS, will give it accelerated opportunities for political and economic interactions

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1 Katharina Buchholz, "Rise Of BRICS Bloc Continues Through Expansion [Infographic]", *Forbes* (August 25, 2023), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katharinabuchholz/2023/08/25/rise-of-brics-bloc-continues-through-expansion-infographic/?sh=420dc8bo225c>

2 Maziar Motamedi, "Continent of opportunities: Iran's Raisi to go on Africa tour", *Aljazeera* (July 11, 2023), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/11/continent-of-opportunities-irans-raisi-kicks-off-africa-tour>Maziar

with current member Brazil, and future member Argentina.<sup>3</sup> Iran's reengagement with the region has actually, however, been underway since 2020, with limited attention by Washington or its neighbors.

Iran's activities in Latin America received substantial attention in Washington during the first decade of the 21st century, as a US attention focused on the Global War Against Terrorism, while Iran's then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pursued high profile<sup>4</sup> engagements with anti US populist leaders in the region, particularly those in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua. In 2010, Iran also established a propaganda outlet in the region, *HispanTV*,<sup>5</sup> which by 2021 was operating in 17 countries in the region.<sup>6</sup> At the height of attention to Iran's activities in the region in 2012, the U.S. Congress passed the "Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act,"<sup>7</sup> obliging the US State Department to formulate a strategy and report regularly to Congress on its response to Iranian activities.

During the Presidency of Ahmadinejad's successor, Hassan Rouhani, Iran maintained a much lower profile in Latin America,<sup>8</sup> reflecting both Rouhani's less confrontational style and Iran's work to escape sanctions through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement with the

3 Julian Borger, "Brics to more than double with admission of six new countries", *The Guardian* (August 25, 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/aug/24/five-brics-nations-announce-admission-of-six-new-countries-to-bloc>

4 CNN, "Ahmadinejad wraps up Latin American tour", *CNN Wire Staff* (January 13, 2012), <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/01/13/world/americas/latin-america-ahmadinejad-visit/index.html>

5 Douglas Farah and Alexa Tavaréz, "Iran in Latin America: Malign Alliances, "Super Spreaders," and Alternative Narratives", *National Defense University Press* (June 2021), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-34.pdf>

6 Joseph M. Humire, "Iran's Pattern of Penetration in Latin America", *Dialogo Americas* (January 28, 2022), <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/irans-pattern-of-penetration-in-latin-america/>

7 Legislation, "H.R.3783 - Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act of 2012", *United States Congress* (December 28, 2012), <https://www.congress.gov/bills/112th-congress/house-bill/3783#:~:text=Countering%20Iran%20in%20the%20Western%20Hemisphere%20Act%20of%20Corps%20%28IRGC%29%2C%20the%20IRGC%27%20Qods%20Force%2C%20and%20Hezbollah>

8 Moises Rendon, Antonio De La Cruz, and Claudia Fernandez, "Understanding the Iran-Venezuela Relationship", *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (June 4, 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-iran-venezuela-relationship>

United States and five other nations on nuclear proliferation.<sup>9</sup> Rouhani did, however, visit Venezuela and Cuba in September 2016<sup>10</sup> in conjunction with a summit of the Non-Aligned movement in Margarita Island, Venezuela.<sup>11</sup>

The current Iranian Presidency of Ebrahim Raisi has coincided with increased Iran-US tensions and the 2018<sup>12</sup> Trump Administration withdraw from the JCPOA, together leading Iran to a more aggressive international posture, including in the US' own near abroad. As the Raisi Administration has looked to Latin America, among other regions, in pursuit of expanded international engagement and the construction of alliances against the US, it has found a new generation of anti-US populist regimes who have consolidated their power and who themselves are looking for new partners beyond the region to offset US influence. More broadly, the Raisi regime's initiatives to expand its partners in Latin America also finds fertile soil in an unprecedented number of new governments on both the right and left unwilling to heed Washington's concerns regarding their conduct of domestic, or foreign affairs.

Iran's reengagement with Latin America, as a subset of its global reengagement, is also occurring in the context of a Washington DC, paralyzed by domestic divisions,<sup>13</sup> and moving away from its prior attention to global terrorism, particularly following its withdrawal from

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9 Kali Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?", *Council on Foreign Relations* (June 21, 2023), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>

10 IFP, "President Rouhani to Visit Venezuela, Cuba, US", *IFP Media Wire* (September 13, 2016), <https://ifpnews.com/president-rouhani-visit-venezuela-cuba-us/>

11 AFP News Agency, "Non-aligned summit kicks off on Venezuela's Margarita Island", *YouTube video 0:39* (September 15, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgjwycfTfrM>

12 Fact Sheets, "President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal", *Trump White House* (May 8, 2018), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>

13 Amber Phillips, "Why is Washington so Dysfunctional", *The Washington Post* (September 30, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/09/30/why-is-washington-so-dysfunctional/>

Afghanistan,<sup>14</sup> to focus on the rise of China<sup>15</sup> and Russia's invasion of the Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> The challenge posed by Iran's re-engagement with the Western Hemisphere is augmented by China, which has economically strengthened Iran through its own engagement,<sup>17</sup> helped Iran to manage its distracting, longstanding rivalry with Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup> China encouraged Latin America and the Caribbean governments to feel the economic and political freedom to collaborate with Iran<sup>19</sup> without worrying about the United States.

The present work looks at Iran's re engagement in the region, including activities of proxy groups such as Hezbollah, and the challenges they present in the region. It argues that the potential reach and impacts Iran may be able to achieve in its new engagement, and the associated risks, go far beyond its previous efforts during the era of the populist-leftist "pink tide" regimes,<sup>20</sup> due to synergies between Iran's initiative, the consolidation of power by anti-US governments in the region, and the unprecedented political shifts in the region away from cooperation with

<sup>14</sup> Adan Zeidan, "Withdrawal of United State troops from Afghanistan United States-Afghan history [2020-2021]", *Britannica* (September 15, 2023), <https://www.britannica.com/event/withdrawal-of-United-States-troops-from-Afghanistan>

<sup>15</sup> Brad Lendon and Ellie Kaufman, "US military gets 'laser focused' on keeping up with China", *CNN* (June 11, 2021), <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/11/asia/us-military-focus-china-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20most%20significant%20military%20threat%20that%20we%E2%80%99re%20focused,efforts%20to%20supplant%20American%20military%20power%20in%20Asia>

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, "How Much Aid Has the U.S. Sent Ukraine? Here Are Six Charts", *Council on Foreign Relations* (July 10, 2023), <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-aid-has-us-sent-ukraine-here-are-six-charts>

<sup>17</sup> Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, "China With \$ 400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast", *New York Times* (March 27, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/middleeast/china-iran-deal.html>

<sup>18</sup> Al Jazeera and News Agencies, "China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal driving 'wave of reconciliation', says Wang", *Al Jazeera* (August 21, 2023), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/21/china-brokered-saudi-iran-deal-driving-wave-of-reconciliation-says-wang>

<sup>19</sup> Evan Ellis, "The Transitional World Order: Implications for Latin America and the Caribbean", *The Global Americans* (March 29, 2022), <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/03/the-transitional-world-order-implications-for-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>

<sup>20</sup> SCE, "Commodities Boom and Growth", *Scholarly Community Encyclopedia* (2023), <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/34333#:~:text=Some%20pink%20tide%20governments%2C%20such%20as%20Bolivia%2C%20Ecuador%2C,such%20as%20uranium%20for%20the%20Iranian%20nuclear%20program>

or deference to the United States.

### General Trends of Iran's Re-Engagement in the Americas

From the time of leftist populist President Hugo Chavez, Venezuela has been the Center of Gravity for Iran's activities in the Americas, as well as the launch point for its current reengagement with the region. It has also served as a de facto template for the activities that Iran pursues with other countries.

Iran's reengagement generally began in 2020 with its assistance to Venezuela's oil sector at a time in which the Maduro regime in crisis for inability to produce. Iran also extended arms sales and co-development in Venezuela, as well as agricultural cooperation. In 2022 Iran also began to renew and extend its ties with other anti-US states, including Nicaragua, Bolivia and Cuba. The symbol of this re-engagement was the 2023 trip by Ebrahim Raisi, his Defense Minister, and other ministers to Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, followed shortly thereafter by receipt of a Bolivian government delegation to Iran, where it signed a defense cooperation agreement with its Iranian hosts.

The visit of the Iranian warship Makran, and its escort the Dena to Rio de Janeiro<sup>21</sup> highlights Iran's intention to expand its re-engagement beyond its narrow group of anti US actors. Brazil's acquiescence to Iran's limited but symbolically important military gesture was enabled by the return of Lula in Brazil, as well as the arrival in power elsewhere in the region of an unprecedented number of governments willing to pursue a course challenging to the U.S. in political and security affairs.

In terms of commerce, according to the International Monetary Fund, in 2022, Latin America exported \$4.9 billion in goods to Iran,<sup>22</sup> principally

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<sup>21</sup> SFS Team, "Vric Monitor N° 29: Latin America between war and peace", *Secure Free Society* (March 3, 2023), <https://www.securefreesociety.org/research/monitor29/>

<sup>22</sup> IMF, "Exports, FOB to Partners Countries", International Monetary Fund (2023), <https://data.imf.org/regular.aspx?key=61013712>

to Brazil, by contrast to \$186 billion in goods and services Latin America exported to the People's Republic of China.<sup>23</sup> In a similar fashion, Latin America imported only \$173 million in goods and services from Iran in 2022,<sup>24</sup> by contrast to \$310 billion of goods the region imported from the PRC that year (almost 2000 times as much).<sup>25</sup>

Although as noted previously, the style of Iran's engagement with the region has varied significantly<sup>26</sup> from the presidencies of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Hussan Rouhani, to Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's broad strategic goals have remained relatively consistent. These include leveraging its relationships in Latin America to evade sanctions, and to escape from international isolation, as well as demonstrating to domestic audiences its ability to do so, while also developing asymmetric military options within the region that could be potentially used against the United States.

The history of Iran's engagement in Latin America shows its continual willingness to take aggressive actions against US equities, limited by relative awkwardness in doing so. Examples include Iran's role in running agents who planned the 2007 attack against the John F Kennedy airport in New York,<sup>27</sup> which was ultimately exposed and foiled.<sup>28</sup> They also include Iran's receptivity to proposals in 2012<sup>29</sup> from a group of computer science professors and students at Mexico's National Autonomous University (UNAM) to mount attacks on DoD targets, exposed not by intelligence agencies, but by Univision,<sup>30</sup> who had become aware of the plot and convinced one of

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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Moises Rendon, De La Cruz, and Fernandez, "Understanding the Iran-Venezuela...".

27 Matthew Levitt, "The Men Responsible for the AMIA Bombing Are Known—and Still at Large", *Advancing Jewish Thought Mosaic* (August 12, 2019), <https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/jewish-world/2019/08/the-men-responsible-for-the-amia-bombing-are-known-and-still-at-large/>

28 CP, "Hezbollah Terrorists Caught in US Planning Attack", *Clarion Project* (2023), <https://clarionproject.org/2017/06/11/hezbollah-terrorists-caught-us-planning-attack/d>

29 bSecure, "La amenaza iraní: el culebrón de UNAM, Venezuela, Irán y EE. UU.", *Seguridad Informática* (January 16, 2012), <https://seguinfo.wordpress.com/2012/01/16/la-amenaza-irani-el-culebron-de-unam-venezuela-iran-y-eeuu/>

30 Ibid.

the students to tape the negotiations. In 2011, Iranian Qods force operative Gholam Shakuri<sup>31</sup> also sought to recruit who he thought were members of feared Mexican narco-trafficking cartel Los Zetas, to kill the Saudi Arabian ambassador in Washington DC,<sup>32</sup> an operation which turned out to be a DEA sting operation.<sup>33</sup>

Iran's primary instruments for engaging in Latin America continue to be a combination of state tools and proxy groups. These include developing human networks, both directly through its Qods forces, and indirectly through the money raising and other activities<sup>34</sup> in the region of its proxy Hezbollah.<sup>35</sup> Iran has also worked through Islamic centers in the region, once estimated to number at least 80, to gain intelligence and recruit members, complementing these in-region activities with paid trips by interested youths to religious indoctrination and training programs in Iran itself.<sup>36</sup> Iran's indoctrination for interested youth included a program of approximately two months in the Iranian city of Qom.<sup>37</sup> A key sponsor of such trips was the organization Iran Ornate, run by Mosheen Rabbani,<sup>38</sup> tied to Hezbollah terrorist attacks on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992, and against the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, AMIA, in 1994.

31 Scott Shane, "U.S. Denies Iran Claims That Saudi Plot Defendant Belongs To Exile Group", *New York Times* (October 19, 2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/20/world/middleeast/obama-administration-denies-iran-claims-that-saudi-plot-defendant-gholam-shakuri-belongs-to-exile-group.html>

32 Charlie Savage and Scott Shane, "Iranians Accused of Plot to Kill Saudis U. S. Envoy", *New York Times* (October 11, 2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/us/us-accuses-iranians-of-plotting-to-kill-saudi-envoy.html>

33 Ibid.

34 SC, "Before The 116th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee", *United States Southern Command* (January 30, 2020), [https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/SASC%20SOUTHCOM%20Posture%20Statement\\_FINAL.pdf?ver=2020-01-30-081357-560](https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/SASC%20SOUTHCOM%20Posture%20Statement_FINAL.pdf?ver=2020-01-30-081357-560)

35 Lawrence A. Franklin, "Iran Acquires 2.5 Million Acres of Venezuela", Gate Stone Institute (September 21, 2022), <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/18892/iran-venezuela-land-purchase>

36 Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Mystery Cargo: Senior Iranian and Venezuelan officials are traveling around the world on a cargo plane. Argentina detained them. But what are they up to?", *The Dispatch* (July 6, 2022), <https://thedispatch.com/article/mystery-cargo/>

37 Tereza Dvorakova, "How Iran Uses Cultural Centers To Expand Its Influence In Latin America", *Global Security* (May 17, 2020), <https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2020/iran-200517-radiofardao3.htm>

38 Ibid.



Rabbani was also believed to have played a key role in running Hezbollah agents in the region.

Iran has also collaborated in the arena of arms, the petrochemical industry, and more recently, agriculture, as discussed in more detail in subsequent sections. Iran's superficially commercial partnerships have empirically been in part a vehicle for hiding its weapons co-development activities, and for evading sanctions.

### Iran-Venezuela Engagement

Iran's partnership with Venezuela, the hub of its engagement in the region, began with a coincidence in the strategic interests<sup>39</sup> between the leftist populist movement of Hugo Chavez, and the efforts of then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to escape from sanctions, to pursue missile development and other military programs, to demonstrate to domestic audiences in each country that its regime was not internationally isolated, and to develop asymmetric military and other options against the United States.

During the Hugo Chavez era the Iran-Venezuela relationship expanded through a large number of projects and cooperative agreements and more than 8 high-level visits between the Venezuelan leader and his Iranian counterpart.<sup>40</sup> By the end of the Chavez era, over 80 Iranian companies were operating in Venezuela,<sup>41</sup> over 60 joint ventures,<sup>42</sup> and over 270 memorandums of understanding define the relationship.<sup>43</sup> To varying degrees, these projects and agreements were a vehicle for "mutual aid." In some cases, Iran also acted as a broker with its other partners in the

<sup>39</sup> Reza Taghizadeh, "The Unlikely Partnership Of Venezuela And Iran", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (October 18, 2010), [https://www.rferl.org/a/The\\_Unlikely\\_Partnership\\_Of\\_Venezuela\\_And\\_Iran/2193900.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/The_Unlikely_Partnership_Of_Venezuela_And_Iran/2193900.html)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Humire, "Iran and Venezuela: A Strategic Partnership", *Dialogo Americas* (June 10, 2021), <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/iran-and-venezuela-a-strategic-partnership/>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Middle East on agricultural and other details. Sanctions-evading activities included the Iran-Venezuela Binational Bank, established in 2010.<sup>44</sup> The Iran-Venezuela bank was sanctioned by the US treasury department's office of foreign assets and control in 2018.<sup>45</sup>

Early Iranian-Venezuela arms collaboration included work with Venezuela's state defense industry firm CAVIM, probably in the development of missile components and drones.<sup>46</sup> As an early indicator of the military content of Iran-Venezuela collaboration, in 2008, Turkish authorities intercepted 22 shipping containers bound from Iran to Venezuela with materials that could be used for making sophisticated explosive devices. Iran's supply of drones to Venezuela was confirmed as early as 2012.<sup>47</sup>

During the early period, as noted by a 2010 US Department of Defense report,<sup>48</sup> Venezuela also became the point of entry in the region for Iranian<sup>49</sup> Qods forces, including regular flights by the Venezuelan airline Conviasa from Iran through Syria to Caracas, resumed in July 2023.<sup>50</sup> In recent years, the nominally Venezuelan airline EMTRASUR, appears to have become a vehicle for surreptitious travel by Qods operatives,<sup>51</sup> and other senior Iranian operatives through the region. As early as 2013, Iranian and Venezuelan officials were also reportedly engaged in intelligence cooperation.<sup>52</sup>

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44 IE, "Iranian-Venezuelan Bi-National Bank", *Iran Watch* (December 10, 2018), <https://www.iranwatch.org/iranian-entities/iranian-venezuelan-bi-national-bank>

45 Ibid.

46 Paola Flores and Daniel Politi, "Bolivia says it is interested in obtaining Iranian drone technology to protect its borders", *Associated Press News* (July 25, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/iran-argentina-novillo-tehran-drones-570b75c7ca61bb6bbf6ca250ccb75828>

47 Joanna Paraszczyk, "Iran admits exporting drone tech to Venezuela", *Jerusalem Post* (December 12, 2012), <https://www.jpost.com/iranian-threat/news/iran-admits-exporting-drone-tech-to-venezuela>

48 Trane, "Iran: Quds Force in Venezuela", *World View* (April 22, 2010), <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/iran-quds-force-venezuela>

49 Erfan Fard, "A blooming threat in US: Iranian IRGC in Venezuela", *Time of Israel* (May 31, 2021), <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/a-blooming-threat-in-us-iranian-irgc-in-venezuela/>

50 MP, "Venezuela's Conviasa starts weekly flights to Tehran", *Mercopress* (August 1, 2022), <https://en.mercopress.com/2022/08/01/venezuela-s-conviasa-starts-weekly-flights-to-tehran>

51 Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Mystery Cargo: Senior Iranian and Venezuelan officials are traveling ..."

52 Sebastian Rotella, "The Terror Threat and Iran's Inroads in Latin America", *Pro Publica* (July 11, 2013), <https://www.propublica.org/article/the-terror-threat-and-irans-inroads-in-latin-america>

The Chavista regime's providing of illegitimate passports, highlighted by former de jure Venezuelan president Juan Guaido,<sup>53</sup> also arguably facilitated the entrance of Iranians in the region. As the principal point of entry for Iranian personnel, Venezuela also became a key hub for Iran support to Islamic cultural centers throughout the region,<sup>54</sup> which among other purposes were used to recruit youth in the region interested in Islam, as well as engage in outreach, propaganda,<sup>55</sup> and other activities in the region. One element of Iran's June 2023 agreement with Venezuela was to establish additional centers.<sup>56</sup>

From at least 2019 and probably before, Tarek al-Aissami played a key role in the relationship with Iran,<sup>57</sup> along with other Chavista leaders such as Nestor Reverol and Hugo Carvajal.<sup>58</sup> His role included petroleum cooperation,<sup>59</sup> consistent with his position at the head of PdVSA, but also reportedly included other areas such as the activities of Hezbollah in the country.<sup>60</sup>

Iran's re engagement with Venezuela began to take off in 2020 as the U.S. <sup>61</sup> "maximum pressure" campaign against the Maduro regime deepened its economic and political challenges. Collapsing Venezuelan oil production, due to both sanctions and significant mismanagement of the sector by

53 Mustafa Alrawi, "Guaido: 17 Venezuelan passports are being handed out to Iranians each day", *The National News* (January 23, 2020), <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/the-americas/guaido-17-venezuelan-passports-are-being-handed-out-to-iranians-each-day-1.668689>

54 John Richardson, "Iran in the US Backyard", *Gate Stone Institute* (May 8, 2018), <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/12268/iran-latin-america>

55 AJT, "Iran's Soft-Power Offensive in Latin America, and How the U.S. Can Counter It", *Advancing Jewish Thought Mosaic* (February 28, 2022), <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/politics-current-affairs/2022/02/irans-soft-power-offensive-in-latin-america-and-how-the-u-s-can-counter-it/>

56 TT, "Iran to establish cultural centers in Venezuela, Brazil", *Tehran Times* (June 16, 2023), <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/485818/Iran-to-establish-cultural-centers-in-Venezuela-Brazil>

57 Hagay Hacoheh, "Venezuela ex-spy chief reveals Maduro's ties to Hezbollah, drugs", *Jerusalem Post* (February 24, 2019), <https://www.jpost.com/omg/venezuela-ex-spy-chief-reveals-maduros-ties-to-hezbollah-drugs-581615>

58 Ibid.

59 RS, "Venezuelan minister thanks Iran for shipments of fuel, refinery parts", *Reuters* (May 25, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/venezuela-iran-fuel-elaisami-idUSL1N2D7oSG>

60 Hagay Hacoheh, "Venezuela ex-spy chief reveals Maduro's ties to Hezbollah, drugs".

61 RS, "U.S. bringing 'maximum pressure' on Venezuela; sanctions official", *Reuters* (March 28, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-venezuela-pressure-idUSKCN1RAoA3>

Maduro, had caused severe gasoline shortages<sup>62</sup> which paralyzed virtually all economic activities in the country dependent on transportation and electric generators to supplement the nation's collapsed power grid,<sup>63</sup> deepening the regime's crisis.

In this moment of crisis, Iran played a key role in repairing the regime's refineries and providing gasoline to restore minimal functionality to the Venezuelan economy, easing the political pressures on Maduro. This assistance visibly begun with a series of flights in April 2020 by Iran's Mahan airlines,<sup>64</sup> bringing experts, components, and material needed to repair Venezuela's Cardon Refinery.<sup>65</sup> In May 2020, Iran also delivered the first five tankers shipments of badly needed gasoline to the country, 1.53 million barrels in total, valued at \$43 million.<sup>66</sup>

This was followed in subsequent years by multiple tanker deliveries of other Iranian petroleum<sup>67</sup> products to be mixed with Venezuelan heavy crude to make it marketable, and/or processed by Venezuelan refineries.<sup>68</sup> Analysts believe that Venezuelan gold, principally acquired from illegal mining operations in the Orinoco region of the country, was used to pay for Iran's

62 Lucas Koerner and Ricardo Vaz, "Venezuela: Widespread Gasoline Shortages as Sanctions Take Toll on Oil Sector", *Venezuela Analysis* (May 21, 2019), <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/14500?text=Caracas%2C%20May%2020%2C%202019%20%28venezuelanalysis.com%29%20-%20Large%20parts,with%20only%20a%20fraction%20of%20gas%20pumps%20open>

63 Julia Jones and Jack Guy, "The struggle to live through Venezuela's blackouts", CNN (March 12, 2019), <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/12/americas/venezuela-struggle-power-intl/index.html>

64 HP, "Venezuela receives material from Iran to help restart refinery", *Hydrocarbon Processing* (April 23, 2020), <https://www.hydrocarbonprocessing.com/news/2020/04/venezuela-receives-material-from-iran-to-help-restart-refinery>

65 RS, "Venezuela receives more airlifts of refinery materials from Iran", Reuters (February 12, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-iran-refineries-idUSKBN2AC1ZH>

66 The Iran Primer, "Timeline: Iranian Fuel Shipments to Venezuela", *United States Institute of Peace* (February 23, 2021), <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/dec/21/timeline-iranian-fuel-shipments-venezuela>

67 Mircely Guanipa, Marianna Parraga and Tibusay Romero, "Exclusive: After revamping Venezuela's smallest oil refinery, Iran to fix the largest", Reuters (May 23, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-after-revamping-venezuelas-smallest-oil-refinery-iran-fix-largest-2022-05-23/>

68 Marianna Parraga, "Venezuela begins imports of Iranian heavy oil for refining -PDVSA document", *Reuters* (May 9, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/venezuela-begins-imports-iranian-heavy-crude-refining-pdvsadocuments-2022-05-09/>

services and products.<sup>69</sup> By 2022, Iran had also executed a \$116 million agreement to repair the El Palito refinery,<sup>70</sup> and had committed to repair the much larger Paraguaná refinery complex.<sup>71</sup>

In the military domain, Iran expanded and broadened its previous collaboration with Venezuela on drones and other programs. In 2021, delivered of Zolfaghar class attack boats,<sup>72</sup> Nasr-1 anti-ship missiles,<sup>73</sup> and more drones, each of which were subsequently displayed in Venezuelan military parades.<sup>74</sup> Iran-supplied armed drones were used by the Venezuelan military in attacks against FARC dissidents in Apure state in May 2022.<sup>75</sup>

In June 2021, the Iranian warship Makran and its escort ship the Sahand<sup>76</sup> made a high-profile transit from Africa toward Venezuela<sup>77</sup> carrying seven military boats and other equipment believed to be destined for Venezuela's armed forces,<sup>78</sup> although in the face of Western pressure, the ships reversed course before reaching Venezuela.<sup>79</sup>

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69 Hassan Mahmoudi, "Iran: Trading Oil Refinery's Equipment For Venezuela's Gold – OpEd", *Eurasia Review* (May 4, 2020), <https://www.eurasiareview.com/04052020-iran-trading-oil-refinerys-equipment-for-venezuelas-gold-oped/>

70 Mircely Guanipa, Marianna Parraga and Tibisay Romero, "Exclusive: After revamping ...".

71 Ibid.

72 Redacción Internacional, "EE. UU. y Colombia monitorean barcos iraníes que llevarían misiles", *El Tiempo* (June 10, 2021), <https://www.eltiempo.com/mundo/eeuu-y-canada/ee-uu-y-colombia-monitorean-barcos-iranies-que-llevarian-misiles-594943>

73 Ibid.

74 Ángel Bermúdez, "Cómo Venezuela se convirtió con la ayuda de Irán en el 'único país latinoamericano que cuenta con drones armados'", *BBC News Mundo* (November 30, 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-63670715>

75 Ibid.

76 Joseph M. Humire, "Iran's Pattern of Penetration in Latin America", *Dialogo Americas* (January 28, 2022).

77 Isabel Debre and Jon Gambrell, "Iran sends warships to Atlantic amid Venezuela concerns", *Associated Press News* (June 10, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-iran-10b8da94fa9040ec6348a7b7006d879b>

78 Debbie White, "Chickened Out Iranian warships 'taking weapons to Venezuela' DIVERT to Africa after US vowed to take 'appropriate action'", *The Sun* (June 18, 2021), <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/15315295/iranian-warships-weapons-venezuela-divert-africa-us-action/>

79 Ibid.

With respect to collaboration in training and exercises, starting in approximately 2020, Iran also began instructing Venezuelan naval special forces in its facility in Bandar Abbas, including a program instructing in the conduct of underwater demolitions. In July 2022, Iran participated, along with Russia, China and other states of concern, the “Sniper Frontier” military exercise hosted by Venezuela.<sup>80</sup>

As Iran continued to extend cooperation with Venezuela across a range of areas, in June 2022, it signed a 20-year<sup>81</sup> multi domain cooperation agreement covering science and technology, agriculture, communications and tourism,<sup>82</sup> among other areas.

Consistent with the new agreement, in September 2022, Venezuela transferred 2.5 million hectares (4,000 square miles)<sup>83</sup> of land to Iran, ostensibly to be used for agricultural projects, including growing corn and soybeans,<sup>84</sup> although Western analysts have expressed concern that the large amount of land and its relatively remote location could also facilitate its use for military or terrorist training<sup>85</sup> and other activities of concern.<sup>86</sup>

In February 2023, Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian traveled

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<sup>80</sup> Defense News, “Iran, China, Russia set to hold joint military drills in Latin America: Report”, *Press TV* (July 6, 2022), <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2022/07/06/685164/Iran-China-Russia-to-flex-muscles-in-America>

<sup>81</sup> RS, “Under U.S. sanctions, Iran and Venezuela sign 20-year cooperation plan”, *Reuters* (June 12, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/iran-venezuela-sign-20-year-cooperation-plan-state-tv-2022-06-11/>

<sup>82</sup> Lawrence A. Franklin, “Iran Acquires 2.5 Million Acres of Venezuela”, Gate Stone Institute (September 21, 2022).

<sup>83</sup> AJT, “Why Is Iran Acquiring Property in Venezuela?”, *Advancing Jewish Thought Mosaic* (October 4, 2022), <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/politics-current-affairs/2022/10/why-is-iran-acquiring-property-in-venezuela/>

<sup>84</sup> FDN, “Venezuela Provides a Million Acres of New Farming Land for Iran”, *Foreign Desk News* (July 28, 2022), <https://foreigndesknews.com/top-story/venezuela-provides-a-million-acres-of-new-farming-land-for-iran/>

<sup>85</sup> Lawrence A. Franklin, “Iran Acquires 2.5 Million Acres of Venezuela”, Gate Stone Institute (September 21, 2022).

<sup>86</sup> AJT, “Why Is Iran Acquiring Property in Venezuela?”, *Advancing Jewish Thought Mosaic*.

to Caracas, as well as Managua and Havana,<sup>87</sup> in what later became clear was coordination and paving the way for a fruitful agenda for the subsequent June 2023 State Visit to each of the three countries by President Ebrahim Raisi, accompanied by his Defense Minister Mohammad Ashtiani, and other ministerial level personnel. The Raisi state visit to Venezuela produced an additional 12 agreements in a range of areas from “academic exchanges”<sup>88</sup> to the donation of cars<sup>89</sup> to the purchase of Venezuelan cattle.<sup>90</sup>

### Iran-Nicaragua Engagement

Iran’s engagement with Nicaragua has followed the template established by its activities with Venezuela, although initially Iran’s initiatives in Nicaragua were more limited and met with resistance. In 2007, for example, following a meeting between Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega,<sup>91</sup> recently returned to power, and the signing of a series of commercial agreements,<sup>92</sup> Iran sent a survey team to Monkey Point, a remote area on Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast, seeking to evaluate the area for construction of a \$350 million port.<sup>93</sup> The team was, however, aggressively confronted by locals,<sup>94</sup> which forced it to leave without completing its business. Nor did other agreements between the two nations subsequently bear substantial fruit. For the next 15 years, the two countries had only limited high-level interactions.

Nicaragua’s reengagement with Iran began substantially in 2022, following

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87 SFS Team, “Vric Monitor N° 29: Latin America between war and peace”, Secure Free Society.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Anahi Rama, “Iran, Nicaragua leaders tour slums, share goals”, *Reuters* (January 21, 2007), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nicaragua-idUSN1436694320070114>

92 Rory Carroll, “Nicaragua defies US with Iran trade deal”, *The Guardian* (August 6, 2007), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/06/usa.iran>

93 Todd Bensman, “Iran’s push into Nicaragua a worry for U.S., allies”, *Chron* (December 18, 2007), <https://www.chron.com/news/nation-world/article/iran-s-push-into-nicaragua-a-worry-for-u-s-1842029.php>

94 Ibid.

that of Venezuela. Iranian Mosheen Rezaei,<sup>95</sup> implicated in the 1994 terrorist attack against the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, AMIA,<sup>96</sup> was present at the inauguration.<sup>97</sup> In May 2022, Iran's petroleum minister, Javad Owji, travel to Nicaragua, discussing collaboration on a refinery, as well as agricultural projects,<sup>98</sup> paralleling Iran engagement in Venezuela. Owji also met with the Nicaraguan parliament, in which opposition parties had been completely eliminated.<sup>99</sup>

The February 2023 stop in Managua by Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amir Ahdollahian,<sup>100</sup> paved the way for the June 2023 State Visit by Ebrahim Raisi,<sup>101</sup> accompanied by Defense Minister Ashtiani and other ministers. As with Iran-Venezuela interactions, Iran and Nicaragua reportedly also discussed defense cooperation.<sup>102</sup> In the commercial domain, as in Venezuela, where Chavista loyalists were positioned to profit from agricultural and other cooperation agreements with Iran, Daniel Ortega's son Laureano, point man for international commercial engagements, played a key role in discussions

<sup>95</sup> Agencies, "Argentina fumes after Iranian AMIA bomb suspect spotted at Nicaragua ceremony", *Times of Israel* (January 11, 2022), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/argentina-fumes-after-iranian-amia-bomb-suspect-spotted-at-nicaragua-ceremony/>

<sup>96</sup> Ronen Bergman, "Mossad Sheds New Light on Argentina Terrorist Attacks in 1990s", *New York Times* (July 25, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/22/world/middleeast/argentina-mossad-hezbollah-bombings.html>

<sup>97</sup> Sharon Nazarian, "Iran's influence in Latin America is a dangerous reminder for regional leaders", *Time of Israel* (February 5, 2022), <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/irans-influence-in-latin-america-a-dangerous-reminder-for-regional-leaders/>

<sup>98</sup> Yubelka Mendoza and Natalie Kitroeff, "Nicaragua Descends Into Autocratic Rule as Ortega Crushes Dissent", *New York Times* (November 7, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/07/world/americas/nicaragua-election-ortega.html>

<sup>99</sup> AP, "Sandinistas complete their political domination of Nicaragua", *Politico* (November 8, 2022), <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/11/08/nicaragua-sandinistas-ortega-repression-00065603>

<sup>100</sup>SFS Team, "Vric Monitor N° 29: Latin America between war and peace", *Secure Free Society* (March 3, 2023).

<sup>101</sup> PD, "Iranian president visits Latin American countries in an attempt to strengthen multipolar world order", *Peoples Dispatch* (June 13, 2023), <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/06/13/iranian-president-visits-latin-american-countries-in-an-attempt-to-strengthen-multipolar-world-order/#:~:text=Iranian%20President%20Ebrahim%20Raisi%20arrived%20in%20Venezuela%20on.affected%20by%20unilateral%20sanctions%20imposed%20by%20the%20US>

<sup>102</sup> Lorena Baires, "Iran, Nicaragua Seek Military Cooperation", *Dialogo Americas* (June 13, 2023), <https://dialogo-americas.com/articulos/iran-nicaragua-seek-military-cooperation/>



of renewed agricultural,<sup>103</sup> petrochemical, and other cooperation.

### Iran-Cuba Engagement

Iran's engagement with Cuba, in terms of commercial projects and other cooperation, has been more limited than that with Venezuela. Overall trade between the two in 2022 was a mere \$3 million,<sup>104</sup> almost entirely Iranian exports to Cuba. Nonetheless, then Iranian president Hassan Rouhani visited Cuba in September 2016 to "reaffirm friendship"<sup>105</sup> between the two governments, and the two authoritarian regimes have engaged on strategic issues on other occasions.

In 2021, during the later stages of the pandemic, Iran and Cuba, each with immature biotechnology industry, collaborated to develop a vaccine against COVID-19.<sup>106</sup> As with Venezuela and Nicaragua, in February 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian traveled to Havana,<sup>107</sup> followed in June 2023, by a State Visit by President Raisi and a delegation that included Iran's Defense Minister Ashtiani. During the Raisi stop in Cuba,<sup>108</sup> the two countries signed six agreements<sup>109</sup> in cooperation in the political domain,<sup>110</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Octavio Enriquez, "Nicaragua Offers a "Platform" for Iran in Central America", Havana Times (February 5, 2023), <https://havanatimes.org/nicaragua/nicaragua-offers-a-platform-for-iran-in-central-america/>

<sup>104</sup> IMF, "Exports, FOB to Partners Countries", International Monetary Fund (2023).

<sup>105</sup> RS, "Iran's president meets Castros in Cuba to reaffirm friendship", *Reuters* (September 19, 2016), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-iran-rouhani-idUSKCN11Q06I>

<sup>106</sup> PD, "Iranian president visits Latin American countries in an attempt to strengthen multipolar world order".

<sup>107</sup> SFS Team, "Vric Monitor N° 29: Latin America between war and peace", *Secure Free Society* (March 3, 2023).

<sup>108</sup> Andrea Rodríguez, "Iran's president meets Cuban counterpart in last leg of Latin American tour", *Associated Press News* (June 15, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/cuba-iran-president-raisi-visit-7b590f5845af84e177666b1eeef8fdd>

<sup>109</sup> TT, "Iran, Cuba sign six agreements as Raisi visits Havana", *Tehran Times* (June 15, 2023), [https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/485797/iran-cuba-sign-six-agreements-as-raisi-visits-havana\\_](https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/485797/iran-cuba-sign-six-agreements-as-raisi-visits-havana_)

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

on “digital”<sup>111</sup> issues, customs, electricity, biotech, and mining.<sup>112</sup> Although relations have historically been warm, reflecting shared enmity with the United States,<sup>113</sup> the meeting was a departure from previously more low-level Cuban engagement. Cuba’s willingness to engage with Iran in such a broad fashion in the commercial domain arguably parallels its signing of economic cooperation agreements with Russia,<sup>114</sup> China,<sup>115</sup> and others, illustrating the desperation of the regime to attract resources that can help keep the economy viable.

### Iran-Bolivia Engagement

As with Nicaragua and to an extent Cuba, Iran’s engagement with Bolivia has followed its template established by Venezuela. Previous leftist populist Bolivian leader Evo Morales met multiple times with his then Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, including Bolivia purchasing military aircraft parts from Iran in 2007,<sup>116</sup> and signing a strategic cooperation agreement in 2008.<sup>117</sup> In October 2010, the two leaders played a symbolic game of soccer,<sup>118</sup> seeking to represent the personal friendship that they were cultivating. The personal nature of the tie between the two leaders,

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Nelson Acosta, “Cuba, Iran presidents meet in Havana, vow to confront ‘Yankee imperialism’”, Reuters (June 15, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/cuba-iran-presidents-meet-havana-vow-confront-yankee-imperialism-2023-06-15/>

<sup>113</sup> TT, “Iran, Cuba sign six agreements as Raisi visits Havana”, Tehran Times (June 15, 2023).

<sup>114</sup> Reuters, “Russia and Cuba ink deals to revitalize island’s ailing economy”, *NBC news* (May 20, 2023), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russia-cuba-ink-deals-revitalize-islands-ailing-economy-rcna85408>

<sup>115</sup> Chris Devonshire-Ellis, “Unlocking US Sanctions: China Signs Construction & Energy Deals With Cuba”, *Silk Road Briefing* (January 3, 2022), <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/01/03/unlocking-us-sanctions-china-signs-construction-energy-deals-with-cuba/#:~:text=He%20Lifeng%2C%20head%20of%20the%20National%20Development%20and,technology%2C%20culture%2C%20education%2C%20tourism%2C%20energy%2C%20communications%2C%20and%20biotechnology>

<sup>116</sup> AFPC, “Report: World Almanac of Islamism”, *Almanac American Foreign Policy Council* (July 1, 2021), <https://almanac.afpc.org/almanac/countries/bolivia-reports>

<sup>117</sup> RS, “Ahmadinejad, Morales team up for soccer win”, *Reuters* (October 26, 2010), <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-52490120101027>

<sup>118</sup> Keith Johnson, “Why Is Evo Morales Suddenly No Longer President of Bolivia?”, *Foreign Policy* (November 11, 2019), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/11/evo-morales-resigns-president-bolivia/>

and Morales' perception of a shared project between the two nations may have contributed to his initiative much later, in October 2020, after having been ousted from power for an attempt to rig the nation's 2019 national election.<sup>119</sup> In that occasion, the former President flew to Caracas from exile in Argentina, to participate in a meeting there between Raisi and Venezuelan's de facto President Nicholas Maduro.<sup>120</sup>

During the earlier Morales period, in 2012, Bolivia and Iran also signed a questionable counter narcotics agreement,<sup>121</sup> despite little evidence of Bolivian cocaine going to Iran.

On the other hand, during the same period, Still, even during that period, Bolivia was still constrained to some extent in its relations with Iran by its public obligations under international law. In 2011 for example, the Morales government was obliged to expedite the departure from the country of visiting Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi,<sup>122</sup> who had an Interpol red notice against him.

With respect to Iran's current re-engagement with Bolivia, the nation was notably not included on the trip by Iranian President Raisi, his Defense Minister and other Cabinet ministers to the country, perhaps due to Bolivia's legal obligations which had previously created an embarrassing situation for former Defense Minister Vahidi. Nonetheless, within weeks after the Raisi trip to the region, a Bolivian delegation including its own Defense Minister Edmundo Novillo Aguillar traveled to Tehran where it

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<sup>119</sup> RS, "Bolivian ex-president Morales leaves Argentina on flight to Venezuela: state news agency", Reuters (October 23, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bolivia-morales-argentina-venezuela-idUSKBN279022>

<sup>120</sup> RS, "Bolivian ex-president Morales leaves Argentina on flight to Venezuela: state news agency", Reuters (October 23, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bolivia-morales-argentina-venezuela-idUSKBN279022>

<sup>121</sup> Daniel Politi and Carlos Valdez, "Bolivia facing questions over shadowy defense pact with Iran", *Times of Israel* (July 25, 2023), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bolivia-facing-questions-over-shadowy-defense-pact-with-iran/>

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

signed a series of agreements<sup>123</sup> with the Raisi regime on topics including narcotrafficking<sup>124</sup> cooperation and border security capabilities.<sup>125</sup> Iran called the agreement “a role model” for Iran’s cooperation with other states in the region.

Notably, the agreement included Iran supplying drones to the country,<sup>126</sup> as well as other items, allowing the country to increase its military capabilities on the sensitive frontier with Peru, where the substantial Amara indigenous population in the border region played a key role in the December 2022 protests over the removal of power of Pedro Castillo come and associated violence, including the deaths of 16 locals in violent protests in Juliaca.<sup>127</sup> The Argentine government also questioned Iran’s support to Bolivian military capabilities along the Bolivia–Argentina border.

### Iran-Argentina Engagement

Prior to Iran’s strategic friendship with Venezuela, established under the regime of Hugo Chavez, Argentina was once an important base of operations for the Islamic Republic’s projection of power in the region. As noted previously, Iranian diplomats such as Mosheen Rabbani, then Iran’s cultural attaché in Buenos Aires, were believed by Argentine prosecutors and others to have played a role in the attacks by terrorist group Hezbollah<sup>128</sup> against the

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123 TT, “Iranian, Bolivian ministers ink defense MOU”, *Téhran Times* (July 21, 2023), <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/487081/Iranian-Bolivian-ministers-ink-defense-MOU>

124 Ibid.

125 Paola Flores and Daniel Politi, “Bolivia says obtaining Iranian drone technology ...”

126 Alexander Villegas, “In Peru’s Andes, scars of protest deaths cut deep as families seek justice”, *Reuters* (March 11, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/perus-andes-scars-protest-deaths-cut-deep-families-seek-justice-2023-03-11/>

127 Joseph M. Humire, “The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-backed Networks Prop up the Venezuelan Regime”, Atlantic Council (October 2020), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Maduro-Hezbollah-Nexus-How-Iran-backed-Networks-Prop-up-the-Venezuelan-Regime.pdf>

128 Sarah N. Stern, “Iran’s presence from Lebanon’s Beirut to Venezuela’s Caracas”, *Jerusalem Post* (June 8, 2020), <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/irans-presence-from-lebanons-beirut-to-venezuelas-caracas-630774>

Israeli embassy in 1992 which killed 29 people and injured 242,<sup>129</sup> and the 1994 attack on the Jewish Cultural Center in Buenos Aires (AMIA) that killed 85 and injured over 300.<sup>130</sup> Rabbani has also been implicated in running Hezbollah agents in the region, including Abdul Kadir and Abdel Nurwere,<sup>131</sup> involved in planning a failed attack in 2007 against New York's John F Kennedy airport. Rabbani was further suspected to be the Iranian controller for Muhammad Amadar, arrested in October 2014 in Surco Peru,<sup>132</sup> with explosives believed to be intended to attack Jewish targets in that country.

Due to the 1992 and 1994 Hezbollah terrorist attacks on Argentine soil, the most deadly to date in Latin America,<sup>133</sup> plus the high-profile investigation by Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman that tied Iran to Hezbollah in their planning, and Nisman's death under questionable conditions,<sup>134</sup> the role of Iran in the region has remained a sensitive issue in Argentina. That sensitivity has inhibited left of center Peronist governments, particularly that of Christina Fernandez de Kirchner, from pursuing closer relations with Iran, even if she wished to.

Argentina's continuing willingness to cooperate legally in the ongoing struggle against international terrorism, whatever the political posture of the Argentine far left toward Iran, has created problems for the Islamic Republic as it has sought to rebuild its engagement in the region. In July 2022, Argentina's a plane belonging to the Venezuela-registered

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129 Meir Javedanfar, "The Islamic Republic tries to maintain its hold in Latin America", *Times of Israel* (July 18, 2023), <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-islamic-republic-tries-to-maintain-its-hold-in-latin-america/>

130 A. G. Suizberger, "Trial Focuses on Iran Ties of Kenedy Plot Suspect", *New York Times* (July 21, 2010), <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/22/nyregion/22kennedy.html>

131 George Chaya, "El caso Hamdar expone el desconocimiento de Pedro Castillo en asuntos de terrorismo y seguridad continental", *Infobae* (February 19, 2022), <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2022/02/19/el-caso-hamdar-expone-el-desconocimiento-de-pedro-castillo-en-asuntos-de-terrorismo-y-seguridad-continental/>

132 Daniel S. Mariaschin, "Iran, Argentina and a 25-year-old terror attack", *Jerusalem Post* (June 19, 2019), <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Iran-Argentina-and-a-25-year-old-terror-attack-593057>

133 Dexter Filkins, "Death of a Prosecutor", *New Yorker* (July 13, 2015).

134 Luciano Mondino, "Iran's silent terror tactics in Latin America", *Times of Israel* (October 25, 2022), <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/irans-silent-terror-tactics-in-latin-america/>

cargo airline Emtrasur, exposing that it had been flying to questionable destinations corresponding to key Hezbollah operational areas, rather than logical routes for a cargo liner, and with an Iranian crew tied to Iran's Qods force, including the pilot Gholamreza Ghasemi,<sup>135</sup> a senior member of the organization.

### Iran-Brazil Engagement

By contrast to Venezuela, Brazil has long been Iran's most important economic partner in the region, accounting for 85% of the region's imports<sup>136</sup> from Iran and 82% of its exports to the country.<sup>137</sup> Despite its weight in the region's economic relationship with Iran, however, Brazil has generally not previously followed the lead of Venezuela and other leftist populist regimes you know high profile military cooperative agreements.

In its commercial engagement, Iran has long been a supplier of fertilizer to Brazil, produced by its petrochemical industry. With restrictions on Brazil's ability to purchase nitrate-based fertilizers from Russia, Iran's portion of the Brazilian market increased following supply disruptions and the imposition of sanctions on Russia. Reciprocally, Iran's most significant purchases from Brazil include grains and meat.<sup>138</sup>

Because of the geographic proximity of Brazil to Africa across the Atlantic, and the commercial relationship between the two countries, Brazil has also been an important logistics hub in Iran's commercial relationship to the continent. Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (RISL) maintains offices in Brazil.<sup>139</sup> In August 2023, Iran assigned a commercial attaché to Brazil,<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> IMF, "Exports, FOB to Partners Countries", International Monetary Fund (2023).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Kevjn Lim, "Bumped Crops: Iran's Grain Imports and Geopolitical Shocks", *Washington Institute* (June 8, 2020), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/bumped-crops-irans-grain-imports-and-geopolitical-shocks>

<sup>138</sup> HTV, "Turkey, Brazil brokering Iran nuclear deal", *Hispan TV* (August 20, 2023), <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/noticias-de-iran/570621/iran-brasil-agregado-comercial-relaciones>

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Louis Charbonneau, "Turkey, Brazil brokering Iran nuclear deal", *Reuters* (April 30, 2010), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-sanctions-idUSTRE63T4QC20100430>

reflecting the regime's desire to expand its important economic relationship with the Lula government.

Beyond commerce, the return of Lula and his Workers Party to power in Brazil in 2023 has deepened the country's interest in working with Iran as a strategic political partner. In 2010, the prior administration of Lula sought to impose Brazil, along with Turkey, as a negotiator of a nuclear agreement<sup>141</sup> between the United States and Iran. Building on that posture, the more radicalized Lula that returned to power in 2023,<sup>142</sup> in an international context where working against the Western "rules based international order" had more momentum,<sup>143</sup> supported the inclusion of Iran in the expanded BRICS organization,<sup>144</sup> culminating in its formal acceptance during the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August 2023.<sup>145</sup>

As noted previously Lula has also gone beyond the commitment to strategic engagement with Iran, demonstrated during his prior time in office, by permitting the Iranian warship *Macron*, and its escort ship *Dena*, to make a port call in Rio de Janeiro,<sup>146</sup> in February 2023.

In ethnic terms, culturally diverse Brazil has an estimated 200,000 Muslims,

<sup>141</sup> Evan Ellis, "Lula's Victory: Implications for Brazil's Foreign Policy and the U.S. Response", *The Global Americans* (November 3, 2022), <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/11/lulas-victory-implications-for-brazils-foreign-policy-and-the-us-response/>

<sup>142</sup> Andrew Latham, "The rules-based international order is ending. What will replace it?", *The Hill* (November 15, 2022), <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3736389-the-rules-based-international-order-is-ending-what-will-replace-it/>

<sup>143</sup> HTV, "Brasil abre brazos a Irán en BRICS, ¿qué beneficios tiene tal ingreso?", *Hispan TV* (August 18, 2023), <https://www.hispanTV.com/noticias/politica/570487/iran-brics-ingreso>

<sup>144</sup> Carien du Plessis, "BRICS invites Saudi, Iran and others to join developing world bloc", *Reuters* (2023), <https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/markets/brics-invites-saudi-iran-and-others-to-join-developing-world-bloc/ar-AA1fHWoF>

<sup>145</sup> Rodrigo Viga and Gabriel Araujo, "Brazil allows two Iranian warships to dock in Rio despite US pressure", *Reuters* (February 27, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/brazil-allows-two-iranian-warships-dock-rio-despite-us-pressure-2023-02-27/>

<sup>146</sup> HDS, "Islam in Brazil", *Harvard Divinity School* (2023), <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/islam-brazil#:~:text=Islam%20is%20practiced%20by%20over%20200%2C000%20Brazilians%E2%80%94making%20it,Muslim%20community%20includes%20both%20Sunni%20and%20Shi%E2%80%99a%20Muslims>

although most are ethnic Arabs,<sup>147</sup> of Lebanese/Syrian decent, or converts, rather than Persian. In June 2023, Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad-Mehdi Esmaeili indicated plans to establish a new Iranian cultural center in the country.

### Conclusions

Iran's renewed expansion of its political, military and other engagement with the Western Hemisphere is a subset of its broader return to the global stage with the support of Chinese money and an international environment in which the appetite for isolating and disciplining illiberal actors as diminished considerably. Iran's return has profound implications for The United States and the region. With its integration into the BRICS, a consolidated power base of friends like Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Cuba, and other key players like Brazil increasingly willing to engage with it, Iran has the potential to develop deeper economic and other ties in the region than before.

Although Iran will continue to be resource-constrained and most focused on its own region, its activities in Latin America will complement the dynamics of other extra-hemispheric actors such as China, as well as subnational and transnational groups such as Hezbollah that Iran works with globally as surrogates, complicating the calculus of US strategic planners in the region.

While the US government already has an abundance of strategic challenges in Latin America and globally, it is important for it to renew attention to Iran's reengagement and its implications, given that Latin America is the region with which US prosperity and security is most directly tied through bonds of geography, commerce, and family.

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<sup>147</sup> TT, "Iran to establish cultural centers in Venezuela, Brazil", *Tehran Times* (June 16, 2023).



### **About the author**

Robert Evan Ellis is a renowned U.S. academic and public policy analyst specializing in Latin America and the Caribbean. His extensive experience addresses security, defense and international relations issues in the region. He has worked in prestigious academic and governmental institutions, advising the Department of Defense and the Department of State. His publications and lectures focus on topics such as Chinese influence, drug trafficking and hemispheric cooperation. As a professor of National Security Studies at the Institute for Global Studies at the Army War College in the United States, his perspective is valued in academic and policy circles related to Latin America and the Caribbean.