



Iran's Global Ambition

By Michael Rubin

While the United States has focused its attention on Iranian activities in the greater Middle East, Iran has worked assiduously to expand its influence in Latin America and Africa. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's outreach in both areas has been deliberate and generously funded. He has made significant strides in Latin America, helping to embolden the anti-American bloc of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. In Africa, he is forging strong ties as well. The United States ignores these developments at its peril, and efforts need to be undertaken to reverse Iran's recent gains.

Both before and after the Islamic Revolution, Iran has aspired to be a regional power. Prior to 1979, Washington supported Tehran's ambitions—after all, the shah provided a bulwark against both communist and radical Arab nationalism. Following the Islamic Revolution, however, U.S. officials viewed Iranian visions of grandeur warily.

This wariness has grown as the Islamic Republic pursues nuclear technology in contravention to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty safeguards agreement and multiple United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions. In addition, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has played an increasingly destabilizing role in Iran's immediate neighborhood.¹ But while U.S. officials scramble to devise a strategy to contain, deter, and perhaps roll back Iranian influence in the greater Middle East, Ahmadinejad's government and the IRGC, flush with cash and overconfident with recent success, now aspire to be worldwide players.

Compartmentalized State Department and Defense Department officers focus on Iranian influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf states, and the Palestinian Authority, but a broader perspective that spans country desks suggests that the Islamic Republic now seeks to become a global power. Under Ahmadinejad,

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Iranian officials have pursued a coordinated diplomatic, economic, and military strategy to expand their influence in Latin America and Africa. They have found success not only in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia, but also in Senegal, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. These new alliances will together challenge U.S. interests in these states and in the wider region, especially if Tehran pursues an inkblot strategy to expand its influence to other regional states.

Latin America: Challenging the Monroe Doctrine

There has long been an Iranian presence in Latin America. Some time ago, Hezbollah established itself at the point where Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina meet.² Terrorists linked to Iran bombed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and a Jewish community center in the same city in 1994. In 2006, Argentine prosecutors issued warrants for former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and seven others on charges of ordering and masterminding the 1994 attack.³ The Hezbollah presence in the region has remained a source of concern for policymakers to the present.⁴

Only under Ahmadinejad, though, has the Iranian government pursued a sustained effort to reach out to Latin American countries. Using

hundreds of millions—if not billions—of dollars in aid and assistance, Ahmadinejad has worked to create an anti-American bloc with Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. While Ahmadinejad's first priority may be to solidify diplomatic support among third-world countries, his baiting—and the subsequent baiting by his allies—of Washington and his efforts to further destabilize the neighborhood suggest that he now seeks a permanent Iranian presence on the U.S. doorstep.

Whereas Iran plies poorer countries with aid on condition that they alter their stances toward the United States, both Iran and Venezuela are oil rich, and so the relationship is more cooperative.

The cornerstone of Ahmadinejad's Latin America policy is the formation of an anti-American axis with Venezuela, a goal driven as much by Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez as it is by the Iranian leader. During a July 2006 visit to Tehran, Chávez told a Tehran University crowd, "We have to save humankind and put an end to the U.S. empire."⁵ The two met again just two months later during the Non-Aligned Movement conference in Havana.⁶ When Chávez again visited Tehran—just a year after his first visit—supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei granted him an audience,⁷ an honor bestowed only upon political figures the Iranian leadership deems its closest partners. At the time, Iranian foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki quipped that "Hugo Chávez is becoming—or rather has already become—a household name in Iran and perhaps the region, thanks to his frequent trips to the Islamic Republic."⁸ Ahmadinejad and Chávez used the visit to declare an "Axis of Unity" against the United States.⁹

Shuttle diplomacy has gone both ways. Just two months after fêting Chávez in Tehran, Ahmadinejad visited him in Caracas.¹⁰ "Together we are surely growing stronger, and in truth no one can defeat us," he told the Venezuelan press.¹¹ Standing beside Chávez during a trip to Tehran just four months later—Chávez's fourth visit to the Iranian capital in just two years—Ahmadinejad declared, "The peoples of Iran and Venezuela will stand shoulder to shoulder with the disadvantaged nations of the world in spite of the opposition of World Imperialism," which is Ahmadinejad's moniker for the United States.¹²

Whereas Iran plies poorer countries with aid on condition that they alter their stances toward the United States, both Iran and Venezuela are oil rich, and so the relationship is more cooperative. Certainly, Tehran appreciates Chávez's diplomatic interventions. Indeed, had Venezuela been victorious in its efforts to win a UN Security Council seat in 2006, it is doubtful that Washington or its European allies would have achieved the symbolic victory of unanimous Security Council resolutions sanctioning Iran's nuclear program.¹³

Both leaders use their mutual embrace to overcome international isolation and sanctions. During his July 2007 visit to Tehran, Chávez presented Ahmadinejad with an Airbus A340-200 as a sign of friendship¹⁴ at a time when many Western countries looked askance at exporting modern aircraft to the Islamic Republic for fear that a plane might be cannibalized for spare parts in support of Iran's aging military fleet. Such cooperation has made moot the efforts of U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice to offer such concessions in order to entice greater Iranian compliance toward its international commitments. For example, just months after she agreed that U.S. companies could export spare aircraft parts to Iran,¹⁵ Ahmadinejad announced the commencement of scheduled passenger flights between Tehran and Caracas.¹⁶

Both leaders have also used their solidarity to support the other against domestic criticism. On opening two Iranian factories in Caracas, Chávez lauded the "achievements made after the Islamic Revolution," contrasting them sharply with life under the shah¹⁷—comments that meant little to the Venezuelan audience but helped Ahmadinejad deflect domestic criticism of his management of Iran's failing economy. Ahmadinejad, for his part, parroted Chávez's anti-American rhetoric to the Venezuelan audience, supporting the populist president's contention that Venezuelan ills derive from U.S. plots rather than economic mismanagement.¹⁸ More bizarre have been reports—clearly false—that "entire native tribes" in Venezuela have converted to Shia Islam.¹⁹ Such propaganda, however, plays well to clerical constituencies in Iran that may feel that their president's adventurism runs contrary to more immediate Iranian regional interests.

Increased trade has augmented the diplomatic embrace. As Chávez moved to nationalize Western oil facilities in Venezuela,²⁰ the Venezuelan state oil firm PDVSA announced a \$4 billion joint Iran-Venezuela oil production project in east-central Venezuela.²¹ In April 2007, Mottaki bragged that bilateral trade between Venezuela and the Islamic Republic would soon total

\$18 billion,²² which, even if an exaggeration, is nevertheless a sign of Iranian strategy to pursue soft power influence. Several recent visitors to Caracas have commented on the number of Iranians in the city's hotels.

Cuba, of course, has been part of the Iranian-Venezuelan embrace, although Cuban leader Fidel Castro's illness and the communist island nation's poverty may have dampened its utility as a primary player. Besides hosting the Non-Aligned Movement meeting in 2006, however, Havana has joined Tehran and Caracas in efforts to form a joint shipping line²³—an asset that, given the disorganization of U.S. and European sanctions enforcement, might help each country bypass certain sanctions. Not every shipping company, for example, may be as compliant with Tehran's sensitivities as one operated by Cubans and Venezuelans. There have already been reports—refuted by the Venezuelan ambassador in Tehran—that Venezuela has enabled Iranian scientists to conduct some nuclear work in the South American state, out of the view of international inspectors.²⁴

Both Tehran and Caracas have used their petrodollar windfall to encourage states in Latin America and Africa to embark upon confrontational policies toward the United States.²⁵ Perhaps the primary beneficiaries in Latin America have been Nicaragua and Bolivia. Just days after Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega's inauguration, Ahmadinejad revealed in the former socialist revolutionary's return to power. "The two nations share identical ideals" and a common enemy in the United States, Ahmadinejad said.²⁶ Ortega endorsed "strong bonds" between the "two nations and [their] revolutions."²⁷ Iran's embassy in Managua is now the largest diplomatic mission in the city.²⁸ Ortega returned Ahmadinejad's visit within months of taking office, traveling to Tehran on a jet lent by Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi.²⁹ In Tehran, Ahmadinejad spoke of growing Iranian-Nicaraguan ties as the cornerstones of "an order based on justice, peace and brotherhood."³⁰ In a subsequent session with Ortega, Khamenei spoke of their mutual antipathy toward the United States.³¹

Venezuela might be able to stand on its own, but Nicaragua cannot. The Islamic Republic's embrace of Nicaragua came with strings attached. Storm-ravaged and unfriendly to investors, Nicaragua gained a needed cash infusion. In the months after Ortega's visit to the Islamic Republic, the two countries signed a number of trade accords,³² and Tehran agreed to finance a \$350 million Nicaraguan port.³³ After the announcement of these deals, Ortega called the United States "a terrorist

nation"³⁴ and later endorsed the Islamic Republic's nuclear program.³⁵ Alluding to this program, Ahmadinejad even offered to transfer "up-to-date experiences and knowledge to Nicaragua."³⁶ One seasoned Nicaraguan ambassador, slightly embarrassed by Ortega's pro-Iranian rhetoric, told an interlocutor that not only Tehran but also Caracas had made aid to Nicaragua contingent upon Managua's frequent statements of support for Tehran. Regardless of whether Nicaragua is motivated by Venezuelan cash or ideological antipathy toward the United States, an isolated Tehran gains an ally with "identical and common political views."³⁷

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Bolivia, too, has become an important Iranian ally. Under the leadership of Juan Evo Morales, La Paz has welcomed alliance with Tehran. As with Nicaragua, Bolivia gets aid—upwards of \$1.1 billion in "industrial cooperation"³⁸—and Iran gets a diplomatic ally. On September 4, 2007, amid international efforts to augment sanctions against the Islamic Republic, Bolivian foreign minister David Choquehuanca Céspedes endorsed "Iran's nuclear rights" and called for international support for the Islamic Republic's position.³⁹ Tehran rewarded Bolivia with the opening of an embassy in La Paz,⁴⁰ certainly a sign that Tehran no longer saw the landlocked South American country as peripheral to its interests.

There is nothing wrong with countries engaging with other countries. Tehran could argue that they have as much interest in strong relations with Latin America as Washington has with the Persian Gulf emirates or newly independent Central Asian or Caucasian republics. But it would be dangerous to dismiss Iranian outreach as altruistic and irrelevant to U.S. national security concerns.

The Islamic Republic's state broadcasting authority has in recent months established partnerships with its Bolivian and Nicaraguan counterparts, not only to help these countries expand their own messaging, but also to have a platform for Iranian-sponsored broadcasts "for all of Latin America."⁴¹ The idea that Ahmadinejad might see Latin America as a beachhead from which to conduct an aggressive strategy against the United States and its allies

gained further credence when, earlier this month, Colombian forces raided a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) encampment and seized a computer whose files referenced FARC plans to purchase fifty kilograms of uranium,⁴² raising concern among some U.S. officials that the purchase may have been facilitated with Iranian money and offices.

Africa: Iran's Next Frontier

With successive U.S. administrations and European governments effectively ignoring Africa, Tehran sees its fifty-two countries as diplomatic easy picking. On January 29, 2008, Mottaki declared that this year would mark a “milestone in Iran-Africa ties.”⁴³ Three days later, while attending the Africa Union summit in Addis Ababa, Mottaki announced that Iran would soon host a summit of African foreign ministers in Tehran.⁴⁴

The traditional pattern in which Iranian actions fail to live up to diplomatic rhetoric also appears to be changing in Africa, with Tehran developing strong partnerships with a number of states. The Islamic Republic has forged particularly strong ties with Senegal, once a Cold War ally of the United States but now quietly turning into West Africa's Venezuela. President Abdoulaye Wade has traveled twice to Tehran to meet with Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, first in 2006 and again in 2008.⁴⁵ During his most recent visit, he provided a backdrop for Khamenei to declare that developing unity between Islamic countries like Senegal and Iran can weaken “the great powers” like the United States.⁴⁶ It would be a mistake to dismiss this as a rhetorical flourish: on January 27, 2008, a week after Senegalese foreign minister Cheikh Tidiane Gadio announced that he, too, would visit Tehran, Minister of Armed Forces Becaye Diop met with his Iranian counterpart to discuss expanding bilateral defense ties between the two states.⁴⁷

Senior Iranian officials have returned the visits. On July 22, 2007, judiciary chief Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi and government spokesman Gholam-Hossein Elham—among the closest confidantes of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, respectively—departed for Dakar, where they met Wade and Senegalese prime minister Cheikh Hadjibou Soumaré. Shahroudi declared, “We believe it is our duty to expand ties with Islamic countries and use the capabilities and potentials [*sic*] of Muslim states to help the growth and spread of Islam.”⁴⁸ On March 12, 2008, Ahmadinejad left for a visit to the West African state.⁴⁹

While the Iranian leadership might be most interested in expanding a Muslim bloc—especially one that might supplant the influence of Sunni Arab states—the Senegalese leadership seems most interested in immediate economic benefits. “Energy, Oil Prospecting, Industry: Senegal Benefits from Iranian Solutions,” a headline in the official government newspaper declared after Wade's first visit to Tehran.⁵⁰ After the reciprocal Iranian visit, Wade announced that Iran would build an oil refinery, a chemical plant, and an \$80 million car assembly plant in the West African nation.⁵¹ Within weeks, Samuel Sarr, Senegal's energy minister, visited Tehran and returned with a pledge that Iran would supply Senegal with oil for a year and purchase a 34 percent stake in Senegal's oil refinery.⁵² Such aid probably came with strings attached. On November 25, 2007, during the third meeting of the Iran-Senegal joint economic commission, Wade endorsed Iran's nuclear program.⁵³

Senegal is not alone among those countries Tehran is cultivating. While Iranian officials trumpet Islam during meetings with Muslim officials, the Islamic Republic is willing to embrace any African state—Muslim or not—that finds itself estranged from the West in general and the United States in particular. Here, Sudan and Zimbabwe especially have been beneficiaries. Both European governments and Washington have sought to isolate Sudan for what many international human rights groups deem genocide in Darfur. As the international community sought to tighten diplomatic sanctions on Khartoum, Ahmadinejad moved to embrace Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir.⁵⁴ Ahmadinejad was forthright: Iranian-Sudanese ties should be built around the understanding that both governments would defend each other in international settings.⁵⁵ Just this month, Iran's defense minister visited Khartoum and called the African state “the cornerstone” of the Islamic Republic's Africa policies.⁵⁶

Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's longtime president, has been as poisonous for his country as Bashir has been for Sudan. Mugabe's government demonizes racial and ethnic minorities, and his economic policies have forced the breadbasket of southern Africa to face famine.⁵⁷ But as the international community has isolated Mugabe's regime in Zimbabwe, Tehran has reached out to fill the gap. Iranian politicians may speak of their commitment to social justice, but their crass indifference to social issues and public health and well-being are on display as they work to transform Africa's most brutal dictatorship into a pillar of Iranian influence in Africa. Mottaki initiated outreach to Zimbabwe on the sidelines of the UN General

Assembly in 2006.⁵⁸ The two countries pledged uniformity of policy.⁵⁹ At a Tehran press conference in November of that year, Mugabe said, "Iran and Zimbabwe think alike and have been described [as belonging to] the 'Axis of Evil.' . . . Those countries that think alike should come together."⁶⁰ In subsequent days, the two countries signed deals to boost energy cooperation, restart Zimbabwe's defunct oil refinery, and underwrite agricultural policies that have left the southern African nation on the brink of famine.⁶¹ The Iranian ambassador in Harare pledged to help Mugabe repel sanctions.⁶²

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South Africa has become another Iranian regional ally. Grateful for the Islamic Republic's opposition to apartheid, the two countries formally reestablished relations in 1994. While subsequent bilateral rhetoric was always warm, in recent years, Tehran has used oil and trade to develop its ties with Pretoria. The Iranian strategy is deliberate. "South Africa is a key member of the Non-Aligned Movement, a bloc of developing countries that has resisted the efforts to force Tehran to halt uranium enrichment," explained a commentary in Iran's official English-language newspaper.⁶³

Having failed to get Venezuela onto the UN Security Council, the Iranian government has been anxious to exploit South Africa's rotating membership and its presence on the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) board of governors.⁶⁴ In February 2007, for example, Ali Larjani, then the nuclear negotiator for Iran, traveled to South Africa to meet with President Thabo Mbeki.⁶⁵ The strategy has paid dividends. Despite the February 2008 IAEA report that found that the Islamic Republic continued to enrich uranium in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty safeguards agreement and two UN Security Council resolutions,⁶⁶ the South African government has used its rotating membership on the UN Security Council to advocate against any further sanctions.⁶⁷

Iranian officials have been just as energetic in cultivating smaller African states. In September 2007, interim Iranian oil minister Gholam-Hossein Nozari pledged cooperation to exploit Uganda's newfound oil field,⁶⁸ and

two months later, the Export Development Bank of Iran pledged \$1 million to underwrite microfinance in Uganda.⁶⁹ In November, Mottaki also announced an initiative to expand relations with Malawi⁷⁰ after that country's president endorsed Iran's right to pursue nuclear technology.⁷¹ The same month, Mottaki welcomed the Côte d'Ivoire foreign minister to Tehran⁷²—again, after the West African nation's ambassador threw his country's support behind Iran in the dispute with the UN Security Council over Iran's nuclear program.⁷³ Indeed, while the Iranian government spreads millions of dollars around Africa, its aid appears conditional upon support. In recent weeks, the Iranian government has used declarations by the leaders of Lesotho, Mauritania, Mali, and Namibia to bolster support for its nuclear program.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Iran will remain at the forefront of U.S. concern well into the next administration. The 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, a joint product of the sixteen organizations comprising the U.S. intelligence community, undercut both a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear defiance and the ability of the Bush administration to constrain Iran's program through unilateral action.⁷⁵ The January 6, 2008, confrontation in the Strait of Hormuz between U.S. warships and IRGC speedboats only underscored the tension.

Absent a diplomatic solution or the prospect of a viable military option, many in Washington embrace containment and deterrence as plan B. For example, General John Abizaid, commander of U.S. Central Command until March 2007, said, "I believe we have the power to deter Iran, should it become nuclear. . . . There are ways to live with a nuclear Iran."⁷⁶ Containing Iran, however, is easier said than done.

Throughout his administration's second term, Bush has struggled to convince regional allies that his commitments to them are solid. As a result, regional U.S. allies like Egypt, Kuwait, Azerbaijan, and Turkey now seek separate accommodation with Iran.

But even as dozens of diplomats, intelligence analysts, and military officers focus on how to counter Iranian strategy in the region and enhance U.S. public diplomacy, the Iranian challenge has grown far broader. The United States has a compartmentalized strategy; Iran has a global strategy that Washington has been unable to counter: for every three trips Ahmadinejad takes to Latin America, Bush takes one.

The chances for long-term Iranian success may be doubtful—Latin American and African countries may welcome Iranian aid and take advantage of Tehran’s soft power with the same enthusiasm with which they sometimes divert U.S. Agency for International Development and World Bank assistance, but any ideological solidarity will be far more limited to each country’s immediate leadership. Still, Ahmadinejad’s outreach to Latin America and Africa can do damage. The Islamic Republic is not an altruistic power. Its aid is conditional, and sometimes these conditions run counter to U.S. interests. At the very least, Tehran’s newfound allies in Latin America and Africa provide needed diplomatic solace and enable Iranian authorities to launder dual use goods and, in theory, outsource suspect weapons research. More worrisome, the Islamic Republic might use its new havens to destabilize neighboring states—indeed, Tehran may be cooperating with Caracas to undermine Álvaro Uribe’s administration in Colombia—or as launching pads for terrorism against U.S. interests. The Pentagon may have strengthened its facilities in the Persian Gulf, but Iran and its proxies may find U.S. interests in places like Cancun and the Caribbean more vulnerable. Just as in 1972 the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine outsourced a terrorist attack on Israel’s main airport to the Japanese Red Army, IRGC planners may find their African and Latin American allies compliant in their desire to lash out at U.S. interests, especially if cooperation comes with further financial reward. The 1994 Buenos Aires bombing already demonstrates Tehran’s willingness to attack soft targets half a world away.

If the Bush administration and its successor continue to ignore Iran’s growing global ambitions and do not implement a strategy to reverse Ahmadinejad’s recent gains, Washington may find that Iran, not the United States, holds the upper hand in a high-stakes game of deterrence.

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