

# U.S. AND IRANIAN STRATEGIC COMPETITION:

Peripheral Competition in Latin America and  
Africa

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran pursues cooperation with states on the geographic and strategic periphery of the competition between the US and Iran in order to create a network of diplomatic and economic relationships or “partners” who can lessen the blow of international sanctions and generally oppose Western attempts to constrict its ambitions. These peripheral “partners,” located mainly in Africa and Latin America, also serve as alternative markets for Iranian oil, provide diplomatic cover for Iran’s nuclear efforts, and aid Iran’s acquisition of goods proscribed by international sanctions.

Tehran’s strategy pragmatically subordinates concerns for ideological and religious homogeneity to the goal of creating a coalition of non- or anti-Western states capable of influencing its competition with the United States. The states involved are drawn to Iran by both promises of economic help—particularly in the energy sector—and by Iranian appeals to commonly oppose the Western international system.

The Islamic Republic also portrays its present isolation by the US and Europe as a continuation of Western imperialism, and draws on its credentials as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement to elicit support from the disparate states throughout Africa and the Americas that have preexisting grievances with the Western order and its leading states.

According to Iranian leaders, the IRI’s competition with the US and its allies is not a just a contest between states, but a clash of worldviews. The US represents an exploitative status quo, and Iran offers the promise of an alternative order geared toward promoting the sovereignty and interests of developing nations. Speaking to an audience in Nigeria in 2010, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for a decisive break with the present Western-dominated system:

We have to develop a proper cooperation among the developing nations in order to wriggle ourselves from the domination of the western powers. And this effort is going on among the independent developing nations today. We have to establish a collective effort with a view to create a new international independent economic system that should be on the basis of justice.<sup>1</sup>

Though many of the countries Iran seeks to cooperate with are militarily and economically weak, Tehran casts a wide net to build an array of partners to counterbalance what it sees as Western dominance of the global order. Iran seeks to be the hub of a non-Western bloc, and intends to frustrate American influence over Iran and throughout the developing world.

US ability to push back against Iran’s attempts to widen its network of such countries is strongest in countries that benefit from US aid, trade, or that lack a significant basis for ideological disagreement with US practices. While Iran’s overtures to peripheral states have the potential to weaken US attempts to contain and isolate Iran, Tehran’s web is fragile and possibly illusory.

It remains to be seen if Tehran can make good on the development commitments it has made to potential partners or if its bonds with peripheral states can be institutionalized beyond a personal relationship between heads of state. Iran’s plan to restructure the international system in opposition to the Western-led model remains the vision of a few fringe governments and does not appear likely to spread.

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<sup>1</sup> Nuruddeen M. Abdallah and Aliyu S. Machika, “Why Nigeria needs nuclear energy now –President Ahmadinejad.” Sunday Trust, 11 July 2010, [http://sunday.dailytrust.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4186:why-nigeria-needsnuclear-energy-now-president-ahmadinejad&catid=57:cover&Itemid=126](http://sunday.dailytrust.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4186:why-nigeria-needsnuclear-energy-now-president-ahmadinejad&catid=57:cover&Itemid=126).

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Iran has found it can make some gains in competition with the US by aligning itself with a wide range of peripheral states. It is unclear how many gains Iran can make, but this does help it defuse UN pressure and sanctions, diversify its economic outreach in response to sanctions, and find allies to work with in the UN and other international forums.

- *Venezuela*: Venezuela's is Iran's most vocal and supportive peripheral "partner." Both countries have engaged in a broad spectrum of commitments ranging from mutual diplomatic support to joint commercial ventures to military exchange. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has advocated for Iran's nuclear program at the IAEA and for Iran's vision of an anti-Western coalition of developing states.
- *Ecuador, Bolivia & Nicaragua*: Iran seeks to work with Latin American countries lacking the resources of larger states like Venezuela or Brazil in order to build a network upon which it can rely to diffuse diplomatic and economic pressure and, potentially, to base Iranian assets in the Western hemisphere.
- *Argentina*: Iran has reached out to Argentina in order to diversify its Latin American connections, but while both countries have increased bilateral trade, relations remain complicated by international pressure and Iran's possible involvement in terrorist attacks against Argentine Jews in the 1990s.
- *Brazil*: Brazil under President Dilma Rousseff appears poised to pursue a middle path which remains independent of the U.S. or Iran and its anti-American Latin allies. The leadership of Brazil will first and foremost protect its economic interests and its aspirations for prominence in a multi-polar world.
- *Senegal and Gambia*: Since the early 2000s Iran has looked to countries in West Africa as potential sources of economic and diplomatic support, but severe political missteps and unfulfilled promises have undercut Tehran's decade of gains.
- *Morocco*: US-Iranian competition for influence in Morocco focuses on Morocco's different political and commercial interests. The monarchy is a strong political ally of the US government, but depends upon Iran for much of its energy needs. The Sunni-Shi'a divide complicates Iran's attempts to improve relations in Morocco.
- *South Africa*: South Africa has an ambivalent relationship with the IRI. Ties between both nations are strengthened by growing economic cooperation, expressed mainly through energy sales, and due to the Iranian regime's condemnation of South Africa's apartheid era leadership. The relationship is strained by Iran's record of human rights violations, its ambiguous nuclear ambitions, and political pressure from the West.
- *Zimbabwe*: Iran has a Chavez-style ally in Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, but internal political division within Zimbabwe along with U.S. pressure impede full cooperation.

## LATIN AMERICA

In Latin America, Iran mobilizes historically rooted anti-American sentiment in combination with economic incentives to draw states into its "post-Western" camp. Economically impoverished countries are drawn to Iran as a source of desperately needed investment and mutual antipathy towards the US provides rhetorical packaging for bilateral agreements.

In the past decade Iran has dramatically increased its diplomatic missions to states critical of the US like Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador, but also to non-aligned states like Argentina and Brazil. Iran has built 17 cultural centers in Latin America and it currently maintains ten embassies, up from six in 2005.<sup>2</sup> The Islamic Republic's diplomatic missions have resulted in lively rhetoric and impressive promises of cooperation, but they have not yet yielded strategic results that have a significant effect on greater US-Iranian competition.

The chronology in Figure 12.1 below highlights some of the key diplomatic exchanges between the leadership of Iran and various Latin American countries:

### Figure 12.1 Chronology of Iran-Latin America Leadership Meetings

- **2000**
  - **September - October:** Iranian President Khatami visits **Cuba** and **Venezuela**
- **2001**
  - **May 18-21:** **Venezuela's** President Hugo Chavez visits Iran
- **2006**
  - **July 31:** **Venezuela's** Chavez visits Teheran
  - **September 11-16:** Ahmadinejad visits Castro in **Cuba** -- Fourteenth Non-Aligned Movement Summit
- **2007**
  - **Jan. 13:** Ahmadinejad visits **Venezuela** to talk about strengthening economic ties<sup>3</sup>
  - **Jan. 14:** Ahmadinejad visits President Daniel Ortega in **Nicaragua** to discuss opening new embassies in each other's capitals.<sup>4</sup>
  - **Jan. 15:** Ahmadinejad attends the inauguration ceremony of **Ecuadorian** President Raphael Correa.<sup>5</sup>
  - **June 10:** **Nicaraguan** president Daniel Ortega met Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei
  - **Sept. 27:** Ahmadinejad visits **Bolivian** President Evo Morales and pledges \$1 billion in aid.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Donna Cassata, "SOUTHCOM boss: Iran makes Latin America inroads." Associated Press. 5 April 2011. <http://www.navytimes.com/news/2011/04/ap-military-southcom-iran-makes-latin-america-inroads-040511/>.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Romero, "Iranian President Visits Venezuela to Strengthen Ties." The New York Times, 14 January 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/14/world/americas/14iran.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Traci Carl "Iran Leader Courts Latin America Allies." The Associated Press, 14 January 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/14/AR2007011400354.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Monte Reel "Argentina Pursues Iran In '94 Blast as Neighbors Court Ahmadinejad." The Washington Post, 14 January 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/13/AR2007011301253.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "Iran Leader Visits Venezuela, Bolivia." USA Today, 28 September 2007, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-09-27-iran-south-america\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-09-27-iran-south-america_N.htm).

- **Sept. 27:** Ahmadinejad visits **Venezuelan** President Hugo Chavez in Caracas to talk about rolling back the influence of Washington in the region.<sup>7</sup>
- **2009**
  - **Feb. 3:** An Iranian delegation visits **Paraguay** to discuss import and investment opportunities.<sup>8</sup>
  - **Feb. 27:** Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Reza Salari leads an Iranian delegation to **Mexico** City to discuss trade relations.<sup>9</sup>
  - **Sep 6:** In Iran **Venezuela's** President Hugo Chavez sealed an agreement to export 20,000 barrels per day of gasoline to Iran. The deal would give Tehran a cushion if the West carries out threats of fuel sanctions over Iran's nuclear program. The two countries also agreed to set up a bank together to help finance joint projects.
  - **Nov. 23:** Ahmadinejad visits **Brazilian** President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to discuss strengthening economic ties.<sup>10</sup>
  - **Nov. 24:** Ahmadinejad visits **Bolivian** President Evo Morales in La Paz to discuss mutual cooperation.<sup>11</sup>
  - **Nov. 25:** Ahmadinejad visits **Venezuelan** President Hugo Chavez.<sup>12</sup>
- **2010**
  - **February 20:** **Ecuador's** inclusion on an international list of nations accused of lagging in the fight against money laundering is a hypocritical punishment for its relations with Iran, said Ecuador's president.<sup>13</sup>
  - **April 26:** Celso Amorim, **Brazil's** foreign minister, visits Tehran, meeting with his Iranian counterpart Manuchehr Mottaki, Iran's nuclear negotiator Said Jalili, and the president of the Iranian parliament, Ali Larijani. At the meeting, Amorim asks for assurances that Iran's nuclear program is meant for only peaceful ends.

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<sup>7</sup> "Iran Leader Visits Venezuela, Bolivia." USA Today, 28 September 2007, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-09-27-iran-south-america\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-09-27-iran-south-america_N.htm).

<sup>8</sup> "Iran eyes enhanced cooperation in trade, technology with Paraguay," 4 February 2009, China View, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-02/04/content\\_10760997.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-02/04/content_10760997.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Alexandra Olson, "Iran eyes Mexico in deepening Latin America ties." Associated Press, Newsvine 26 February 2009, <http://www.newsvine.com/news/2009/02/26/2482481-iran-eyes-mexico-in-deepening-latin-america-ties>.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Brice, "Iranian leader continues South American trip with Bolivia stop." CNN, 24 November 2009, CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/11/24/iran.bolivia.visit/index.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Cawthorne, "Ecuador Says Iran Ties Landed It on Laundering List." Reuters, 20 February 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/02/20/us-ecuador-money-idUSTRE61J2H220100220>.

- **May 16: Brazil's** president Lula meets Ahmadinejad in Tehran, in what has been framed as possibly a last, best chance for a negotiated solution.
- **August 11:** Relations between Argentina and Iran begin to thaw as **Argentine** President Cristina Fernandez openly welcomed Brazil's efforts to resolve the dispute over Iran's nuclear program and believes the Tehran declaration helps promote peace and dialogue.<sup>14</sup>
- **2011**
  - **January 25:** The relationship between **Brazil** and the U.S. had suffered during the past year as a result of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's attempts to seek close ties with the Iranian government and efforts to mediate a solution in the international standoff over Iran's nuclear program. However Brazil's current president Rousseff has quickly distanced herself from Lula's Iran policy and has done more than Lula to address human rights abuses in Iran and elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

### *Venezuela*

Iran's closest peripheral relationship is with Venezuela. Although both countries have very different guiding ideologies and political structures, they are bound by a common rejection of US leadership in the international system and by their significant petroleum exports, signified by their dual membership in OPEC. In the past decade Tehran and Caracas have engaged in a broad spectrum of commitments ranging from mutual diplomatic support to military exchange. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has shown himself to be committed to Iranian sovereignty—supporting Iran's nuclear program at the IAEA—and to Iran's vision of an anti-Western coalition of developing states.

As long as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez continues to define his role as one of opposition to the US, Washington has little hope of bettering its political position with Caracas or diminishing Iran's close affiliation. That being said, US-Venezuelan commercial ties are strong and provide links between both countries which help maintain an undercurrent of stability in the relationship. At present, the US need not be too concerned about this Iran-Venezuelan relationship, despite the threatening language used by both presidents. Mutual US-Venezuelan energy dependence mitigates the possibility of a more serious breach in relations.

### **Evolving US-Venezuela Relations**

Relations between the US and the Venezuela have been consistently strained since the ascendance of Hugo Chavez to the presidency in 1998. Chavez's "Bolivarian Revolution" consists of nationalist and populist policies infused with a rejection of American "imperialism" in Latin America and the world at large. Like Iran, Venezuela has attempted to leverage its oil wealth in order to gain allies in opposition to US leadership in the hemisphere. Caracas promotes its PetroCaribe and PetroSur petroleum initiatives in order to encourage regional integration

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<sup>14</sup> M. Soroush, "Iran-Argentina Relations begin to thaw." Tehran Times, 11 August 2010.  
[http://www.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=224606](http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=224606).

<sup>15</sup> "Obama to visit Brazil in sign of warmer ties." Reuters, 25 January, 2011.  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/25/obama-brazil-idusn2523622520110125>.

guided by the principles espoused by Chavez.<sup>16</sup> Since Venezuela's economic decline in 2009, this tactic has met with limited success.

In 2010, a regional poll conducted by Latinobarometro, a Chilean nonprofit policy analysis group, showed that Chavez's impact in Latin American states has precipitously declined during the last decade. Among leaders in the Americas he was rated second to last.<sup>17</sup> Even in Bolivia and Argentina, traditional supporters of Chavez's regime, the Venezuelan President received less than a 35 percent approval rating.<sup>18</sup>

Many of Chavez's more grandiose projects for South America—including a pipeline to Argentina, a joint Venezuela-Iran development bank, and a continental investment fund—have been shelved since 2009. The Venezuelan government has not issued official statements regarding why the projects have been called off, but the reduced ambitions have coincided with the country's present economic woes.<sup>19</sup>

During the Bush Administration US-Venezuela animosity was widely publicized and government officials viewed Chavez as a credible threat to regional stability in Latin America. In September 2008, President Chavez ordered the expulsion of the US Ambassador in Caracas and the US Government ordered the reciprocal expulsion of the Venezuela's Ambassador to Washington.<sup>20</sup>

Tensions seemed to ease somewhat with the election of Barak Obama, and at the 2009 Summit of the Americas both nations agreed to pursue a relationship based on mutual interests. Political friction soon returned and culminated in the governments' joint removal of their ambassadors in 2010. In recent years, with the decline of Venezuela's energy-export dependent economy, Chavez's stature as a pan-South American leader—and a potential threat to US interests—has been considerably undermined.

These sharp political disagreements between the US and Venezuela do, however, mask significant economic exchanges. According to Bancoex, the Venezuelan Bank of Commerce, the United States is Venezuela's most important trading partner and Venezuela is the US's fifth largest export market in Latin America.<sup>21</sup> US goods account for about 25% of Venezuelan imports and approximately 50% of Venezuelan exports go to the United States.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Background Note: Venezuela," U.S. State Department. 2 September 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35766.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Juan Forero, "Chavez's Influence Wanes in Latin America." Washington Post, 17 May 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/chavezs-influence-wanes-in-latin-america/2011/05/13/AF2x785G\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/chavezs-influence-wanes-in-latin-america/2011/05/13/AF2x785G_story.html).

<sup>18</sup> Juan Forero, "Chavez's Influence Wanes in Latin America." Washington Post, 17 May 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/chavezs-influence-wanes-in-latin-america/2011/05/13/AF2x785G\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/chavezs-influence-wanes-in-latin-america/2011/05/13/AF2x785G_story.html).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Background Note: Venezuela," U.S. State Department. 2 September 2011, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35766.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



Venezuela is the fourth largest supplier of foreign oil to United States and supplies about 11 percent of US crude oil imports. Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA), Venezuela's state-owned petroleum company, and its US subsidiary, CITGO, either wholly own or are part-owners of nine oil refineries throughout the United States.<sup>23</sup> The US Energy Information Administration reports that in 2009 Venezuela supplied approximately 1.5 million barrels of crude oil and refined petroleum products to the US per day.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the importance of the US-Venezuelan commercial and energy-based relationship, President Chavez has on occasion shown himself willing to jeopardize economic relations in order to advance his political agenda. In several cases Venezuelan companies have defied UN and US unilateral sanctions on Iran by continuing trade in proscribed goods and Chavez has also worked through OPEC, in solidarity with Iran, to keep oil prices artificially high.<sup>25</sup>

### **Evolving IRI-Venezuela Relations**

Iran's relationship with Venezuela goes back to their role in founding OPEC in 1960. Though culturally and geographically distinct, both nations were drawn together by "petro-politics" and membership in an organization noticeably absent Western powers. Bilateral relations were significantly altered by the Islamic Revolution—the Venezuelan Government had a close relationship with the deposed Shah—and remained largely dormant until September 2000.<sup>26</sup>

In that year Iran's President Khatami made the first visit by an Iranian head-of-state to Caracas since the 1979 Revolution. That official visit initiated the current close relationship between Iran and Venezuela. As illustrated by the chronology above, since that first meeting executive-level diplomatic exchange has become routine between the Islamic Republic and Venezuela.

As a result of the election of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, Iran's relationship with Venezuela intensified and became even more focused on resisting American international leadership. Employing their common rhetorical style, Presidents Ahmadinejad and Chavez have jointly criticized the United States for a myriad of abuses across the globe while praising their relations as a model for the new world order. On an official visit to the Islamic Republic, Chavez told a news conference that his country and Iran "will united defeat the imperialism of North America."<sup>27</sup> Ahmadinejad, visiting Venezuela in 2009, labeled Chavez "A brother who is resisting like a mountain the intentions of imperialism and colonialism."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cesar J. Alvarez and Stephanie Hanson, "Backgrounder: Venezuela's Oil-Based Economy." Council on Foreign Relations, 9 February 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/economics/venezuelas-oil-based-economy/p12089#p7>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Anna Mahjar-Barducci "Venezuela Freezes Relations with U.S.; Triggers Oil Price Hike." Hudson New York, 15 February 2011, <http://www.hudson-ny.org/2199/venezuela-freezes-relations-with-us>.

<sup>26</sup> "Venezuelastan: Iran's Latin American Ambitions." Hudson Institute, 15 April 2010, <http://www.hudson.org/files/publications/41510%20Venezuelistan%20Event%20Transcript.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Parisa Hafezi, "Iran, Venezuela in "Axis of Unity" Against U.S." Reuters, 2 July 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/07/02/us-iran-venezuela-idUSDAH23660020070702>.

<sup>28</sup> "Chavez Welcomes Ahmadinejad in Venezuela." CNN, 25 November 2009. [http://articles.cnn.com/2009-11-25/world/iran.ahmadinejad.venezuela\\_1\\_iranian-president-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-venezuelan-president-hugo-chavez-mr-ahmadinejad?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2009-11-25/world/iran.ahmadinejad.venezuela_1_iranian-president-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-venezuelan-president-hugo-chavez-mr-ahmadinejad?_s=PM:WORLD).

The relationship remains significant and according to Air Force Gen. Douglas Fraser, the head of US Southern Command, it is based on “shared interests, such as access to military and petroleum technologies and avoiding international isolation.”<sup>29</sup> Venezuela, and more specifically President Chavez, serves as the nexus for Iran’s political engagement with Latin America. That nexus is institutionalized in the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA), of which Iran is an observer.

In addition to serving as a regional political hub for Iran, Venezuela may also serve as a transit point for arms and other technologies restricted under UN sanctions. Between 2005 and 2010 Venezuela acquired approximately \$12 billion to \$15 billion worth of weapons from Russia and China.<sup>30</sup> While both permanent Security Council members have promised to halt arms sales to the Islamic Republic, US officials fear that Venezuela provides sellers a convenient third party to avoid sanctions.<sup>31</sup>

Iran and Venezuela have made energy sector cooperation the centerpiece of their economic relationship, but they actively pursue cooperation on many fronts. The two OPEC states established a joint petrochemical plant in 2007 and an oil company, Beniroug, in 2009. Iran has constructed an ammunition factory, a car assembly plant, a cement factory, and other fixed investments in Venezuela.<sup>32</sup> Despite both countries deep political and economic commitments, Venezuela is only Iran’s fifth largest trade partner in Latin America, trailing behind less friendly powers like Argentina and Brazil.<sup>33</sup>

The countries also enjoy significant military cooperation. Since 2006, Iran has embedded its officers in the Venezuelan military and provides close support and training. Iran has also influenced Venezuelan military doctrine and strategic planning. According to David Myers, professor of political science at Pennsylvania State University, due to Iranian influence Venezuela has restructured its military along asymmetric lines—a fighting model more suited to combating a conventionally superior enemy like the United States.<sup>34</sup>

According to the US Department of the Treasury, Venezuela also indirectly supports Iran’s Lebanon-based proxy, Hezbollah. In 2008, Adam J. Szubin, Director of the Office of Foreign Assets Control, accused the Government of Venezuela of “employing and providing safe harbor to Hizballah facilitators and fundraisers.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Donna Cassata, “SOUTHCOM boss: Iran makes Latin America inroads.” Associated Press. 5 April 2011. <http://www.navytimes.com/news/2011/04/ap-military-southcom-iran-makes-latin-america-inroads-040511/>.

<sup>30</sup> Anna Mahjar-Barducci, “Iran’s Ties with Venezuela: US Concerned, and Should Be.” Hudson New York. 13 April 2011. <http://www.hudson-ny.org/2035/iran-ties-with-venezuela>.

<sup>31</sup> Anna Mahjar-Barducci, “Iran’s Ties with Venezuela: US Concerned, and Should Be.” Hudson New York. 13 April 2011. <http://www.hudson-ny.org/2035/iran-ties-with-venezuela>.

<sup>32</sup> “Iran, Venezuela to launch joint oil company: report.” People’s daily online, 29 October 2009, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90777/90854/6797976.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Jaime Darenblum, “Risky Business in Buenos Aires.” The Weekly Standard, 24 August 2011. [http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/risky-business-buenos-aires\\_591324.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/risky-business-buenos-aires_591324.html)

<sup>34</sup> Danielle Kurtzleben, “Iran-Venezuela ties worry US.” Asia Times Online, 12 August 2009. [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/KH12Ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/KH12Ak02.html).

<sup>35</sup> “Treasury Targets Hizballah in Venezuela” U.S. Department of the Treasury Press Center, 18 June 2008, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1036.aspx>.

The military relationship is further strengthened by numerous official commitments to solidarity in the face of possible Western aggression. On a visit to Caracas in 2009 Iranian Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammed-Najjar promised “full support to promote the Venezuelan military's defense capabilities in the framework of mutual defensive agreements.”<sup>36</sup>

As mentioned above, much of the force behind the Venezuela-Iranian relationship is driven by the personalities of Chavez and Ahmadinejad. The personal connection of both leaders has led to a strong bond between both nations, but it is also a vulnerability to the longevity of the alliance. Without a substantial institutional framework to support continued exchange, the Iran-Venezuelan partnership is only as strong as its principal advocates. In light of Hugo Chavez's ongoing battle with cancer, the future of Iran's connection to Venezuela, and thus to Latin America in general, may be in doubt.

### **Venezuela's Approach to Sanctions: Diplomatic and Practical Rejection**

The Venezuelan Government rejects the UN and unilateral sanctions placed on Iran's nuclear program and works both diplomatically and covertly to undermine their effectiveness. After the passage of UNSCR 1929, which imposed the toughest round of UN sanctions on Iran to date, Venezuela issued a communiqué condemning the resolution for “attacking again the dignity [of Iran].”<sup>37</sup> The document states that Venezuela promises “unrestricted support for the legitimate aspirations” of Iran for the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.<sup>38</sup> Several months later, in October 2010, President Chavez promised that his nation “will back Iran under any circumstances and without conditions.”<sup>39</sup>

Chavez' rhetoric is matched by the business practices of PDVSA, Venezuela's state-run oil company. Reuters reports that in the face of UN sanctions barring the sale of gasoline to Iran “PDVSA delivered at least two cargoes of reformat, a gasoline blending component, to Iran between December 2010 and March 2011 worth about \$50 million.”<sup>40</sup>

The US responded in May 2011 by barring PDVSA from access to US export financing and government contracts, but because the sanctions do not affect the activities of CITGO, the company's US subsidiary, the measures are seen as largely symbolic.<sup>41</sup> Just as the severity of US sanctions placed on Caracas was constrained by America's need for Venezuelan oil, Venezuela, dependent on the US market, was limited to verbal criticism of the US for initiating sanctions. Venting his anger with the US to followers of his Twitter account, Hugo Chavez wrote, “Sanctions against the Fatherland of Bolivia? Imposed by the Gringo imperialist? Well, welcome Mr. Obama, don't forget we are the children of Bolivar!”<sup>42</sup> Despite the President's public anger,

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<sup>36</sup> Danielle Kurtzleben, “Iran-Venezuela ties worry US.” Asia Times Online, 12 August 2009.  
[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/KH12Ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/KH12Ak02.html).

<sup>37</sup> “Background Note: Venezuela,” U.S. State Department. 2 September 2011,  
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35766.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Quinn and Frank Jack Daniel, “U.S. sanctions Venezuela oil giant for Iran trade.” Reuters, 24 May 2011.  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/24/us-iran-usa-sanctions-idUSTRE74N47R20110524>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Venezuelan Oil Minister Rafael Ramirez said in a nation-wide broadcast that PDVSA guaranteed oil shipments to its U.S. subsidiaries.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to Venezuela's flouting of UN sanctions, the US is also concerned about the cargo and passengers that transit between Iran, Venezuela, and Syria aboard Venezuela's Conviasa Airlines. Though the weekly flight between Caracas, Tehran, and Damascus is listed as a commercial route, Fox News reports that passengers are specially vetted by the Venezuelan and Iranian governments and the procedure for booking a flight is different than all other Conviasa flights.<sup>44</sup>

There are serious uncertainties surrounding the nature of such flights as passengers are not subject to immigration and customs controls and cargo manifests are not made public. Intelligence agencies of the US and other states such as Brazil believe the Conviasa flight may be used to ferry Iranian sponsored terrorists and military materiel between the three capitals. It was reported that Abdul Kadir, the Guyanese national who attempted to explode fuel tanks at JFK International Airport in New York, had planned to board a Conviasa flight to Iran from Venezuela before he was arrested in Trinidad.<sup>45</sup>

Undocumented travel may also affect Iran's capacity to produce a nuclear weapon because Venezuela is estimated to possess approximately 50,000 tons of reserve uranium ore. In the past, Iran has actively helped to extract Venezuela's fissile material which it needs to supplement its own limited domestic supply.<sup>46</sup>

While the verbal battles of Venezuela, Iran and the US remain some of the most incendiary in the international competition, economic realities, and the fragility of leader-based political ties temper the real strategic threat of the Venezuela-Iranian alliance to the US.

### ***Other ALBA States: Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua***

Like Iran's relationship with Venezuela, its relations with other ALBA states like Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua are built on a mutual ideological rejection of the current international order in general, and American leadership in particular. Unlike Venezuela, however, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua lack Venezuela's critical resources and regional influence. From these poorer countries Iran aims to build a Latin American network upon which it can rely to diffuse diplomatic and economic pressure and, potentially, to base Iranian intelligence and paramilitary assets in the Western hemisphere.

So far Iran's many "memorandums of understanding" with these nations have translated into few actual projects. Such limited success brings into question whether the Islamic Republic is

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<sup>43</sup> Andrew Quinn and Frank Jack Daniel, "U.S. sanctions Venezuela oil giant for Iran trade." Reuters, 24 May 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/24/us-iran-usa-sanctions-idUSTRE74N47R20110524>.

<sup>44</sup> Ed Barnes, "Exclusive: Venezuela Cancels Round-Trip 'Terror Flight' to Syria and Iran" Fox News, 14 September 2010. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/09/14/terror-flight-venezuela-iran-illicit-arms-hezbollah-hamas-protest/>.

<sup>45</sup> Jose Cardenas, "Sanctioning Venezuela's Aero-Terror." Foreign Policy, 23 June 2011. [http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/23/sanctioning\\_venezuela\\_s\\_aero\\_terror](http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/23/sanctioning_venezuela_s_aero_terror).

<sup>46</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, "Iran's Adventures in Latin America." FPIF, 18 November 2010. [http://www.fpif.org/articles/irans\\_adventures\\_in\\_latin\\_america](http://www.fpif.org/articles/irans_adventures_in_latin_america).

advancing its strategic ends by supporting impoverished states on the opposite side of the world. Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua are not the only Latin American states that fit this mold, but they serve as useful proxies for the IRI approach to ideologically receptive, yet resource deficient peripheral partners.

### *Ecuador*

In addition to both countries' participation in OPEC, the partnership between Iran and Ecuador is largely based on the personal relationship of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa and Ahmadinejad shepherded by Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.<sup>47</sup>

President Correa signed 25 bilateral agreements with the government of Iran in 2008 in order to secure financing agreements to ease trade and fund badly needed civil works projects. In late 2009 Ecuador was forced to start rationing power and turned to Iran for a loan to construct hydroelectric power plants to remedy the shortages.<sup>48</sup> The US has been able to reduce some of the financial connections made between Iran and Ecuador by threatening sanctions and the seizure of money held abroad.<sup>49</sup> Ecuador uses the US dollar as its currency and like many Latin American states it is much more dependent on its existing economic relationships than the promises of the IRI.

That being said, Iran's trade with Ecuador increased from \$6 million to \$168 million between 2007 and 2008, according to the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). Correa remains determined to increase broad-based support for Iran. According to the news service of the Presidency of Iran, in September 2010, Ecuador's foreign minister Ricardo Patino told President Ahmadinejad that his country "shows special reverence for Iran and calls for the increase of co-operations for the two countries at all levels."<sup>50</sup>

An element of potential Iran-Ecuadorian cooperation of particular interest to the US government is narco-terrorism, particularly the possibility of some form of a drug nexus between Iran, Hezbollah, and Ecuador. In March 2010, the DEA released a statement linking Hezbollah to drug trafficking in the Americas.<sup>51</sup> With the potential support of friendly governments in South America, the Iran-backed terrorist organization may be able to more effectively amass operational funding from the sale of drugs to the West.

While there are serious impediments to strategically significant cooperation between Iran and Ecuador, it appears that as long as Correa—or someone with a similar populist, anti-Western ideology—is in power, bilateral relations will continue to strengthen. The danger to the US may remain superficial, but as is the case with all of Iran's other efforts to expand its influence at the periphery, it is a relationship the US should closely monitor.

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<sup>47</sup> Roni Sofer, "Israel: Ties to South America aiding Iran's nuclear program." Ynet News, 25 May 2009, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3721335,00.html>.

<sup>48</sup> "Ayatollahs in the Backyard." The Economist, 26 November 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/14969124>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Jose Cardenas, "The Chávez Model Threatens Ecuador." AEI Outlook Series. March 2011. <http://www.aei.org/outlook/101037>.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony P. Placido, "Transnational Drug Enterprises (part ii): Threats to global Stability and U.S. Policy responses." DEA Public Affairs, 3 March 2010. <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/cngrtest/ct030310.pdf>

## ***Bolivia***

Like Ecuador, Bolivia is an open supporter of Iran's nuclear program. It seeks to develop enhanced economic ties, and criticizes Western "imperialism." Also like Ecuador, however, the bonds between La Paz and Tehran remain largely symbolic. Iran has made concrete investments in Bolivia, but its promises of aid far outstrip its delivered benefits. The Bolivian leadership, under pressure because of the country's widespread poverty, wants to maintain Iran as a benefactor, but elements of the government have pushed back because of Iran's checked human rights record.

The relationship between Bolivian President Evo Morales and Iran's Ahmadinejad has been guided by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Chavez helped facilitate the meeting of the two leaders and perpetuates cooperation through the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas.<sup>52</sup> In 2008, Iran opened an embassy in La Paz and Bolivia reciprocated by moving its diplomatic mission from Cairo to Tehran in 2010.

Despite its hydrocarbon and mineral deposits, Bolivia is South America's poorest country and welcomes Iranian investment in exchange for political support.<sup>53</sup> In 2008, Evo Morales granted visa-free travel to Iranian citizens in exchange for a \$1.1 billion investment over five years in Bolivian natural gas facilities, agriculture and humanitarian affairs.<sup>54</sup> Like the IRI's deal with Venezuela's Conviasa Airlines, the relaxed travel restrictions make it much easier for Iran to use the country as a potential forward base for covert operations.

According to AEI, Iran has funded the construction of several small to mid-scale projects in Bolivia's industrial, agricultural, and healthcare sectors including: two cement factories, six milk-processing plants, and three health clinics.<sup>55</sup> In partnership with Venezuela, Iran has also established an Iranian television network in Bolivia to enhance its cultural footprint in the country.<sup>56</sup>

The level of progress in actually making the bulk of Iran's promised \$1.1 billion investment is largely unknown. In July 2009 Iran's top representative to Bolivia announced that Tehran had approved a \$280 million loan to develop Bolivia's energy sector, but how or if the balance of the promised funds will be spent remains a mystery.<sup>57</sup> According to research done by the CSIS Americas Program, the only public records of how money has been spent are presidential announcements of programs.

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<sup>52</sup> Rudi Guraziu, "Exchange." International Business and Diplomatic Exchange. December 2010. <http://www.ibde.org/attachments/EXCHANGE%20Issue%202%20December%202010.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> "Bolivia." CIA World Factbook. 21 October 2011. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bl.html>.

<sup>54</sup> John Kiriakou, "Iran's Latin America Push." The Los Angeles Times, 8 November 2008. <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-kiriakou8-2008nov08,0,878526.story>

<sup>55</sup> Ariel Farrar-Wellman, Robert Frasco, "Bolivia-Iran Foreign Relations." AEI Iran Tracker, 4 August 2010, [http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/bolivia-iran-foreign-relations#\\_ftn8](http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/bolivia-iran-foreign-relations#_ftn8).

<sup>56</sup> "Bolivia Overview," The American Foreign Policy Council's World Almanac of Islamism, 14 July 2011. <http://almanac.afpc.org/Bolivia>.

<sup>57</sup> "Iran loans Bolivia 280 million USD to develop industry and energy sector." Merco Press, 31 July 2009. <http://en.mercopress.com/2009/07/30/iran-loans-bolivia-280-million-usd-to-develop-industry-and-energy-sector>.

Bolivia's potential mineral wealth may have implications for Iran's nuclear program. Bolivia is thought to possess moderate uranium deposits and exploratory programs have been launched to determine the feasibility of extraction. The Morales government has denied that Iran is a partner in the process, but Tehran has officially offered to provide technical assistance for the future construction of a Bolivian nuclear power plant.<sup>58</sup>

Iran-Bolivian military cooperation takes the form of arms sales and investment. Iran reportedly helped finance the creation of a multinational military training center located in the Bolivian town of Warnes. The training center is a Venezuelan initiative though ALBA to counter the influence of US training programs in Latin America. The day before the facility opened in December 2010, President Morales remarked:

Until recently, the only ones that created training schools for defense and security were the North Americans and they did so where they wished and without asking anyone's permission. A clear example of this is the School of the Americas, whose object was to implant a mental framework, to indoctrinate our Armed Forces to defend imperial interests, besides serving to divide soldiers and their people.<sup>59</sup>

Maria Alejandro Prado, Bolivia's opposition congressional deputy, described the training facility as a location for militant political groups to exchange information, while Defense Minister Cecilia Chacon countered saying that it will supply informal education to rural and indigenous people.<sup>60</sup>

The similarities in the worldviews of Ahmadinejad and Morales provided a footing for bilateral relations, but they do not necessarily guarantee stability. The Bolivian government chiefly values its partnership with Iran because it presents an opportunity for economic development outside of a framework dictated by the United States. But if Iranian aid diminishes, it is not clear that Morales will continue to give preferential treatment to Iran purely on ideological grounds, especially if the US makes cooperation economically and politically unpalatable.

### *Nicaragua*

Nicaragua and Iran have a shared revolutionary past, and their present cooperation is built on old partnerships and promises of mutual development akin to those made by Iran to Ecuador and Bolivia.

Both the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Sandinista's seizure of power in Nicaragua occurred in 1979, and participants in those revolutions then expressed solidarity in overturning the establishment. Both revolutionary governments maintained cordial relations until the Sandinistas were removed from power as a result of free elections in 1990. In 2007, Daniel Ortega, President of Nicaragua during the Sandinista regime, returned to power. The attendance of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the Ortega's inauguration signaled the return to normalized relations between Nicaragua and Iran.

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<sup>58</sup> "Bolivia to Buy Warplanes, Helicopters from Iran." Latin American Herald Tribune. 2 November 2010, <http://www.laht.com/article.asp?ArticleId=374965&CategoryId=14919>.

<sup>59</sup> "Se inaugura en Bolivia Escuela de Defensa de países "bolivarianos." ABC Digital, 1 June 2011, <http://www.abc.com.py/nota/se-inaugura-en-bolivia-escuela-de-defensa-de-paises-bolivarianos/>.

<sup>60</sup> "Bolivia introdujo en la región a un socio muy peligroso, Irán." ABC Digital, 10 February 2011, <http://www.abc.com.py/nota/bolivia-introdujo-en-la-region-a-un-socio-muy-peligroso-iran/>.

Throughout 2007, officials from both countries began to put together a series of agreements to promote economic exchange and Nicaraguan development. In return for access to Nicaraguan commodities, Iran promised to finance projects including: hydroelectric plants, a tractor factory, a health clinic, low-income housing, and renovations to the western port of Corinto.<sup>61</sup>

Bilateral economic cooperation is not without friction, however, because of Nicaragua's debts to Iran and its need to maintain trade relations with the US. The Iran Independent News Service reports that Iran is owed some \$164 million for oil it exported to Nicaragua in 1986.<sup>62</sup> The Ortega government has not taken obvious steps to pay off the debt and Iranian critics of the Latin American partnership question its political and economic value.<sup>63</sup>

Increased sanctions on the Export Development Bank of Iran (EDBI) have also threatened to undermine relations. Nicaragua supported Iran's nuclear efforts in 2007 by openly opposing UN Security Council sanctions, but it was careful not to jeopardize its trade relations with the US. Since the EDBI has been linked to the Iranian defense sector, the Ortega government may be forced to limit partnership with Tehran. The uncertainty of the Islamic Republic's ability and will to fulfill its commitments of aid to Nicaragua also undermine the relationship's sustainability.

In the past, the US has overestimated the strength of the Iran-Nicaragua alliance. In the late 2000s, US officials feared that Iran had setup a massive embassy in Managua staffed with "more than 100 Iranian agents."<sup>64</sup> Though Iran had mentioned its intention to create such a station, presently Iran maintains a humble diplomatic mission in Nicaragua, especially compared with the massive US complex in Managua.<sup>65</sup>

Nicaragua and Iran have historical bonds and a similar negative outlook of the US and Western international leadership, but Nicaragua's poverty and military insignificance place it on the periphery of Iran's peripheral allies. Notably, the revamped relationship between the IRI and Nicaragua coincided with the return of the Sandinistas and Daniel Ortega to power, as with the cases of Iran's other Latin American partners, leader-to-leader relations are an essential and vulnerable component of the alliance.

### *Argentina*

Argentina, like Brazil, illustrates the present limitations of Iran's reach into Latin America. Moderate countries are willing to pursue economic cooperation with the IRI, but are not willing to provide lasting political support which may jeopardize their relationship with status quo

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<sup>61</sup> "Iran to build \$230 million hydroelectric dam in Nicaragua." The Star Online, 14 March 2008.  
<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/3/14/apworld/20080314082154&sec=apworld>.

<sup>62</sup> "Nicaraguan debt to Iran becomes 25 years old, report." Iran Independent News Service, 11 June 2011,  
[http://www.iranwpd.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=1725:nicaraguan-debt-to-iran-becomes-25-years-old-report&Itemid=66](http://www.iranwpd.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=1725:nicaraguan-debt-to-iran-becomes-25-years-old-report&Itemid=66).

<sup>63</sup> Meir Javedanfar "Iran's Failed Latin American Outreach," The Atlantic, 22 July 2011,  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/07/irans-failed-latin-america-outreach/242331/>.

<sup>64</sup> "Venezuelastan: Iran's Latin American Ambitions." Hudson Institute, 15 April 2010,  
<http://www.hudson.org/files/publications/41510%20Venezuelistan%20Event%20Transcript.pdf>.

<sup>65</sup> Anne-Marie O'Connor and Mary Beth Sheridan, "Iran's Rumored Nicaraguan 'Mega-Embassy' Set Off Alarms in U.S." The Washington Post, 13 July 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/12/AR2009071202337.html>.



powers. Iran has reached out to Argentina in order to diversify its Latin American connections with limited effect. While both countries have increased bilateral trade, relations remain complicated by international pressure and Iran's possible involvement in terrorist attacks against Argentine Jews in the 1990s. Argentina is not a member of Chavez's ALBA and its foreign and domestic policies lack the overtly anti-American sentiments that serve to help Tehran reach out to other states in the Americas.

Argentina is Iran's second largest trading partner in Latin America and commercial activity has significantly increased within the last five years. From 2007 to 2008, bilateral trade jumped from \$30 million to around \$1.2 billion—a 97% percent increase. The relationship heavily favors Argentina: in 2009 Argentina exported \$855.4 million, while it imported just \$9.4 million from Iran. The lopsided balance of trade signals Iran's motives for increasing economic activity most likely extend beyond pure commercial interests.<sup>66</sup>

Cooperation between Argentina and Iran outside of the economic sphere is impaired by unresolved questions surrounding the bombings of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and a Jewish community center in 1994. The Iranian sponsored terrorist group Hezbollah was implicated as the culprit behind both bombings and the Argentine government formally accused Iranian officials, including then President Akbar Rafsanjani, of masterminding the attacks.

Iran denies participation in the bombings and in 2004 President Khatami refused to meet with Argentine President Nestor Kirchner at a G15 summit unless Argentina officially apologized for accusing Iran of collaboration.<sup>67</sup> As recently as July 2011, Iran's Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning the attacks while refusing to acknowledge responsibility:

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as one of the major victims of terrorism, condemns all acts of terror, including the 1994 AMIA bombing and, offers sympathy with the families of the victims of the explosion...Iran's Foreign ministry expresses regret that 17 years on from the occurrence of this crime, the truth behind it has not been revealed yet and the identities of its real perpetrators are still shrouded in mystery.<sup>68</sup>

The diplomatic breach created by the bombings has had regional consequences. In 2007, President Kirchner refused to attend the inauguration of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa because Iranian President Ahmadinejad had been invited. Similarly, the Argentine government lodged a complaint with the Bolivarian Foreign Ministry when it was learned that Iranian Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi, one of the IRI officials implicated in the bomb plots, had been invited to participate in the opening of the ALBA military school there. Argentine Foreign Minister Hector Timerman successfully persuaded the Bolivian government to ask Vahidi to leave. Later, Bolivia's Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca and President Evo Morales both apologized to Argentina for having made the invitation.<sup>69</sup> For the time being, a meaningful political relationship between Iran and Argentina remains blocked by this issue.

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<sup>66</sup> UN Comtrade Statistics 2009

<sup>67</sup> "Injustice breeds terrorism, says Khatami." Dawn Internet Edition (Reuters), 29 February 2004, <http://archives.dawn.com/2004/03/01/int8.htm>.

<sup>68</sup> "Iran regrets AMIA probe distortion." PressTV, 21 July 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/190162.html>.

<sup>69</sup> "Bolivia tells Iranian Defence minister to leave and apologizes to Argentina." Merco Press, 1 June 2011, <http://en.mercopress.com/2011/06/01/bolivia-tells-iranian-defence-minister-to-leave-and-apologizes-to-argentina>.

Argentina is not likely to risk political capital to support Iran's regional or nuclear ambitions, but it does appear determined to maintain a growing commercial relationship, as long as sanctions do not require a choice between partnership with Iran and access to other more lucrative markets. The Argentine-Iranian political relationship will most likely remain inhibited—and strategically benign to the US—as long as Iran continues to rebuff Argentine investigations of the 1990s bombings.

### ***Brazil***

Brazil lacks the nascent anti-Americanism which serves as a foundation for so many of Iran's partnerships throughout the region. Nevertheless, Iran hopes to form bonds with Brazil based on commercial exchange, both countries' common status as developing regional powers, and Brazil's desire for global influence as a non-aligned state. The United States works to deemphasize Iran's influence on Brazil by encouraging Brazilian participation in the international status quo and by portraying Iran as increasingly self-isolating.

The most notable example of Brazil's role in US-Iranian competition came in 2010 during the run-up to the new round of UN sanctions that would become UNSCR 1929. Brazil, along with Turkey—a state similar to Brazil in its aspirations for regional preeminence and global importance—organized an alternative bargain with Iran whereby the IRI would exchange 1,200 kilograms of low enriched uranium for 120 kilograms of fuel rods it could use in a medical research reactor.<sup>70</sup>

The deal would have left Iran with “breakout capacity”, or the amount of fissile material needed to produce nuclear weapons, and was rejected by the US and its partners pushing for sanctions at the UN. The alternative deal fell through and Brazil voted against UNSCR 1929 when proposed before the Security Council, but at the same time Brazil agreed to abide by the sanctions once they were passed by the permanent members. Brazil's break with the status quo was symbolic rather than substantive. The Brazilian government intended to make known its political independence from the West, but at the same time independence did not translate into wholehearted support for Iran or a costly rejection of valuable economic partners.

Brazil is Iran's largest trade partner in Latin America and past governments have actively pushed for enhanced economic relations. In 2007, the Brazilian government under President Da Silva vowed it would pursue policies to increase bilateral trade with Iran by as much as \$10 billion in the coming years.<sup>71</sup> In November 2010, bilateral trade stood at \$1.3 billion.

That said, Brazil's state-controlled oil major Petrobras, a critical player in the economic linkages between Brazil and Iran, announced in 2010 that it would suspend investment in the IRI. While the company claimed the move was based purely on “technical evaluations”, it is reasonable to

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<sup>70</sup> “Bad nuclear deal with Brazil and Turkey hands Iran a diplomatic coup.” The Washington Post, 18 May 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/17/AR2010051703455.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, “Iran's Adventures in Latin America.” FPIF, 18 November 2010. [http://www.fpif.org/articles/irans\\_adventures\\_in\\_latin\\_america](http://www.fpif.org/articles/irans_adventures_in_latin_america).

assume that the increased pressure of widespread intentional sanctions in addition to the absence of significant oil deposits contributed to the turn around.<sup>72</sup>

A changed political stance under the new presidency of Dilma Rousseff may also dampen Iran's hopes for sustained growth of the political and economic partnership. While Rousseff has not shown herself to be an enthusiastic supporter of the West, she is openly critical of Iran's human rights abuses and has created greater distance between Brasilia and Tehran than her predecessor.<sup>73</sup> Brazil under Rousseff appears poised to pursue a middle path which remains independent of the U.S. or Iran and its anti-American Latin allies. The leadership of Brazil will first and foremost protect its economic interests and its aspirations for prominence in a multi-polar world.<sup>74</sup>

## AFRICA

Driven by the same strategic principles which underpin its missions in Latin America, Iran seeks to spread its influence to other peripheral states, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Whereas historically rooted anti-American sentiment provides the main point of connection for Tehran with Latin American countries, the situation is different in Africa. The IRI generally stresses religious commonality and offers cheap oil as an incentive for stronger relations.

U.S. aid to many African nations creates strong barriers to countries courted by Tehran. As such, Iran's African presence is at this point largely superficial: an impressive number of diplomatic missions, the construction of small commercial enterprises, and promises of greater cooperation. Notably, Iran's diplomatic progress has also been hindered by discoveries that it may be using African nations as transshipment points for arms exchanges with or without the knowledge of host governments.

Iranian ventures into Africa are also spurred by the country's need for a source of uranium to fuel its nuclear program. According to Real Clear World's Ilan Berman:

Iran's aging uranium stockpile, which the Islamic Republic acquired from South Africa in the 1970s, is mostly depleted. According to a confidential intelligence summary from an unnamed International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) member state this past February [2011], the Islamic Republic has focused on Africa, home to a number of key uranium producers including Zimbabwe, Senegal, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>75</sup>

In order to achieve its interests in Africa Iran is forced to compete not just with the United States, but with Israel. Israel has a long history of diplomatic, economic and security-based relations

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<sup>72</sup> Brian Ellsworth and Denise Luna, "Brazil's Petrobras sees few prospects for Iran oil." Reuters, 3 July 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/07/03/petrobras-international-idUSN0317110720090703>.

<sup>73</sup> Alexander Ragir, "Rousseff like Lula on Mideast Keeps Brazil-U.S. Ties Chilled." Bloomberg, 21 September 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-09-21/rousseff-like-lula-on-mideast-keeps-brazil-u-s-ties-chilled.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ilan Berman, "Iran's Bid for Uranium." Real Clear World, 24 May 2011. [http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2011/05/24/irans\\_bid\\_for\\_africas\\_uranium\\_99532.html](http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2011/05/24/irans_bid_for_africas_uranium_99532.html).

with Africa and its continent-wide diplomatic efforts hinder Iranian expansion.<sup>76</sup> But Iran has made recent gains in Africa at Israel's expense.

In March 2010, Iran drew closer to Mauritania—one of only three Arab states with formal diplomatic relations with Israel—when the West African nation severed its ties with Jerusalem over Israel's invasion of Gaza.<sup>77</sup> In September 2011, President Ahmadinejad met with Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and discussed the need for multilateral cooperation through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Non-Aligned Movement.<sup>78</sup> Aziz proclaimed his support for Iran's "right to access peaceful nuclear energy" and Ahmadinejad vowed to pursue responsible resource based economic cooperation with Mauritania in contrast to the "exploitative" practices of "Western countries."<sup>79</sup> Though Iran uses Muslim solidarity as a key point of its strategic outreach, African Muslims are overwhelmingly Sunni and sectarian differences with Iran's Shi'as complicate relations.

According to the Economist, Iran conducted 20 ministerial or grander visits to Africa in 2009. **Figure 12.2** depicts the African nations with which Iran has been strengthening its relations, as well as countries visited by Israel's foreign minister:

**Figure 12.2 Map of Iran in Africa<sup>80</sup>**



<sup>76</sup> Chris Zambelis, "Iran Deals itself into African Game." Asia Times, 17 January 2011, [http://atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/MA13Ak04.html](http://atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MA13Ak04.html).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> "Iran, Mauritania call for enhanced ties." PressTV. 26 September 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/201175.html>.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> "A Search for Allies in a Hostile World." The Economist, 4 February 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/15453225>.

Iran's dealings with the countries highlighted in Figure 12.2 vary in intensity. This report does not list every potential Iranian partner but rather presents several cases of Iranian expansion in order to depict an overarching Iranian strategy in Africa and how that strategy has fared to this point.

In September 2010, Tehran hosted a two-day Iran-Africa summit designed to promote broad based engagement. In attendance were heads of state and diplomats, as well as business and cultural leaders from over 50 African nations.<sup>81</sup> Appealing to the Non-Aligned sentiments of many African leaders, President Ahmadinejad used the occasion to praise the potential for greater cooperation and the possibility that Iran and African states might create a world order based on "respect for nations' rights and dignity."<sup>82</sup>

Despite Iran's stepped up engagement in Africa, its reach is limited by several factors. First, Iran does not have the resources to match the economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian footprint left by other major powers interested in Africa, namely the U.S. and China. Second, though many African states welcome Iranian offers of enhanced economic relations, it is unlikely that they will forge a bond with Tehran if such support seriously jeopardizes preexisting relationships with wealthier, more stable powers. Third, Iran's covert arms business and its complex relationship with proxy militant forces complicate its regional relationships. Finally, Iran's economic ambitions for Africa are constrained by internal economic disorganization and external pressure from sanctions. Tehran's inability to deliver on promised projects further damages its standing.

As previously mentioned, Iran's strategic approach to Africa is broadly designed to diffuse the diplomatic and economic pressure of competition with the West and to craft a set of long-term allies opposed to the present international order. Although this competition plays out differently in every country involved, several countries serve as instructive models of how the U.S. and Iran compete in the African periphery.

- In Senegal and Gambia Iran sought to cultivate new allies, but for myriad reasons has seen its influence recede.
- Morocco has positioned itself in opposition to Iran and has drawn closer to the Saudi-led GCC which competes with Iran for regional influence in the Gulf.
- Iran maintains a tenuous relationship with South Africa strengthened by historical and economic ties, but weakened by Iranian human rights abuses and by international pressure over the nuclear issue.
- Finally, Iran has a Chavez-style ally in Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, but internal political division within Zimbabwe along with U.S. pressure impede full cooperation.

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<sup>81</sup> Chris Zambelis, "Iran Deals itself into African Game." Asia Times, 17 January 2011, [http://atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/MA13Ak04.html](http://atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MA13Ak04.html).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

### *Senegal and Gambia*

Since the early 2000s Iran has looked to countries in West Africa as potential sources of economic and diplomatic support, but severe political missteps and unfulfilled promises have undercut Tehran's decade of gains. Tehran has employed a mix of economic incentives, calls to Muslim solidarity, and anti-Western rhetoric to increase its presence in Senegal and Gambia. In 2009 Iranian President Ahmadinejad declared that "countries like Iran, Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Gambia and Senegal have the ability to establish a new world order."<sup>83</sup>

Senegal, once a country aggressively pursued by the IRI for greater economic cooperation and diplomatic support, severed diplomatic relations with Tehran in early 2011. It did so upon learning that the Islamic Republic probably supplied separatists in its Casamance region with arms used to kill three Senegalese soldiers.<sup>84</sup> A report delivered to Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade by the army chief of staff detailed that the Casamance Movement of Democratic Forces (MDDC) were using sophisticated weapons and ammunition forensically traced to Iran.<sup>85</sup> Wade issued a statement saying "Senegal is outraged to see that Iranian bullets caused the death of three Senegalese soldiers."<sup>86</sup> The revelation fits into a pattern of controversial arms shipments emanating from Iran to customers throughout the African continent.<sup>87</sup>

In October 2010, Nigerian officials intercepted thirteen shipping containers of weapons including 107mm artillery rockets, rifle rounds, and various small arms. The cargo had been labeled "Building Materials" and according to the Nigerian investigation that followed, the consignment originated from Iran and was intended for Gambia. In response to the discovery, in November 2010 the Gambian government cut diplomatic ties with Iran and expelled Iranian diplomats from the country.

In February 2011, Iran admitted it had shipped the containers and claimed the cargo was part of secret agreement made between Tehran and Banjul, but it denied that it broke UN sanctions prohibiting arms sales because the deal had been contracted in 2008, two years before the imposition of restrictions.<sup>88</sup>

Before the rapid collapse of relations, both Senegal and Gambia had been promising peripheral relationships for Iran. Senegal especially was one of Iran's most active African partners. President Wade and other Senegalese officials visited Tehran and received Iranian delegates on

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<sup>83</sup> Simon Maro, "Senegal - Iran: From friendship to diplomatic war." Afrik News, 25 February 2011, <http://www.afrik-news.com/article19020.html>.

<sup>84</sup> "Senegal severs ties with Iran." Al Jazeera, 23 February 2011. <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/02/201122392022223897.html>.

<sup>85</sup> "Senegal ends relations; says Iran arms rebels." International Iran Times, 3 March 2011, [http://www.irantimes.com/english/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1407:senegal-ends-relations-says-iran-arms-rebels&catid=98:whats-left&Itemid=425](http://www.irantimes.com/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1407:senegal-ends-relations-says-iran-arms-rebels&catid=98:whats-left&Itemid=425).

<sup>86</sup> "Senegal severs ties with Iran." Al Jazeera, 23 February 2011. <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/02/201122392022223897.html>.

<sup>87</sup> "Senegal severs ties with Iran." Al Jazeera, 23 February 2011. <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/02/201122392022223897.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Anna Mahjar-Barducci, "Iran's charm offensive in Africa." Hudson New York, 18 March 2011, <http://www.hudson-ny.org/1974/iran-charm-offensive-africa>.

numerous occasions and in 2007-2008 both countries took significant steps to increase economic and specifically energy-related cooperation. During the summer of 2007 Tehran and Dakar reached agreements to open an Iranian-backed oil refinery, a chemical plant, and an \$80 million car assembly plant, Seniran Auto, in the city of Thies.<sup>89</sup> Iran also pledged to sell Senegal oil for a year on preferential credit terms and purchase a 34% stake in Senegal's oil refinery.<sup>90</sup> Reciprocating Iran's moves toward a closer partnership, Wade publically endorsed Iran's nuclear program in 2007. Gambia, which also supported Iran's right to develop peaceful nuclear capabilities, enjoyed positive relations with Iran built largely on a shared feeling of Western abuse and increasing bilateral exchange.<sup>91</sup>

The motivation behind Iran's supply of Senegalese rebels remains unclear and some question the conclusions drawn by Senegal's forensic teams. Despite the unknown veracity of the findings, Iran's meddling has led to a significant backslide in its attempts to gain a foothold in West Africa.

In addition to Iran's possible role as a source of regional instability, African leaders may also be pulling back from Iran over questions concerning the capability of the IRI to deliver on its promises of enhanced economic partnership. According to the news agency Afrik, the \$80 million Seniran Auto plant in Senegal has failed to meet production expectations. As of February 2011, "The company has, since its inception, sold about fifty cars to individuals. And by virtue of a taxi renewal operation launched by the government, the car company was able to sell 1000 cars."<sup>92</sup>

### ***Morocco***

US-Iranian competition for influence in Morocco centers around a struggle between political and commercial interests. Morocco is a strong political ally of the US and its government has openly turned its back on Iran by cutting diplomatic ties in 2009. But despite Rabat's distance from Tehran diplomatically, both countries' production of critical resources—Iran's crude oil and Morocco's phosphates (potentially used a secondary source for uranium)—signal that commercial engagement is unlikely to lessen.<sup>93</sup>

The United States' relationship with Morocco is strong and rooted in historical friendship which dates back to the Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1787. The relationship has been maintained through sustained high-level dialogue between the Kings of Morocco—most recently King Hassan II and now his son King Mohammed VI—and successive US administrations. According to the US State Department, Morocco is considered "a major non-NATO ally" through its

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<sup>89</sup> "Iran to build oil refinery and chemical plant in Senegal." Gulfnews.com (Reuters), 3 August 2011. <http://gulfnews.com/business/oil-gas/iran-to-build-oil-refinery-and-chemical-plant-in-senegal-1.194031>.

<sup>90</sup> "Iran to Expand Senegal Refinery." Arabian Business.com (Reuters), 28 August 2007, <http://m.arabianbusiness.com/iran-expand-senegal-refinery-56937.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Anna Mahjar-Barducci, "Iran's charm offensive in Africa." Hudson New York, 18 march 2011, <http://www.hudson-ny.org/1974/iran-charm-offensive-africa>.

<sup>92</sup> Simon Maro, "Senegal - Iran: From friendship to diplomatic war." Afrik News, 25 February 2011, <http://www.afrik-news.com/article19020.html>.

<sup>93</sup> "Oil Continues To Grease Morocco-Iran Relations, But Friction Remains." Cablegate Search (Consulate Casablanca), 19 February 2010, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=10CASABLANCA24>.

contribution to “UN-led multilateral peacekeeping operations... and major bilateral exercises on the African continent.”<sup>94</sup>

The US-Moroccan relationship is further cemented by the provision of foreign assistance. The State Department reports: “The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and its predecessor agencies have managed an active and effective assistance program in Morocco since 1953 exceeding \$2 billion over its lifetime. The amount of USAID assistance to Morocco in FY 2009 was \$18 million, with an estimated \$24.5 million allotted for FY 2010.”<sup>95</sup>

The close ties between the US and Morocco are mirrored by growing political distance between the Arab Kingdom and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The physical distance between Morocco and Iran gives it more rhetorical freedom than similarly sized Gulf states when dealing with issues surrounding the Shi’a-Sunni divide. In the spring of 2011, the government of Morocco openly supported the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) intervention led by Saudi Arabia to quell unrest among Bahrain’s Shi’a majority. Morocco’s Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri said “Nobody can say ‘no’ to the intervention” and based Moroccan support on the claim that unrest was the product of “Iranian interference in the Gulf.”<sup>96</sup>

The *Los Angeles Times* reports that according to a leaked U.S. diplomatic cable, “In exchange for active Moroccan support, Saudi Arabia allegedly promised to ensure the flow of subsidized oil and compensate for the loss in direct foreign investment in Morocco resulting from the global financial crisis.” Notably, Moroccan support also coincided with its invitation to join the GCC, the political and economic alliance of Arab states headed by Saudi Arabia.<sup>97</sup>

In response to Morocco’s defense of the intervention Iran summoned Rabat’s envoy to Tehran and issued a critique in language the Moroccan government deemed “unacceptable”.<sup>98</sup> Rabat broke ties with Tehran in March 2009 and initiated a domestic crackdown on its small Shi’a minority.

The Iranian government criticized the move appealing to a need for Muslim solidarity—a tactic it has frequently employed to appeal to potential African partners. According to Iran’s Fars news service the Iranian Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying, “The Islamic Republic of Iran believes that at the present juncture when the unity and solidarity of Islamic countries is necessary for supporting the Palestinian people, this act of Morocco harms unity of the Muslim world.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> “Background Note: Morocco,” U.S. State Department, 20 April 2011. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5431.htm>.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> “Morocco FM defends Gulf deployment in Bahrain.” *Ahram Online*, 15 May 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/~NewsContent/2/8/12151/World/Region/Morocco-FM-defends-Gulf-deployment-in-Bahrain.aspx>.

<sup>97</sup> “Morocco: For cheap Saudi oil, Rabat broke ties with Iran, cracked down on Shiites, leaked cable says.” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 December 2010, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/12/morocco-iran-saudi-arabia-shiite-sunni.html>.

<sup>98</sup> “Iran says Morocco's move to cut ties harms unity.” *CNN World*, 7 March 2009, [http://articles.cnn.com/2009-03-07/world/morocco.iran\\_1\\_bahrain-islamic-republic-fars-news-agency?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2009-03-07/world/morocco.iran_1_bahrain-islamic-republic-fars-news-agency?_s=PM:WORLD).

<sup>99</sup> “Iran Dismisses Morocco's Claims as Baseless.” *Fars News Agency*, 7 March 2009, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8712171151>.



Despite the rupture of diplomatic relations, Iran and Morocco's commercial relationship remains intact. Following the cessation of diplomatic contact, the director of Morocco's Oil Refinery (SAMIR), Jamal Mohammed Ba Amer, issued a press statement stating "Morocco will continue to import crude oil from Iran."<sup>100</sup> And during 2009 Iran supplied Morocco with more than a quarter of its crude oil imports.<sup>101</sup>

Morocco's economic value to Iran is chiefly centered on the country's possession of significant phosphate deposits (three-quarters of the world's reserve) which are used extensively in the Iranian agricultural sector. Morocco exports about 12 percent of its phosphoric acid and about 5 percent of its rock phosphate to Iran, making Tehran one of Morocco's largest phosphate customers.<sup>102</sup> Phosphate could be used as a source of natural uranium, but the process of extraction is unduly expensive compared to other methods. Moroccan officials have stated that they do not believe "Iran is extracting or planning to extract uranium from Moroccan phosphate imports."<sup>103</sup> Iran is pursuing other possibilities for commercial cooperation mainly through its Khodro automobile manufacturer.

Despite their mutually beneficial trade relationship, Morocco and Iran remain divided by political and sectarian differences. The monarchy remains suspicious of foreign-promoted Shi'a activism and is very aware of Iran's oil-based geo-political strategy. According to leaked State Department cables, the Moroccan leadership is starting to look towards Iraq as an alternative for its crude oil needs but it is hindered by technical challenges required to handle Iraq's different type of crude.<sup>104</sup>

### *South Africa*

South Africa has an ambivalent relationship with the IRI. Ties between both nations are strengthened by growing economic cooperation, expressed mainly through energy sales, and by Iran's past support of Nelson Mandela's now-ruling African National Congress during the apartheid era. However, the relationship is strained by Iran's record of human rights violations and by its ambiguous nuclear ambitions. Describing his country's position on Iran, Deputy Minister in the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim acknowledged, "We haven't sorted this out yet."<sup>105</sup>

In the past, Iran's history of support for the ANC has led South Africa to play a moderating role in the polarized competition between the IRI and the West. While South Africa is by no means a committed ally of Iran, South African officials have criticized the American approach to the

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<sup>100</sup> "Oil Continues To Grease Morocco-Iran Relations, But Friction Remains." Cablegate Search (Consulate Casablanca), 19 February 2010, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=10CASABLANCA24>.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> "South Africa Divided Internally On Iran." Cablegate Search (Embassy Pretoria), 25 February 2010, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=10PRETORIA383>.

nuclear issue as hypocritical (because of its tacit support for Israel's nuclear activities) and called on all sides to seek resolution through diplomatic engagement.<sup>106</sup>

South Africa has dealt with the escalating sanctions against the Iranian nuclear program by repeatedly stating that Non-Proliferation Treaty members should be able to pursue nuclear energy peacefully, but that Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon is not in South Africa's interests. Responding to international pressure, South African companies with investments in Iran like Sasol, the world's top producer of motor fuel from coal, have ceased expansion in Iran and are reviewing current projects.<sup>107</sup>

Iran is currently South Africa's primary supplier of crude oil—providing upwards of 40% of crude imports in 2006. That dependency has moderated South Africa's response to unsavory Iranian practices.<sup>108</sup> The competing pressures of economic interest and human rights concerns have produced diplomatic outcomes like South Africa's abstaining vote at the UN General Assembly on the issue of Iran's human rights violations. The move to abstain upset both the Government of Iran hoping for support and Western governments hoping for condemnation.

According to leaked US State Department cables, Ahmadinejad has also been able to successfully exploit South Africa's Non-Alignment position as a means of countering Western influence. DIRCO Chief Director of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Pitso Montwedi claims "Ahmadinejad has managed to equate investigating human rights violations in Iran with 'jumping on the bandwagon with the West.'"<sup>109</sup>

South Africa remains hesitant to join the Western push to isolate Iran because of its innate desire for political independence from the Western bloc and its need to maintain a flow of energy from Iran. Iranian intransigence has generated distance between Tehran and Cape Town, but limited cooperation persists.

### ***Zimbabwe***

Like the leadership in Iran, the ruling elite in Zimbabwe has been ostracized by the West for its persistent manipulation of elections and government-sponsored human rights abuses. In response to Western criticism, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe has started to pursue a "Look East" policy in order to find less critical allies and open markets in the Middle East and Asia. Not surprisingly, Iranian President Ahmadinejad has positioned Iran as a close supporter of Zimbabwe's breakaway from the West.

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<sup>106</sup> "South Africa supports Iran's nuclear rights: SA parliament speaker." Tehran Times, 24 January 2010, [http://old.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=212850](http://old.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=212850).

<sup>107</sup> "Sanction threat prompts Sasol to review Iran operations." Mail & Guardian Online, 12 October 2011, <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-10-12-sasol-reviewing-iran-operations/>.

<sup>108</sup> "Iran, South Africa Open Joint Cooperation Commission," IRNA, August 21, 2006.

<sup>109</sup> "South Africa Divided Internally On Iran." Cablegate Search (Embassy Pretoria), 25 February 2010, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=10PRETORIA383>.

### Shared Isolation as a Common Interest

In a meeting of both Presidents in 2006, Mugabe stated that “Iran and Zimbabwe think alike.”<sup>110</sup> Echoing the worldviews of Ahmadinejad and Chavez, he later claimed that the sovereignty of developing nations is under threat and must be persevered through collective action. Mugabe said, “We have a fight to put up against these evil men and their evil systems...countries who think alike must come together and work out mechanisms to defend ourselves.”<sup>111</sup>

Iran and Zimbabwe have increased cooperation through enhanced trade, humanitarian assistance, and political support. In January 2010, Zimbabwean Minister of State, Sylvester Nguni, praised Iran for its provision of aid to regions of the country affected by natural disasters.<sup>112</sup> Nguni also commended the IRI for its committed diplomatic support of Zimbabwe at the United Nations.<sup>113</sup>

According to Iran’s deputy ambassador to Zimbabwe, Javad Dehghan, Iran is involved in numerous commercial and aid-based projects throughout the south African nation including: the mechanization of the agricultural sector, equipping the national broadcaster, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings, and investing in the tourism sector.<sup>114</sup>

### Zimbabwe’s Potential Role in Iran’s Nuclear Programs

Zimbabwe’s potential to supply Iran with the fissile material it needs to advance its nuclear designs could be critical to the effectiveness of UN and US/EU sanctions. According to the *Sunday Telegraph* in April 2010, “Iran struck a secret deal with Zimbabwe to mine its untapped uranium reserves.”<sup>115</sup> The paper’s Zanu-PF source explained, “In return for supplying oil, which Zimbabwe desperately needs to keep its faltering economy moving, Iran has been promised access to potentially huge deposits of uranium ore – which can be converted into the basic fuel for nuclear power or enriched to make a nuclear bomb.”<sup>116</sup> Under the terms of the deal Iran would have access to an estimated 455,000 tons of raw uranium that could produce 20,000 tons of enrichable uranium over the next five years.<sup>117</sup>

The government source added: “The uranium deal is the culmination of a lot of work dating back to 2007, when Mr. Mugabe visited Tehran in search of fuel. Now Iran is beginning to reap the

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<sup>110</sup> “Zimbabwe, Iran Think Alike, Says President Mugabe.” Fox News (Associated Press), 21 November 2006, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,231021,00.html>.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> “Zimbabwe: 'Iran will stand by Zimbabwe'.” *allafrica.com*, the herald (published by the government of Zimbabwe), 1 January 2010, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201001040024.html>.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Itai Mushekwe and Harriet Alexander, “Iran strikes secret nuclear mining deal with Zimbabwe's Mugabe regime.” *The Telegraph*, 24 April 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/zimbabwe/7628750/Iran-strikes-secret-nuclear-mining-deal-with-Zimbabwes-Mugabe-regime.html>.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> George Jahn, “Iran’s secret hunt for uranium in zimbabwe.” *The Daily Caller*, 24 February 2011, <http://dailycaller.com/2011/02/24/ap-exclusive-iran-hunts-for-uranium/>.

benefits...Iranian geologists have been conducting feasibility studies of the mineral for over a year now and we expect them to go ahead with mining once they are ready.”<sup>118</sup>

As of October 2011, the deal—which is officially called the Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPPA) with Iran—has yet to receive official approval from the Zimbabwean Parliament and international pressure may be affecting its slow passage.<sup>119</sup> The Zimbabwe Reporter notes that division exists amongst Zimbabwe’s two primary political parties: Mugabe’s Zanu-PF, who want to see the agreement passed, and the opposition MDC, who are opposed to aiding Iran’s nuclear pursuits.<sup>120</sup> The Zimbabwean news source reports:

MDC MP Simon Hove immediately raised objections. ‘What is it that Zimbabwe expects to get from Iran and what is it that Iran intends to protect which is in Zimbabwe?’ Hove asked. ‘I want to know the type of investment Iran is having with this country and why we need this kind of investment promotion protection in light of other means that we have. So I find it very difficult to proceed when I have not been informed of what is it that is contained in the agreement and what is it that we are trading with Iran.’<sup>121</sup>

The United States has responded by issuing clear warnings to the Zimbabwean government that cooperation with Iran in defiance of international sanctions will produce negative consequences. Former U.S. State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said in March 2011 that, “There are ramifications for countries that decline to observe their international obligations.”<sup>122</sup> Though Mugabe remains a staunch supporter of the Iranian regime, it remains to be seen if the countries’ past political partnership will trump the increasing threat of economic repercussions for violating international sanctions.<sup>123</sup>

## Implications for U.S. Policy

Iran’s forays into Latin America and elsewhere are the product of an aggressive diplomacy geared towards alleviating the pressure of Western-led sanctions and more generally combating the international order, which Tehran views as hostile to its interests. At present, Iran’s relationships with individual peripheral powers are not strong enough to achieve its goals, and thus not of critical concern to the US. The current weakness of Iran’s alliance network is brought about by divisions within Iran and its targeted partners, but also by sustained engagement and pressure from the US. To prevent Iran from strengthening its bonds with peripheral powers policymakers in Washington should consider the following broad strategies:

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<sup>118</sup> Itai Mushekwe and Harriet Alexander, “Iran strikes secret nuclear mining deal with Zimbabwe's Mugabe regime.” The Telegraph, 24 April 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/zimbabwe/7628750/Iran-strikes-secret-nuclear-mining-deal-with-Zimbabwes-Mugabe-regime.html>.

<sup>119</sup> “MDC MPs refuse to ratify Iran BIPPA.” Zimbabwe Reporter, 8 October 2011, <http://zimbabwepolitics.com/politics/3872.html>.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> “MDC MPs refuse to ratify Iran BIPPA.” Zimbabwe Reporter, 8 October 2011, <http://zimbabwepolitics.com/politics/3872.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Anna Mahjar-Barducci, “Iran Scooping Up African Uranium.” Hudson New York, 7 October 2011, <http://www.hudson-ny.org/2478/iran-africa-uranium#.TqTg9KBIR4s.gmail>.

- *Engage with peripheral countries, but do not mettle.* Some analysts have criticized the US for ignoring the periphery (especially Latin America) and thus allowing Iran to gain a foothold. As Iran's ambitious and geographically unbounded strategy in seeking partners and "allies" demonstrates, the US cannot afford to completely ignore any region of the globe. That being said, in countries of limited strategic interest it is beneficial to engage without overreaching, especially when considering that Iranian commitments have a tendency to eventually collapse under their own weight (e.g. Senegal's Seniran Auto). US aid and commercial interests provide strong incentives for peripheral nations to hesitate from full cooperation with the IRI.
- *Maintain US aid and support.* The US should maintain its current aid programs at both the civil and security levels. These programs are far less costly than the expansion of Iranian influence, and serve as critical ways of counterbalancing Iranian efforts and showing US concern. They are key ways of separating US influence from the attitudes of current leaders and building a broader base of popular support. The US should also work with key Gulf allies like Saudi Arabia to minimize Iran's ability to use energy exports as tools in strengthening relations with Latin American and African states.
- *Portray Iran as self-isolated and belligerent.* The peripheral powers with the greatest potential to affect competition are aspiring regional powers like Brazil and South Africa. The US and its allies should consistently stress that despite Iran's promise of temporary economic gain, it is a political and long-term economic risk due to its tainted human rights record and its potential instability.
- *Stress harsh penalties for supplying Iran with fissile material.* The US, in concert with its allies, should continue to preemptively warn nations contemplating supplying Iran with nuclear material of the harsh economic penalties they will face. The US posture toward Zimbabwe appears to have had a positive effect and it should be replicated with other potential suppliers.
- *Avoid US actions that appear to threaten the sovereignty of Latin American and African states.* The US must be acutely sensitive to the anger with which Latin American and African states react to American pressure and sanctions that is not the product of careful and persuasive diplomacy. It must rely on its embassy teams to create nuanced and careful approaches that deal with each country in ways that fully take into account their concerns and sensitivities. A one size fits all, or legislated set of general "sticks" and penalties will do more harm than good.

The US should neither overestimate Iran's capabilities in the periphery nor treat peripheral theaters of competition as critical ones; it should monitor Iranian advances with an eye toward discerning Iran's overarching strategy to evade Western pressure and expand its regional interests. By all accounts Iran is far from achieving a global alliance of counter-Western states, but Iran's distance from that goal is in part provided for by the engagement and vigilance of status quo powers. To secure the periphery engagement and vigilance should continue.