



Rubio vows to eliminate Hezbollah, Iran operations from Venezuela after Maduro capture

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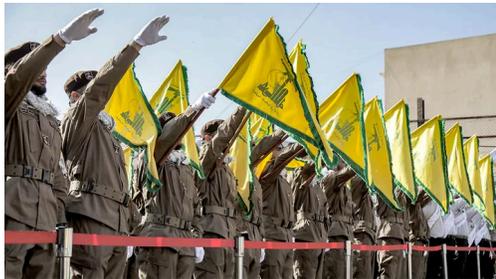
Fox News

The day after elite U.S. forces captured wanted narco-terrorist and former Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro in Caracas, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that the Iran-backed Lebanese terrorist movement Hezbollah will no longer have operations in the South American state.

The Iranian regime-backed Hezbollah terrorist organization is responsible for both the bombing of the U.S. embassy, which killed 63 people, and the Marine barracks bombing in Beirut in 1983, when 241 U.S. military personnel were killed.

Speaking on CBS' "Face the Nation," Rubio said, "It's very simple, OK? In the 21st century, under the Trump administration, we are not going to have a country like Venezuela in our own hemisphere, in the sphere of control and the crossroads for Hezbollah, for Iran and for every other malign influence in the world. That's just not gonna exist." He also told NBC's "Meet the Press" that, in regard to Venezuela, that meant, "No more Iran/Hezbollah presence there."

GOP SENATOR PREDICTS TRUMP'S NEXT MOVE IN VENEZUELA AMID HEZBOLLAH'S INFLUENCE: 'LONG PAST DUE'



Hezbollah members salute and raise the group's flags during the funeral for comrades killed in an Israeli strike on their vehicles, in south Lebanon, on April 17, 2024. (AFP via Getty Images)

Walid Phares, who has advised U.S. presidential candidates and is a leading expert on Hezbollah, told Fox News Digital, "Hezbollah has a long history in Venezuela and has emerged as a significant security concern in Latin America, particularly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The origins of Hezbollah's presence in Venezuela date back to the mid-1980s, when the organization began recruiting members from segments of the local Lebanese diaspora."

He noted that Hezbollah gained greater traction following the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's consolidation of power in 2002. "During this period, Hezbollah's presence became more visible, with reports indicating that some of its members gained access to Venezuelan state institutions, including security agencies, often through the acquisition of Venezuelan passports and legal documentation. These developments facilitated the expansion of Hezbollah-linked networks throughout Latin America, extending into Brazil, Argentina and Chile, and reportedly reaching as far as the U.S.–Mexico border."

Phares said, "Hezbollah is believed to maintain a substantial presence across Venezuela, including command-and-control elements in Caracas. Margarita Island has been frequently cited in open-source reporting as a logistical hub used for activities ranging from financial operations to intelligence gathering and alleged narcotics trafficking. Additional public reporting has suggested Venezuelan cooperation with Iranian and Hezbollah-linked operations targeting Iranian dissidents abroad, including attempted kidnappings and

intimidation campaigns in the Western Hemisphere."



Trump monitors mission to capture Maduro from a secure location at his Mar-a-Lago estate. CIA Director John Ratcliffe, left, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, right, sit beside him. (Donald J Trump via Truth Social)

ON MADURO'S 'TERROR ISLAND,' HEZBOLLAH OPERATIVES MOVE IN AS TOURISTS DRIFT OUT

The U.S.-designated terrorist organization Hezbollah lashed out at the U.S. after it captured Maduro. Hezbollah said it "condemns the terrorist aggression and American thuggery against the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela" and "further affirms its full solidarity with Venezuela — its people, presidency and government — in confronting this American aggression and arrogance."

The thorny challenge of how to purge the Venezuelan state and society of embedded Hezbollah operatives was addressed by Phares. He said, "One option would be to rely on a post-Maduro transitional authority that has pledged to dismantle terrorist networks. In practice, however, it is likely that U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism agencies would play a leading role in identifying and disrupting pro-Iranian networks operating within Venezuelan territory."

Matthew Levitt, a scholar on Hezbollah from the Washington Institute, told Fox News Digital, "It will all come down to what kind of regime comes next. Trump's statements leave that wide open. There is, however, an opportunity to address the long-standing Hezbollah presence in Venezuela, and the strategic relationship between Venezuela and Iran more broadly."



Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro (L) meets the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei during his visit in Tehran, Iran on Oct. 22, 2016. (Pool / Supreme Leader Press Office/Anadolu Agency/Getty Image)

Carrie Filipetti, executive director of the Vandenberg Coalition and a deputy assistant secretary of state during Trump's first administration, told Fox News Digital, "Among the many ways in which the Iranian regime and Maduro regime coordinated until Maduro's arrest was providing a safe haven for Hezbollah fighters. Hezbollah took advantage of the lack of rule of law in Venezuela and parts of Latin America more generally to engage in money laundering connected to the drug trade. They are also believed to have used connections within the Maduro regime to secure Venezuelan passports for members of Hezbollah."

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"It isn't a surprise that the plot to kidnap Iranian American journalist Masih Alinejad involved taking her by speedboat to Caracas," she noted. "Hezbollah and Iran knew, under Maduro, they could operate with impunity there, spread anti-American propaganda and plan anti-American attacks. Whether there are any implications for the Maduro-Hezbollah relationship now that Maduro is gone will depend on whether regime insiders are allowed to remain in power or not."

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