

Testimony for the hearing: “Ahmadinejad’s Tour of Tyrants and Iran’s Agenda in the Western Hemisphere.”

Presented before the United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs – Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Chairman

By José Azel, Ph. D., Senior Research Associate, Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, University of Miami

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**Iran’s Influence in Latin America:
The Tehran, Havana, Caracas Axis**

Madam Chair, Ranking Member Mr. Berman, distinguished members of the committee, I am honored and pleased to have this opportunity to share my views on the growing Iranian influence in Latin America, and I commend you for calling this hearing on what is an underestimated and misunderstood threat to our national interests.

Iran is an increasingly important politico-economic player in Latin America. Its influence transcends geography, language, culture, and religion. At the heart of this growing Iranian influence is a peculiar trilateral political configuration with Cuba and Venezuela. The basis of this eccentric alignment is not East-West political philosophy, or a coalition based on congruent economic models, or North-South ideological affinity.

Even more perplexing, it is a strategic alliance that transcends profound theological differences. What then brings together Fidel Castro -a Marxist-Leninist atheist-, Hugo Chavez -a putative socialist Christian- and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad -a product of Islamic fundamentalism? What allows the Iranian theocracy, so removed from Latin America by ethnicity, customs and values, to play an increasingly influential role in this hemisphere?

If we answer these questions in terms of the growing economic ties among these countries, and there are many, licit as well as illicit and covert, we would be basing our analysis on strict Western economic rationality. We would be mistakenly extrapolating our logical model to Castro, Chavez, and Ahmadinejad.

A second analytical mistake is to scrutinize Iran’s influence in discrete Lilliputian country-by-country terms rather than in terms of the synergies and symbiosis of the Tehran-Havana-Caracas alliance. We would further compound our error if we formulate U.S. foreign policy in similarly disconnected terms. As world events have repeatedly demonstrated, we eventually gain the Socratic insight that we know very little of the logical reasoning models of autocratic leaders like Ahmadinejad, Castro, or Chavez.

Although it may seem that way to us, these countries do not pursue an irrational foreign policy. The analytical challenge for the United States is how to understand in our cultural and analytical milieu actions arising in another?

In the case of Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela the unifying point seems to be a virulent hostility towards the United States, liberal democracy and market economies, as well as opposition to Israel. In other words, the Ahmadinejad, Castro, Chavez nexus is fundamentally an anti-American political alignment. As such, it follows its own logic and rules of engagement.

Let us recall, for example, that in 1979, with the victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Fidel Castro abandoned his support of the communist Iranian People's Party (IPP) and embraced Ayatollah Khomeini's theocratic anti-communist regime. In Castro's logic the Ayatollah's anti-Americanism trumped his anti-communist ideology.

The growing Iranian influence in Latin America, together with its Cuban and Venezuelan connections, should be understood in this context of an anti-American alliance determined, above all other considerations, to undermine U.S. national interests. For example, Cuba and Venezuela have become the most strident defenders of Iran's nuclear ambitions and the three countries have formed a strategic partnership to evade UN and U.S economic sanctions. Cuba's sophisticated intelligence and counter intelligence capabilities are reportedly shared with Iran and Venezuela. Moreover, the triumvirates' influence has expanded now to include Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua.

Increasingly, the Tehran, Havana, Caracas bloc speaks with a unified anti-American voice at the UN and other international forums in a concerted effort to undermine U.S. influence by any means at their disposal. In addition to diplomatic maneuvers, the bloc seeks to increase US economic costs in a variety of ways from impacting the price of commodities, to support for anti-American and terrorist groups, to collaborating with Russia and China in opposing US initiatives and, of course, by Iran seeking to become a nuclear power. This geopolitical alignment, if it can be described as ideological at all, is based on an ideology of hate towards the United States, Israel, and democratic governing principles.

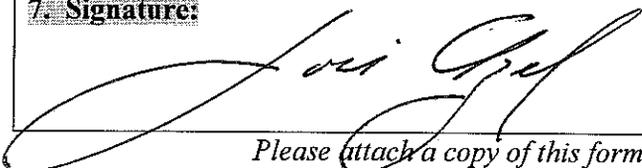
Distinguished committee members, the formulation of U.S. foreign policy is often imbued with inherent tensions between policies anchored on our democratic principles and policies based on our national interests. In this case, a rare congruence exists for clarity of purpose in a coordinated U.S. foreign policy that blends our support of democratic values and human rights in Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela with our national security concerns.

First, our foreign policy should pay far more sustained attention to Latin America, and second, unambiguously, we should take advantage of this congruence of purpose to be unabashed and not timid in supporting opposition to the tyrants that threaten our national interests.

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Jose AZEL	Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, University of Miami
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