

# WebMemo



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## Iran Moves West: Ahmadinejad's 2012 Latin American Visit

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On January 8, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad lands in Venezuela to start a brief but highly symbolic Latin American visit. The Iranian leader aims to bolster ties with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and some of the region's most strident anti-American leaders. For the Obama Administration, the Iranian visit reflects a continuing erosion of U.S. influence in the region and highlights the urgent need for an active policy to safeguard and advance U.S. security and interests in our neighborhood.

**Winning Friends and Influencing Nations.** Ahmadinejad's visit comes as Iran ramps up brinkmanship in the face of new economic sanctions. With recent military maneuvers and threats to close the vital Strait of Hormuz, Iran has ushered in an uncertain 2012. Ahmadinejad also seeks an opportunity to strut on the world stage to shore up declining political support at home, where he is despised by Iran's opposition Green Movement and denounced by bitter rivals within Iran's hard-line regime. Ahmadinejad's beleaguered faction faces growing anxiety about the mushrooming impact of sanctions on Iran's economy and strong opposition in the sham elections for Iran's faux parliament in March. Ahmadinejad hopes that his Latin "tyrant's tour" will demonstrate that Iran is not isolated and that he is a respected leader of the anti-American bloc.

Since taking office in 2005, Admadinejad has broadened and deepened Iran's ties with the Western Hemisphere. His government has signed numerous

civilian and military cooperation agreements with Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. For a nation with a Taiwan-size economy, Iran's trade relations with Latin America continue to grow at a surprisingly fast rate. Iran has expanded its diplomatic presence, which masks the covert expansion of intelligence and Revolutionary Guard personnel charged with maintaining support for Iran's terrorist proxies and allied anti-American movements.

In Brazil's former President Lula da Silva, Iran discovered a leader sympathetic to its claims that its nuclear ambitions were entirely benign, and Brazil voted against imposing the last round of sanctions against Iran at the U.N. Security Council in June 2010. In general, Iran craves greater international legitimacy and seeks to project global influence and power at a time when Latin America has distanced itself from the U.S.

**Iran's Western Hemisphere Agenda.** What does Iran seek in the Americas? It desires diplomatic cover and international support against the U.S. and Western Europe, which are imposing increasingly tougher sanctions. Iran wants commercial and

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economic outlets for its limited range of exports and sources of secure supply for its domestic market.

Iran also desires a set of friends who are willing to buck the U.S. and aid the Iranian Central Bank and state enterprises in their efforts to conduct sales and technology transfers that minimize the bite of sanctions. From a geostrategic point of view, Iran likely views Latin America as a potential platform for conducting asymmetric warfare or disruptive terrorism in the event of a conflict over free passage in the Strait of Hormuz or a strike against Iran's accelerating nuclear weapons program by Israel or the U.S.

Iran also colludes with foreign terrorist organizations, particularly Hezbollah, the radical Lebanese Shiite terrorist organization that has established deep roots within the Lebanese diaspora in South and Central America. Hezbollah has enriched itself through involvement with South America's cocaine trade to fund its activities around the world. Finally, Venezuela and others (notably Bolivia) are positioned to provide Iran with long-term access to strategic materials like uranium, which is required for further development of a nuclear weapons program.

**Ahmadinejad's 2012 Itinerary.** Iran seeks to cement ties with a coterie of member states of the Bolivarian Alternative for the People of Our America (ALBA). Established in 2004, ALBA links kindred leftist regimes under the leadership of the Castro brothers and Hugo Chavez. ALBA members pursue a hybrid mix of nationalism, Marxism-Leninism, populism, authoritarianism, and militarism. While ALBA exists because of Venezuela's oil wealth, the ideological glue is a strident anti-Americanism and a desire—shared with Iran—to see the demise of the U.S. as a global leader for democracy and free markets.

The following is a rundown of the countries the Iranian leader plans to visit:

- **Venezuela.** Venezuela remains Iran's critical entry point into the Americas. Venezuela's Chavez has cultivated a decade-long relationship with Iran's revolutionary Islamic leadership, creating its so-called axis of unity. The meeting is the first since the start of the Arab Spring, including the fall of

Chavez ally Muammar Qadhafi and the discovery of Chavez's life-threatening cancer. Facing reelection in October, Chavez continues to play the anti-American card to whip up Venezuelan nationalism and will use the Iranian visit to revalidate his anti-American credentials. While careful to avoid overt threats to U.S. security, the two leaders will privately scheme further sanction-busting actions and advance planning for asymmetric warfare strategies.

- **Nicaragua.** The presence of Ahmadinejad at the inauguration of Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega on January 10 is a damning reflection of the deterioration of democracy in that country. While sanctioned by the majority in November, Ortega's return to the presidency was built on a series of constitutional violations and electoral chicanery. The fact that Ortega wishes to share center stage with the bloody repressor of the Green Movement confirms Nicaragua's steady descent into authoritarianism.
- **Cuba.** Despite a recent flurry of economic reforms designed to shed state workers and improve the woeful economic balance sheet of Cuban communism, the island remains under the unyielding and repressive control of General Raul Castro. The Iranian president's visit is a reminder that in matters relating to politics and the international distribution of power, the Castro regime has far more in common with the intolerance and repression of Iran's theocracy than it does with democracy in the Americas.
- **Ecuador.** Under the erratic leadership of President Rafael Correa, oil-producing Ecuador has steadily moved away from the U.S. By hosting the Iranian president, Correa hopes to bring fresh commercial ties and burnish his increasingly anti-American credentials.
- **Guatemala.** While Guatemala maintains limited diplomatic relations with Iran, it recently took up a two-year rotating seat on the U.N. Security Council, making it an object of Iranian courtship. Incoming Guatemalan president Oscar Perez Molina, a former military officer and conservative, will be inaugurated on January 14. Accept-

ing the presence of Iran's president will be a bad start for a new presidency and a slap in the face to the U.S.

**The Obama Administration: Wobbly on Iran.**

The Obama Administration entered office naively hoping to persuade Iran to halt its nuclear weapons program through diplomatic engagement. The President famously promised that if Iran "unclenched its fist," he would extend his hand in friendship. But the Tehran regime contemptuously spurned his engagement efforts, brutally cracked down on its own people, seized several Americans as hostages, stepped up its nuclear program and its ballistic missile buildup, plotted to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador in Washington, and most recently threatened to attack shipping in the Persian Gulf.

The Obama Administration claims that Tehran's recent threats are a sign that sanctions are starting to bite, but Iran's current economic crisis is related to the plummeting value of Iran's currency caused by sanctions on Iran's Central Bank, which the Administration opposed but was forced to accept after the Senate voted 100–0 to include them in the Defense authorization bill.

There are independent but unconfirmed reports that Iran and Venezuela are pressing forward with a clandestine agenda that includes facilitating access to uranium and support for Hezbollah in the Americas. The State Department has sought to normalize relations with ALBA nations and wants to send new ambassadors to Ecuador and Nicaragua while minimizing increasingly glaring bilateral differences.

**America's Neighborhood Watch.** The Obama Administration must adopt a tougher stance in

2012, and relations with Iran should serve as a critical litmus test. The Administration should do the following:

- **Maintain a consistent response to Iran.** Signal to other nations that supporting Iran's dangerous, rogue behavior will have serious consequences that affect the sending of new ambassadors, foreign assistance, and loan approvals in the Inter-American Development Bank.
- **Increase intelligence assets.** Assign a higher priority to the collection of intelligence regarding Iran's penetration into the Americas and Iranian-supported terrorist organizations like Hezbollah.
- **Support the democratic opposition.** Find ways to redouble support for Venezuela's democratic opposition as a critical presidential election approaches in October. Domestic democratic forces within the ALBA countries clearly oppose stronger ties with Iran and leaders who are ready to replicate aspects of Iran's tyranny.

The impending Ahmadinejad visit in the region requires heightened awareness and greater responsiveness by the Obama Administration to serious challenges close to the homeland.

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