

IRAN AND HEZBOLLAH IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Statement before the
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East and North Africa

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Chairman Duncan, Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen, ranking members Sires and Deutch, distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

It is a pleasure to appear before you today to offer my perspective on Iran and Hezbollah's presence, activities and influence in Latin America, with a particular focus on Peru, my home country.

Peru is not typically associated as part of the wave of anti-American populist countries in Latin America characterized by the Cuban and Venezuelan-led Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA). In fact, Peru is a growing trade partner of the United States and, along with Chile, Colombia and Mexico; it forms part of the Pacific Alliance that counters the more socialist message of the ALBA narrative. In the past few years, Peru's economy has enjoyed healthy economic growth. Nor is Peru's government currently hostile to the United States.

Nevertheless, Iran and Hezbollah, two forces hostile to U.S. interests, have made significant inroads in Peru, almost without detection, in part because of our weak institutions, prevalent criminal enterprise, and various stateless areas. These elements are particularly weak in the southern mountainous region of my country.

As Peru's Vice Minister of Interior in 2006, and through my work as an analyst of political and social conflict conducting various risk analyses for a variety of private sector clients—I have become very familiar with these sub-regions and the illicit actors that operate within them. In the case of Iran and Hezbollah, I began noticing their presence back in 2011. At this time, a connection was forming between the Islamic Republic and other

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activist movements in Peru controlled by Havana, Caracas and La Paz. These activist groups, have been operating in my country since at least 2005, and include the *Casas de ALBA* (Houses of ALBA) and the *Casas de Amistad Peruano-Cubanos* (Peruvian-Cuban Friendship Houses) — political/social organizations aimed at subverting and weakening our democratic institutions and spreading socialist ideology throughout the country.

Since the Iranian attack on the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina* (AMIA) in 1994, I have been concerned about the Iranian and radical Islamist presence in my country. But it wasn't until a few years ago (circa 2011) that I began receiving information regarding the presence and activity of Iranian and Hezbollah operatives in Apurímac, Peru, which is a poor, not densely inhabited, remote region of the country. Apurímac is also a mineral rich region, with tremendous potential for strategic minerals such as uranium (Minera), but the region is also heavily involved in cocaine production.

The following written testimony provides details to the presence and activities of Iran and Hezbollah in my country, which has advanced very rapidly almost unnoticed.

A Hezbollah terrorist is arrested in Lima

On October 28, 2014, a 28-year-old Lebanese-national—**Muhamad Amadar**—was arrested in Lima by the Peruvian National Police for possession of explosives. Amadar entered the country from São Paulo, Brazil using false documents from Sierra Leone and admitted to being a member of Hezbollah during his initial interrogation (Aguirre).

According to immigration records, Amadar first arrived in Peru in November 2013, and married Peruvian-American Carmen del Pilar Carrión Vela, a U.S. citizen who resides in Miami but was born in Pucallpa, a remote city in the Amazon region of Peru with a great amount of narco-trafficking activity. Peruvian police monitored Amadar intermittently after he arrived in country since the police anti-terrorism database had information that tied him to Islamic terrorist networks. But because he was married to a Peruvian national, his immigration status prevented him from being immediately deported. (Aguirre)

After a little more than a year in Peru, the police proceeded to apprehend Amadar after noticing he had not left his apartment for several weeks. At the time of his arrest, Amadar was alone and no explosives were found; however, there were plastic gloves and traces of TNT, carbon, and other chemical products. These products were later analyzed by a technical team of the Peruvian National Police and determined to have similarities to explosives usually employed by Hezbollah. (Aguirre)

The target of attack was not identified, and Amadar has declined to cooperate with the Peruvian Counter-Terrorism Police (*Dirección Nacional Contra el Terrorismo*—DIRCOTE) Photos, however, were found on his iPad of the Peruvian-North American Cultural Institute (*Instituto Cultural Peruano-Norteamericano*—ICPN) in Miraflores as well as the Jorge Chavez International Airport in Callao (“Peru Dicta”, 2014).

All of this is reminiscent of the AMIA attack in Buenos Aires on July 18, 1994 and the lesser known bombing of a Panamanian commuter flight the next day, on July 19, 1994 that

killed 21 persons including 12 Jews. A cultural center and an airport are common soft targets for Hezbollah.

Based on conversations with Peruvian officials familiar with this investigation, what seems clear is that Amadar is an explosives expert, but not an operator. He was not going to be the individual who would carry out the attack that was presumably being prepared.

Although the quick dissemination to the press of Amadar's arrest prevented further identification and arrest of other members of his cell, it is logical to assume that he belonged to a larger, regional network. There is speculation that his premature arrest, before it was possible to identify more members of his cell, was a political decision made at the highest levels of my country. (Aguirre)

Amadar stands accused of possession of explosives and his case is with the Peruvian prosecutor. Although it is evident that he handled or manufactured explosives, as an attorney myself, based in my experience as litigator, I can say the case is quite fragile legally, since it is only based on expert analysis of explosive residue and reports provided, apparently by the Mossad, in which he is identified as an explosives expert. But since no target was confirmed, nor is there an actual confession, it is quite possible that he will be found not guilty and released from prison. Meanwhile, his network is unknown and presumably intact, therefore its operational capability can continue to build and intensify without interruption.

The Amadar case is but the tip of the iceberg as Iranian and Hezbollah operatives have been leaving a growing footprint throughout the Americas. While Iran has been shown to have established substantial links with ALBA countries, its presence and influence in other countries in Latin America seems to be growing as part of a coordinated strategy to expand throughout the region. In doing so, Iran is utilizing the same strategy, and even the same agents of influence, that allowed it to grow exponentially within the ALBA countries. In Peru, this strategy began to take shape in 2011.

It's important to be aware of the tendency of Hezbollah to raise funds from illegal activities like drug trafficking and illegal mining, both heavily related to the economic life of the southern mountain and jungle areas of my country.

Creating a cultural climate favorable to Iran

Unlike the U.S. and many countries in Europe, Peru's Islamic community is relatively small, comprising approximately a few hundred people throughout the country. Most of this community is dispersed, however, Tacna, along our southern border with Chile is an exception with a small but unified Islamic community (approximately 60 Muslim families).

The majority of Tacna's Muslims are Pakistani, engaged in used-car importing, and have assimilated into Peruvian society, with many obtaining Peruvian citizenship and subsequently applying for immigrant investor visas in the United States.

Due to the small size of the Islamic community in Peru, with the only major Sunni Mosques in Lima and Tacna, the transfer of cash donations for the construction of additional

mosques and/or Islamic cultural centers deserves attention. This bears watching since there is not a large enough Islamic community in Peru to warrant the construction of more Mosques or any significant Islamic cultural activity.

Yet, on September 2011 an Iranian-Argentine dual citizen named Suhail Assad (birth name: Edgardo Ruben Assad) visited Peru for the first time to do just that. It is important to note that in July 2011 Ollanta Humala Tasso assumed his presidency of Peru. Sources close to Humala have suggested that Suhail Assad showed interest in establishing contact with President Humala at the offset of his presidency. I cannot confirm that he made such contact, but Assad did meet with a former professor at the Pontifical Catholic University in Lima, who is in Humala's inner-circle. Assad also met with a government official who helped clear his way through immigration, since he is on a watch-list.

Numerous intelligence reports have identified Assad, who resides alternatively between Chile, Venezuela and Iran, as the Islamic Republic's main agent of influence in charge of recruitment and proselytizing in Latin America. (Salcedo)

While in Peru, Assad made a series of films with Marxist historians focused on the benefits of pre-Columbian cultures and contrasting these with the alleged devastating damage done by the West during the 20th century. Assad used these films continuously speaking about the "enemies of Islam" without specifying who these exact enemies are. Assad's skill as a propagandist is instrumental for the influence operations that have recruited thousands of young, native-born Latin Americans to travel to Qom, Iran to receive "training" from the infamous terrorist, and "mastermind" of the AMIA attack—Mohsen Rabbani.

Through religious proselytizing, several of these Latin Americans have intertwined their new Muslim faith with existing militant positions prevalent throughout their communities, adopting the Iranian and Bolivarian (ALBA) mission to "liberate the oppressed" in their country. This narrative sits well with many violent radical movements in South America who have clear anti-Western attitudes. In this context, the 1979 Iranian revolution is viewed as a recipe for success for many homegrown Latin American radical movements that look to move the region away from U.S. and Western influence. (Teólogo Sheij)

In Peru, it appears that Assad's first contact was a Peruvian national, Edwar Quiroga Vargas, who contacted the Argentine through his Iranian-Latin American Cultural Center in Caracas, Venezuela, via an introduction from the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez Frías. Quiroga has a reputation as an avid fundraiser in Peru, Venezuela and Bolivia, with connections throughout various indigenous movements in the country. Quiroga managed to convince Assad that Apurímac, a remote, sparsely populated region, rich with minerals and agriculture—is a strategic region to start building Iran's presence in Peru.

It is not clear whether Quiroga continues to be involved with Iran. There are several rumors circulated within the small Peruvian Shiite community concerning the disappearance of a \$40,000 grant awarded by Iran for the construction of a mosque, which was never built. Nevertheless, Quiroga was able to organize several trips for an unknown number of Peruvians to Qom, Iran for political, religious and other training. Peruvian national

intelligence sources speak of more than 120 military reservists (former active duty soldiers) who were recruited and sent to Iran via Quito, Caracas or La Paz. Most of these recruits have no Islamic ancestry and belong to remote indigenous communities, with some harboring significant resentment toward the West. Many participated in a violent takeover of the Micaela Bastidas National University of Apurímac (*Universidad Nacional Micaela Bastidas de Apurímac*—UNAMBA) a couple years ago. The total number of Peruvians who received this Islamic indoctrination and possible advanced military training is unknown, but at least two (2) remained in Iran or outside Peru for several years and at least eight (8) are back in Apurímac directing the INKARRISLAM, an Islamic cultural center in this sub-region.

Peruvian police have also linked Quiroga to the *Etnocaceristas*, a militant nationalist movement and political party led from jail by Antauro Humala, the brother of President Ollanta Humala, who attained prominence by occupying a rural police station in Apurímac back in 2005 but is now imprisoned and convicted of sedition, homicide and kidnapping. Etnocacerist party (a racist organization that advocates against western races and western aspects of Peruvian society and Peruvian culture) also played an important role in the takeover of Pichanaki town, which was followed by the expulsion of Plus Petrol oil company from the region, as they have done in several riots in the last 10 years.

The link between Quiroga and the *Etnocaceristas* is a Peruvian citizen named Guillermo Bermejo Rios, who is part of Venezuela and Cuba's activist movements in Peru with ties to several Latin American terrorist groups, namely the FARC in Colombia, *Alfaro Vive Carajo* in Ecuador, MRTA (the terrorist group that took control of the Japanese Embassy in Peru and previously kidnapped or killed several businessmen in Peru and Bolivia) and the infamous Shining Path. Bermejo is currently in prison for his ties to drug trafficking and to the Shining Path, but was initially arrested in 2006 by the Peruvian National Police for allegedly planning to attack the U.S. Embassy. Bermejo was not convicted in 2006 because "conspiracy" to commit a terrorist act is not a legal concept in Peru, nor do we have sufficient anti-terror legislation to prosecute someone for affiliation to terrorist entities (Humire, 99).

These cases raise significant concern over the growing presence of Iranian-allied operatives and organizations in a friendly nation, taking advantage (in the same way China and Russia do) of each void the U.S. has left in Peru for years now, Hezbollah related activities, even those of a preliminary type, indicate the possibility of greater and more serious threats. The Amadar arrest this past October does not tell us the extent of the cell or other networks with which it presumably operates, nor the intended primary and secondary targets and objectives. All of this raises more questions than answers.

What is clear, however, is the coordinated set of activities that bear watching. Colonizing Middle Eastern and Islamic communities, recruiting people with an anti-Western predisposition and their unspecified "training" abroad, outreach to indigenous communities with previous grievances, the presence of activists with ties to militant and intelligence operations are not the acts of a friendly power. When an individual is found to be engaged in the handling of explosives and is not prosecuted to the full extent of the law, then the suggestion of political cover ups and end runs around the legal system should set off alarms about the extent of the Iranian infiltration in my country.

Peru's geo-strategic advantage

Peru's south is a region with many advantages for Iran's expansionist plans. Both Apurimac and Puno have proven uranium reserves and the border with Bolivia and Chile is highly porous and permeable, encompassing jungle area, highlands and mountain ranges. It has become an area of rampant and flagrant trafficking in drugs, weapons, explosives, gas, oil and human smuggling, without any real possibility of detecting what or who enters or leaves the area. (Minera)

Considering Iran's extraordinarily large presence in neighboring Bolivia, and the apparent closeness of Bolivia's government to that of Peru—this presents the possibility that Iran could use its embassy in La Paz as a central hub to command and control operatives and agents in neighboring countries.

These neighboring countries, namely Peru and Chile, share a very porous border that is filled with criminal and other elements of organized crime. The lack of legal oversight and systematic weakness in the Free Trade Zones of Tacna (Peru), Arica and Iquique (Chile, and El Alto (Bolivia) could conceal a variety of illicit or sanctioned activity. On August 28, 2012, Brazilian and Bolivian authorities found two tons of tantalite in nylon bags in the office garage of the Venezuelan military attaché in La Paz, Bolivia. This strategic mineral, with dual-use military grade applications, was reported to be mined out of Guajará-Mirim in Brazil and transported via smuggling river routes through Bolivia, than by land to Arica, Chile where it was allegedly going to be docked and transported via vessel to Venezuela and then to Iran.

Moreover, its large Andean indigenous population also characterizes this sub-region. In an attempt to win converts and sympathizers, cultural memes are used to create parallels between seemingly disparate religions and cultures. Such concepts as the Shiite belief in the "return of the Mahdi" can be translated closely to resemble the traditional *Inkarri* myth, believed by many indigenous in the Andes to represent the return of the Inca (God). Such parallels can be used to provide a certain cover of legitimacy to those otherwise thought of as "outsiders."

Iranian agents have shown to have an acute familiarity to the cultural environment of the Andes and do not ignore any of these elements. The combination of weak institutions, religious parallels, and a strong anti-American political narrative are all consciously used to lay the foundations for carrying out future actions and operations by Iran and its terror proxies.

Iranian interests, by working with local anti-Western movements, work against economic cooperation with the U.S. and other countries, undermining productive capacity and therefore making us more dependent on our relations with Iran and its allies. The cultural similarity previously mentioned between the Shiite worldview and the southern Andean world could, given funding and sufficient dedication, generate a rapid expansion of Hezbollah cells with effects that are hard to predict.

Finally, there is a dangerous convergence taking place in Peru between Iranian and Hezbollah cells, the governments of Cuba and Venezuela, the *Etnocacerista* movement

(founded by President Humala), the FARC, the Shining Path and the MRTA which jointly direct the so-called “Fronts for the Defense of the Environment” – positions to which no one has elected them and titles which they themselves have appointed. The connections between this convergence is not entirely clear; however, what is clear is that Iran’s ability to spread its influence is increasing due to the growth of these groups in Peru.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Peru’s current government may show some sympathy towards Iran, but it is not openly an ally of Iran. Iran is recruiting and using clandestine entry into Peru, constructing networks with a growing capability for action in the southern Andean region, which puts at risk not only U.S. interests, but also undermines the very stability of democracy and economic growth of my country.

These networks have links with subversive organizations; operate under the facade of self proclaimed (not elected by citizens) fronts for environmental protection (usually forcing the population to back them by fear), and to promote an anti-investment climate that has already yielded their desired results by paralyzing major mining, energy and hydrocarbon projects. The arrest in October 2014 of a presumed Lebanese terrorist (Amadar), who confessed to being a member of Hezbollah, with clear evidence of having handled explosives, indicates they seem to be ready to move into an offensive phase using terror.

The U.S. government should strengthen its traditional friendship with Peru, increasing efforts to train the armed forces, police and prosecutors starting at the basic professional training of its members. So far, at least in the Army (where Etnocacerist party, close to Iran’s political position is making itself stronger), Peru’s military training continues under the influence of the Russian schooling instilled in the 70’s. It would also be highly advisable to direct more effort toward human and electronic intelligence collection so as to better understand how Hezbollah is deploying its plans of action in the southern Andean region. Human Intelligence collection by local peasants is crucial in far regions still poorly connected. To be valuable, this must be analyzed by professionals who really understand the culture of the area, which is quite idiosyncratic and different than large Peruvian cities, and very different from U.S. culture itself.

The police and armed forces of my country also need to build strong quick-response capabilities to act efficiently and promptly when need against these common enemies of democracy and freedom.

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