

Danger stalks Latin America

BY JOHN KIRIAKOU

Wed, Dec. 17, 2008

Iran -- the ultimate mischief maker with global reach, astounding patience, a shameless marriage to mayhem and terrorism and interests in opposition to those of the United States -- is making major diplomatic inroads under Washington's nose.

It's amazing, really. Iran, after all, is regarded by much of the world as an outlaw country. Sanctions are in place on its military-industrial complex, and international loan guarantees are virtually impossible to come by.

The Iranian economy is in tatters. Even while \$100-barrel-plus oil was enriching producers in the region, Iran's low-tech, outdated industry was barely profiting. In fact, 6 percent of the country's gasoline is imported.

Nevertheless, over the past year, Iran has worked diligently to expand relations with a host of Latin American countries, many of which have populist leaders who harbor a strong distrust of the United States and are looking for a powerful friend to help them rebuff Washington's influence.

- Venezuela: President Hugo Chávez, for instance, has held up his close ties with Iran as an example of what his revolution can do for the region. He has much to show for it, including an Iranian ammunition factory, a car assembly plant, a cement factory and other such examples of Iranian involvement. And just to make sure the United States can't interfere (as it has in the past), Iran Air initiated direct air service between Tehran; Damascus, Syria, and Caracas, Venezuela.

- Paraguay: President Fernando Lugo Méndez was lauded in the Iranian media as "an enemy of the Great Satan" after naming Hezbollah sympathizer and fundraiser Alejandro Hamed Franco as the country's new foreign minister. Hezbollah -- which is Iranian funded and supported -- has a well-documented presence in Paraguay, and the U.S. State Department has banned the minister from entering the United States or from flying on a U.S. airline.

- Bolivia: President Evo Morales jumped into Iran's lap even more quickly than his neighbors, ordering his foreign minister to lift visa restrictions on Iranian citizens in exchange for a \$1.1-billion Iranian investment in Bolivia's gas facilities. Morales then gushed that Bolivia would move its only embassy in the Middle East from Cairo to Tehran.

Iranian state television even agreed to provide Bolivian state television with Spanish-language programming, making it that much easier for every Bolivian to receive Iranian-produced news and documentary shows -- i.e. propaganda.

The real danger here doesn't have to do with an arcane diplomatic battle over who has more friends in Latin America. The problem is visa-free Iranian travel and the potential creation of a terrorist base of operations in the United States' backyard. If anyone with an Iranian passport can enter Bolivia without a visa or any further documentation, the country soon will be open to covert officers of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, its Islamic Revolutionary Guard, which the State Department recently declared a terrorist organization, and the Quds Force, an Iranian military group whose mandate is to spread Islamic revolution around the world.

A further danger is if other Latin American countries follow the Bolivian lead and lift visa restrictions. Iran already has proved what it can do in Latin America with visa restrictions. In 1994, Iranian agents worked with Hezbollah terrorists to bomb a Jewish association's community center in Argentina, killing 85 people and wounding hundreds. An established Iranian intelligence presence traveling freely throughout Latin America would make counterterrorism efforts in the region much more difficult.

The United States still has an opportunity to stop the Iranians in Latin America. But it's a big job. The growing Iranian influence -- inconceivable a decade ago -- is the result of the decision by the United States to stop paying attention to the region. It will be reversed only if the United States changes its policy.

Break bread with the U.S.

First, the new president must reverse the Bush administration's policy of ignoring Latin America and instead engage those countries in active diplomacy. Political and economic relations must improve to the point at which there is simply no benefit to breaking bread with Iran.

Diplomacy will be slow, difficult and probably expensive. Iran is spending billions of dollars on the continent, and the United States must do the same. Trade agreements must be negotiated, an immigration policy must be conceived and implemented, and the new administration must pay our neighbors the attention that is necessary to win them over.

The only alternative is yet another front in the battle against terrorism.

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