

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
Joint Subcommittee Hearing entitled:
“Examining the State Department’s Report on Iranian Presence in the Western Hemisphere 19 Years After AMIA Attack”
Thursday, August 1, 2013

I came into Congress in 1989 and was here nineteen years ago when the AMIA attack occurred in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1994. Fast forward to today and the Iranian presence in Latin America is on the rise and poses a greater threat to our national security.

Two months ago the Special Prosecutor for AMIA, Alberto Nisman, released a 500 page report citing extensive evidence of Iran’s intelligence and terrorist network alive and well in various Latin American nations. This report reaffirmed that Iran continues to use its diplomatic and cultural centers as a facade to infiltrate the region. As our two subcommittees continue to do our due diligence and shine the spotlight on the Iranian presence in the Western Hemisphere, it is important to examine this problem through the prism of the Obama administration’s failed policies in Latin America.

Time and again we have seen the Obama administration fail to hold oppressive regimes accountable for the human rights violations, constitutional violations, and a breakdown of rule of law in the region. The ALBA nations of Venezuela, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Bolivia, and to a certain extent now sadly Argentina, continue to undermine U.S. efforts in the region and it is not surprising that those same countries have opened their arms to embrace the Iranian regime.

Just yesterday, the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa held a hearing on the Iran-Syria nexus and Ambassador John Bolton stated, and I quote: “the largest Iranian diplomatic facility in the world is in Caracas, Venezuela...because they are laundering their money through the Venezuelan banks.” In order for the Obama administration to get serious about this issue, it cannot ignore the close ties between Venezuela and Iran. But it has become abundantly clear that the Administration continues to put politics over national security.

To admit that there is a problem in the Hemisphere regarding Iran, the Administration would first have to put the blame on the Venezuelan regime - the same regime that it continues to attempt to normalize relations with. The decision is misguided and will only embolden the corrupt Venezuelan leadership.

One month ago, the Department of State presented to Congress a report on the Iranian influence in Latin America – and we thank our colleague for passing a bill making that possible, a report that was required thanks to the efforts of Mr. Duncan. Our responsibility as policy makers is to do our best to prevent problems from becoming even worse.

We cannot wait until this threat increases to such a level that cannot be contained, so we must be proactive and not reactive. That is why I was extremely disappointed that the report failed to reach its objectives required by U.S. law and failed to connect those dots on what is really going in the Hemisphere with Iran.

The report lacked a coherent and detailed strategy on what the Department of State and other federal agencies are doing to combat the Iranian threat in our region, and drastically underestimated that threat. For example, the report states the U.S. Intelligence Community works with our allies in the region to collect information on Iranian activities. What it failed to mention is the fact that there is a large intelligence gap within our own intelligence community to gather accurate information on Iranian activities, and this Administration has failed to appropriately address this threat.

In March of this year, the Commander of SOUTHCOM testified before Congress and said, and I quote: "I would be remiss, however, if I did not share with the Congress my assessment that U.S. Southern Command's limited intelligence capabilities may prevent our full awareness of all Iranian and Hezbollah activities in the region."

This is why I offered an amendment to the NDAA this year that authorizes the Secretary of Defense to deploy assets, personnel and resources to the Joint Interagency Task Force South, in coordination with SOUTHCOM, to combat narco-terrorism and the Iranian threat in the region. The links between terrorism and drug trafficking are well known which is why it is easy to assume why the Iranian regime and its proxies are in our hemisphere.

What this administration fails to comprehend is that terrorists fighting in the Middle East, in Syria, in Iran, in Yemen, in Lebanon, are financing their illicit activities from drug trafficking proceeds being collected from right here in our own region. Whether it's the foiled plot by an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps member to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. on U.S. soil, or the DEA-led investigations into the Lebanese Canadian Bank and Operation Titian, it is clear that the Iranian regime is supporting operatives in our region. So it is in our national security interests to dismantle these transnational criminal organization and we cannot and must not turn a blind eye to this imminent threat.