

Iranian Authoritarian Architecture and the Projection of the ‘Axis of Resistance’ in Latin America

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Abstract— This article analyzes the mechanisms that the Islamic Republic of Iran has employed to exert influence over authoritarian regimes and left-wing governments in Latin America. Drawing on three theoretical frameworks, including soft power theory, proxy network theory, and propaganda theory, this article examines the *modus operandi* of the Iranian regime in the region, addressing three key dimensions, public diplomacy and soft power, proxy networks, and propaganda and disinformation on social media. Likewise, the text draws on a historical and prosopographical methodology, grounded in academic and journalistic sources, to uncover the architecture of Iranian influence in the region from 2000 to the recent transformations resulting from the detention of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela and “Operation Epic Fury” in 2026.

Keywords— Iran, Latin America, Hezbollah, soft power, transnational authoritarianism, information warfare & prosopography

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Latin America has undergone processes of autocratization marked by the rise of populist leaders and the instrumentalization of democratic institutions and laws (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The named authoritarian turn of the Latin American left cannot be properly addressed without examining the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran, one of the most influential extrahemispheric actors in the region. As with China and Russia, the Iranian presence has fostered ideological, military, and transactional alliances that reinforce the foundations of authoritarian regimes in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, and that lend legitimacy to left-wing projects in Bolivia, Mexico, and Colombia.

Iranian interest and influence in the region can be traced back to the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the moment at which Iran decisively broke with the Western political and social order built around strategic dependence on the United States and the failed redistribution of oil revenues (Camacho, 2019). The Pahlavi dynasty and the Shah’s government promoted modernization and pro-western relations for more than three decades, but rising inequality and widespread discontent, channeled through the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, led to the establishment of a theocratic

and authoritarian republic that incorporated a universalist and expansionist vocation for its political and religious model.

This vocation aligned itself, in the mid-2000s, with the rise of left-wing governments in Latin America, referred to as the “Pink Tide”, owing to its ideological affinity grounded in anti-imperialist rhetoric and rejection of the liberal Western order (Castañeda, 2006). Nevertheless, the alliance between the Iranian regime and Latin American left-wing projects is paradoxical, given that these governments presented themselves under an inclusive and progressive ideology, rooted in equality and respect for the rights of women, LGBTIQ+ communities, and workers. The Iranian regime, for its part, prosecutes and penalizes the political and social participation of women, same-sex relations, and dissent. Why, then, does an affinity emerge between the “Islamic Revolution” and the “Pink Tide”? In practice, Latin American regimes have also systematically violated gender demands and political openness, demonstrating that the affinity between the theocratic regime and the Latin American left revolves not only around an anti-imperialist worldview, but is further bound by a shared disposition to instrumentalize and suppress individual freedoms and rights (Corrales & Penfold, 2011).

The result was the progressive transition toward the formation and consolidation of an “Axis of Resistance”, a designation the Iranian regime adopted in response to the so-called “Axis of Evil” under which President George W. Bush, in his speech of January 29, 2002, categorized Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, citing accusations of supporting terrorism and pursuing weapons of mass destruction. The “Axis of Resistance” was the deliberate initiative of self-legitimization and international projection of the Iranian regime, composed of state and non-state actors united under the premises of anti-imperialism and rejection of the liberal international value system (Mansour, Al-Shakeri & Haid, 2025). In Latin America, the Bolivarian, Castroist, and Sandinista rhetoric aligned seamlessly with revolutionary ideology and the mechanisms of authoritarian governance.

This article analyzes the mechanisms through which the Iranian regime has expanded its engagement and influence over authoritarian regimes in Latin America. The text is organized around three sections, grounded in a historical

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and prosopographical analysis of the actors and networks involved. The first section addresses the origins of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and its universalist and expansionist vocation. Subsequently, the three dimensions of articulation between the Iranian regime and authoritarian regimes in Latin America are examined, including diplomacy and soft power, proxy networks, and propaganda and disinformation on social media, particularly on platform X. The final section analyzes the implications of “*Operation Epic Fury*” and the prospects for democratic transition in Iran and the region.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the Exportation Doctrine

The Iranian revolution was the culmination of the struggle between a massive popular insurrection and the monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, eldest son of Reza Shah Pahlavi, a military officer and founder of the Pahlavi dynasty. In 1941, the USSR and the United Kingdom, fearing that the Shah might align with the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis in order to free himself from their tutelage and achieve independence, occupied Iran and forced the king into exile. Thus, on September 16, 1941, Mohammad Reza succeeded his father on the throne and governed until the triumph of the Iranian revolution.

In the early 1950s, an internal struggle erupted between the Shah’s government and Mohammad Mosaddegh, a parliamentarian and fervent Iranian nationalist who, in 1951, was democratically elected prime minister of Iran and secured the passage of legislation in the Majlis, the parliament, to nationalize the Iranian oil industry. The initiative enjoyed broad political support and social legitimacy, given that the oil reserves, discovered in 1909, remained under the control of the *British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC)*, later renamed *British Petroleum* and now *BP*, which held the monopoly over the drilling, extraction, and sale of the country’s oil (Gasiorowski, 1987). Since 1940, nationalists had been demanding the nationalization of the industry, but British interference in the government of the last Shah had blocked and dissipated every attempt.

Initially, the British sought channels of negotiation and diplomacy, however, the prime minister rejected any foreign involvement in the Iranian oil industry. Accordingly, the United Kingdom sought the assistance of the United States under the pretext that the prime minister and his supporters, aligned with the left and socialism, posed a threat to the West. Thus began “*Operation Ajax*” and “*Operation Boot*”, led by the CIA and MI6, the intelligence services of the United States and the United Kingdom respectively, aimed at staging a coup against the prime minister and facilitating the rise of General Fazlollah Zahedi, a pliable and anti-communist ally (Kinzer, 2003).

After months of political manipulation, psychological warfare, and induced unrest, the general and the intelligence services orchestrated the coup in 1953. The prime minister was arrested, tried, and sentenced to thirteen years of house arrest, where he remained until his death in 1967. Immediately thereafter, the Shah returned to power, assuming full authority and leading a regime of terror and human rights violations. The Shah governed for more than two decades, during which he advanced programs of modernization, gender inclusion, and literacy. Nevertheless, the repressive apparatus of the intelligence agency *Sazman-e Ettel’at va Amniyat-e Keshvar* (Savak) and the inequality derived from the unequal distribution of oil revenues transformed Iran into one of the most authoritarian and unequal countries in the world.

This event was etched into the Iranian collective memory, fueling the anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism that would rapidly become the organizing axis of the insurrection and the revolutionary doctrine (Camacho, 2019). Under the command of Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, an Iranian Shia religious and political leader, workers, clergy, and students mobilized to overthrow the Shah’s government. The greatest support, however, came from Marxist and socialist groups, who found in Khomeini’s figure a path to halt the Westernization of Iran and move closer to the Soviet sphere of influence.

Between 1921 and 1961, Khomeini was a disciple of Ayatollah Abdul Karim Haeri Yazdi and later of Ayatollah Mohammad Hossein Borujerdi, the supreme religious authority of Shiism, who had promised Shah Reza Pahlavi to keep religion separate from politics, provided that the monarch would minimize secularizing measures and lift the ban on the Islamic veil. Paradoxically, following the death of his mentor, Khomeini chose to enter politics and opposed the “*Shah’s White Revolution*”, which entailed agrarian reforms, the sale of factories to private interests, and women’s suffrage. In response to his rejection of the Shah’s measures, which he denounced as anti-Islamic and deplorable, the Ayatollah was arrested and shortly thereafter forced into exile in Turkey (Moya, 2019).

From Bursa and Najaf, where he lived for thirteen years, he continued delivering incendiary speeches, dictating religious doctrine, and training followers. By the mid-1970s, the people had designated Khomeini “*Imam of Iran*”, a momentous act, given that since the country had adopted Shiism in the sixteenth century no such title had ever been granted to a living person. Although monitored by Iraqi authorities, Khomeini continued to oppose the regime and sponsor insurrections within the country (Moya, 2019).

The revolution also possessed a remarkable capacity to simultaneously appeal to Islamic audiences and left-wing movements, embodying what the Shah himself named “*The*

unholy alliance between the black and the red”, associating black with Islamist groups and red with the radical left. Particularly notable was the role of Ali Shariati, the revolution’s principal intellectual, ideological, and sociological guide, who fused revolutionary Shiism with anti-colonial Third Worldism into what he termed the “*Islamic Left*”. In this way, an intricate linkage between Islam and Marxist ideology emerged (Abrahamian, 1989).

Following the triumph of the revolution, on February 1, 1979, Khomeini returned to Iran, where a crowd of approximately five million Iranians welcomed and cheered him, proclaiming him leader of the revolution. In March, after winning the referendum in favor of an Islamic Republic, the Ayatollah established a theocratic regime under Sharia law and the ideology of “*Velayat-e faqih*”, the guardianship of the Islamic jurist, in which the ruler holds both political and religious authority simultaneously (Arjomand, 1988). The regime also enshrined the universalist and exportation vocation of the revolution in Article 154 of Iranian law, which stipulates that Iran shall support the just struggles of the “*Mustad’afun*”, the oppressed, against the “*Mustakbirun*”, the tyrants, in every corner of the globe.

At the end of that year, the revolutionaries stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held diplomatic personnel and American nationals captive for 444 days, marking the beginning of hostilities between Iran and the United States under anti-imperialist and anti-Western rhetoric (Sick, 1985). The United States, in turn, sanctioned the regime and backed Iraq in the war it waged against Iran throughout the 1980s. In response, Iran would turn its attention to Latin America, a region of geostrategic importance to North America in its anti-communist struggle and pursuit of global leadership.

The relationship between the Iranian regime and Latin America took shape in the early 1980s, driven by the deliberate instrumentalization of networks and influence agents in the region. In 1982, the “*Seminar on the Ideal Islamic Government*” brought together 380 religious figures from 70 countries and reached an agreement to export the Iranian revolution at the political, religious, and social levels from a radical and violent interpretation of Islam (Nisman Foundation, 2015). Within this framework, the regime and the assembled leaders agreed to resort to terrorism as a means of legitimizing the revolution and expanding its networks of influence in Latin America.

The regime swiftly took action and advanced the reforms necessary to achieve its objectives and gain international recognition. In 1983, the Iranian diplomat and cleric Mohsen Rabbani began assembling support groups for the exportation of the Islamic revolution in Latin America, deploying diplomatic representations and Islamic networks throughout the

region (Gelman, 2023). The “*Nisman Report*” by Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman, himself a victim of terrorist violence, denounced Iranian infiltration across several countries in the region, noting the disproportionate presence of Iranian diplomats and nationals in embassies in Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina. The primary entry point and operational hub of the Iranian diaspora was the Tri-Border Area, a zone of free trade and navigation shared by Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, from which it could operate and expand throughout the rest of the region (Levitt, 2013).

The Projection of Iranian Revolutionary Diplomacy and Soft Power in Latin America

“We must strive to export our revolution throughout the world. Both superpowers have risen to obliterate oppressed nations, and we must support the oppressed peoples of the world”.
 (Khomeini, 1980, speech on the eve of the Persian New Year of 1980)

Iran has employed public diplomacy and soft power to promote its revisionist foreign policy and revolutionary Sharia, primarily among left-wing governments and authoritarian regimes around the world. Soft power refers to the capacity to influence others through attraction and persuasion, as opposed to hard power, which relies on military force and sanctions (Nye, 2004). Specifically, the Iranian regime has projected its ideology and religion in African and Latin American countries through the theory of “*Wilayat al-Faqih*”, the guardianship of the Islamic jurist, drawing on diplomatic relations and the cultivation of aligned political networks to confer legitimacy and international recognition on the revolution (Arjomand, 1988).

Mohsen Rabbani and the Architecture of the Iranian Missionary Network in Latin America

The figure of Mohsen Rabbani marks the starting point of Iranian insertion into Latin American governments and societies. Trained in religious seminaries in Iran and linked to the post-revolutionary organization, Rabbani arrived in Argentina in the early 1980s with the mission of assembling a network of religious and political intelligence in service of the Islamic Republic (Andrade, 2020). Rabbani’s activities in the Tri-Border Area operated through a front company called *South Beef*, which ostensibly exported food products from Argentina to Iran but in reality served as a vehicle for the illicit trafficking of weapons, supplies, and false identity documents to facilitate the entry of Iranians into Argentina.

For fourteen years, Rabbani was the pivotal figure in the promotion of Iran’s ideological, religious, diplomatic, and terrorist activities in Latin America. The most powerful instrument of

projection in the region was the Iranian missionary network and the Al-Tawhid mosque in Buenos Aires, from which he directed processes of Islamization and indoctrination (Levitt, 2013). He was also the mastermind behind the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992, which claimed 29 lives, and two years later, the attack on the AMIA Jewish community center, which left 85 dead and 300 wounded.

Rabbani became Iran's principal proselytizer in Latin America, as his networks served multiple purposes, including amplifying diplomatic representation and propaganda in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua, and facilitating the transit of Iranian agents disguised as inspectors, airline crews, and religious figures. In 1997, having left Argentina amid suspicions regarding his involvement in the attacks, Rabbani returned to Iran. Although he remains a fugitive wanted internationally, he continues to serve today as an advisor on global affairs and personal representative of the Ayatollah in Latin America, delegating to his network of local disciples the task of perpetuating the revolution and his legacy (Nisman Foundation, 2015).

Edgardo Suhail Assad and Iranian Transnational Operations

In the decade following Rabbani, Edgardo Suhail Assad became the principal transnational and Latin American operator of the Iranian revolution. Born in Argentina, the son of Lebanese immigrants and a disciple of Rabbani, Assad assumed leadership in the dissemination of the revolution and the indoctrination of Latin American youth (Gelman, 2023). The network operates according to a three-tier hierarchy, comprising Islam Oriente based in Qom, which directs the network across Latin America, the *Iranian-Latin American Cultural Exchange Center* in Venezuela, which coordinates Iranian programs and activities in the region, and *Local Cultural Centers*, dispersed throughout Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Mexico, and Central America, which serve as national hubs for recruitment and indoctrination.

In conjunction with this, Assad led the establishment and expansion of Al-Mustafa University, under the direct supervision of Supreme Leader Khamenei and the Qom religious establishment, an institution that recruits adherents, promotes Iranian influence, gathers intelligence, and establishes ties between aligned leaders and movements (Andrade, 2020). Its principal campuses are located in Caracas, Venezuela, and Bogotá, Colombia. The recruitment process is characterized by a high degree of deliberateness and selectivity, as Iran, unlike other mass-influence models, seeks to cultivate highly loyal and strategically positioned networks within universities and local groups.

Assad's work also materialized in the launch and expansion of HispanTV, the Iranian Spanish-language television network aimed at Latin American audiences. Assad became the regime's right-hand figure in the region, directing pro-Iranian programming and activities while reaching approximately 600 million Spanish speakers (Álvarez, 2024). The television outlet does not limit itself to reporting on current events but also disseminates anti-imperialist messaging, demonizes Israel, and normalizes hostility toward Jewish people.

The Khatami Administration and the Geostrategic Opening toward the Pink Tide in Latin America

The rise to power of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) marked a turning point in Iranian foreign policy and in the regime's proximity to authoritarian left-wing projects in the region (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007). Trained in Islamic philosophy and theology, Khatami articulated a reformist discourse grounded in the "*Dialogue of Civilizations*", seeking to reduce the country's isolation and project the principles of the revolution outward. The doctrine gained significant international traction, including at the United Nations, which adopted Resolution 2322 of 1998, proclaiming the "*Year of Dialogue among Civilizations*". That forum made explicit reference to the Iranian president's words, thereby improving Iran's standing before numerous states and international organizations.

With regard to Latin America, the presidencies of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), and Ebrahim Raisi (2021-2024) exploited the "*Pink Tide*" a wave of left-wing and progressive governments that emerged in the region in the late 1990s and early 2000s and subsequently evolved into authoritarian regimes, to deepen the ties between the Iranian revolution and revolutionary projects throughout the region (Castañeda, 2006; Corrales & Penfold, 2011).

These alliances have rested on the pillars of anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism, support for Palestine and rejection of Israel, technical and financial assistance in oil and gas projects, the weakening of democratic systems, and systematic violations of freedoms and human rights. The Latin American leaders most closely aligned with the Iranian influence network were Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. The bond between Iran and Bolivarianism in Venezuela represents the vertebral axis of Iranian projection and the most enduring relationship in the region (Romero & Curiel, 2009).

President Khatami visited Venezuela on three occasions during his tenure, promoting alliances in oil matters and aligning OPEC members around the interests of exporting countries. The arrival of Ahmadinejad to power, however,

transformed the relationship into a first-order alliance, as he visited the country twice and received Hugo Chávez, president and leader of the Bolivarian revolution, on three occasions, where Chávez was received by Supreme Leader Khamenei, an honor reserved for Iran's closest and most vital allies.

In 2007, Ahmadinejad highlighted the similarities between the Islamic Revolution and the Bolivarian Revolution, characterizing both as bearing a message of struggle on behalf of the "Oppressed Peoples" against the American "Great Satan". The relationship was further consolidated in 2022 with the signing of a twenty-year agreement covering oil, petrochemicals, defense, agriculture, and intercultural programs. In 2023, President Raisi announced alongside Nicolás Maduro, Chávez's successor, the objective of increasing bilateral trade volumes from 3 to 20 billion dollars annually, underscoring that the relationship between Tehran and Caracas had a geostrategic dimension that extended far beyond low-profile diplomacy (Álvarez, 2024).

The relationship between Iran and Cuba, for its part, rests on the pillar of anti-imperialism and socialist revolution. The island, under the leadership of Fidel Castro first and Raúl Castro thereafter, offered Iran a space for revolutionary legitimation, granting it the status of honorary member of the anti-American and authoritarian pantheon of the new era (Sweig, 2002). Simultaneously, Cuba voted against Security Council and UN General Assembly resolutions that sought to pressure Iran over its nuclear program, a position Tehran reciprocated through assistance in the fields of medicine and biotechnology. In 2023, President Raisi made an official visit to Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, visits that gave rise to several exchange and cooperation agreements in agriculture, energy, information technology, maritime transport, and indoctrination.

The bond between Iran and Nicaragua was formalized following the return to power of Daniel Ortega and First Lady Rosario Murillo in 2007, with Ortega becoming the first head of state to receive Ahmadinejad's visit that same year. On that occasion, Ahmadinejad declared that both nations shared interests, objectives, and Western adversaries. Since then, relations between Iran and the Sandinista revolution have included declarations of solidarity, participation in anti-imperialist forums, mutual support in multilateral bodies, and agreements on infrastructure and energy (Gelman, 2023). Raisi's 2023 visit expanded the frameworks of alliance and indoctrination into new sectors. The progressive authoritarianism of Ortega's government, which has dissolved political parties, stripped opponents of their nationality, and expelled the Church, has further reinforced ideological affinity and regional destabilization.

Proxy Networks, Terrorism, and Regional Destabilization in Latin America

"Over the years, Tareck El Aissami has developed a sophisticated and multifaceted financial network that operates through criminal and terrorist modules to bring Islamic militants to Venezuela and neighboring countries, and to send illicit funds from Latin America to the Middle East". (Center for a Secure Free Society, 2014)

Iran has employed proxy warfare to acquire indirect control over the governance and preservation of authoritarian regimes in Latin America (Mumford, 2013). Iran's indirect warfare strategy has involved the insertion of terrorist groups and the provision of weapons and resources to local armed factions, with the aim of propping up left-wing dictatorships and destabilizing democratic governments. Within this framework, Hezbollah, the Lebanese terrorist organization sponsored and financed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, has managed to interfere in the region through drug trafficking, money laundering, document trafficking, and terrorist attacks (Levitt, 2013).

The Tri-Border Area, the frontier zone shared by Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, has become an epicenter of money laundering for Hezbollah, where the group exploits porous borders and weak oversight mechanisms to launder millions of dollars annually through shell companies, currency exchange houses, and casinos (Hudson, 2010). In addition, operational modules exist in Maicao, Colombia, Isla Margarita, Venezuela, Iquique, Chile, and Colón, Panama.

To reinforce its financial networks, Hezbollah has forged ties with Mexican criminal organizations and local terrorist groups, including the FARC and the ELN in Colombia, relationships that facilitate the trafficking of drugs and weapons to the United States, Europe, and the Middle East (Farah, 2012). Nevertheless, only Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Paraguay have officially designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization, a gap that has hampered counter-narcotics efforts and the dismantling of authoritarian regimes in the region.

Imad Mughniyeh and Transnational Terror in the Region

Imad Fayeze Mughniyeh, known by the alias "Hajj Radwan", who was born in southern Lebanon and commanded the forces of Yasser Arafat in 1976, has been implicated in some of the largest terrorist attacks of the 1980s and 1990s, earning him a place on the most-wanted lists of the FBI and the European Union (Levitt, 2013). He also directed Hezbollah's international operations and Iran's intelligence services. In the Middle East, he authorized the bombing of the United States Embassy in Beirut in 1983 and the Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia in 1996.

In Latin America, the first major operation was the March 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, which killed 29 people. Two years later, he directed the bombing

of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), killing 85 people (Nisman Foundation, 2015). Although Hezbollah sponsored the attack, Argentine judicial documents allege that the impetus for Mughniyeh's actions came from Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Mughniyeh was killed on February 12, 2008, in a bombing in Damascus, as part of a Mossad and CIA operation authorized by President George W. Bush. Following his death, the networks remained active under the supervision of the Revolutionary Guard and his successors.

Assad Ahmad Barakat and the Expansion of Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Area

While Mughniyeh embodied the operational and terrorist dimension of Hezbollah in the south, Assad Ahmad Barakat personifies its financial and logistical dimension. Barakat was born in Lebanon and settled in Paraguay in the 1980s, where he used businesses and commercial enterprises to launder money, becoming the central figure of what the authorities of the three Tri-Border Area countries called the "*Barakat Clan*", a terrorist network with branches in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Chile (Hudson, 2010). In 2004, the U.S. Department of the Treasury placed him on the list of terrorism financiers responsible for the AMIA bombing.

Barakat pressured local Lebanese merchants in the Tri-Border Area, Venezuela, and the southern cone to channel resources to Hezbollah. Likewise, he maintained direct access to Hezbollah's senior leadership in Lebanon, and from 2002 onwards he traveled to Iran and Lebanon annually to report to the organization (Farah, 2012). This access would not have been possible without the Venezuelan diplomatic infrastructure that enabled, between 2008 and 2012, the naturalization of Middle Eastern nationals connected to Hezbollah. Barakat's prolonged impunity in Paraguay, where he had been sanctioned by the U.S.

Department of the Treasury since 2004, illustrates the broader pattern of institutional tolerance and authoritarian reciprocity that characterized the regimes of the Bolivarian, Castroist, and Sandinista axis. Barakat remained a fugitive for at least a decade until his arrest on September 21, 2018, in Foz de Iguacu, Brazil. His detention, however, did not dismantle the network, as the U.S. Department of the Treasury subsequently designated additional members of the same organization, including his brothers Hatem and Hamza Barakat, as well as multinational entities, on the list of terrorist groups (INISEG, 2022).

Tareck El Aissami and the Hezbollah Proxy Network in Venezuela

Tareck Zeidan, known as "*El Aissami Maddah*", operated across both planes of Iranian influence in Venezuela and

the broader region, encompassing the political-institutional dimension as a high-level state official and the operative-terrorist dimension as the coordinator of drug trafficking networks, money laundering, and proxy terrorism through Hezbollah. Of Lebanese descent and Venezuelan origin, the son of immigrants and a university activist, El Aissami became the ideal intermediary between Caracas, Beirut, and Tehran (Center for a Secure Free Society, 2014). He studied law at the Universidad de Los Andes, where he allied himself with Adán Chávez, the future president's brother, and indoctrinated leftist student groups inspired by Castroist and Sandinista revolutionary movements.

El Aissami rose through the Venezuelan regime to become the second-most powerful figure under Maduro, using the institutional apparatus of the Venezuelan state to facilitate the operations of terrorist groups and drug trafficking networks (Romero & Curiel, 2009). Among the positions he held were deputy in 2005, Vice-Minister of the Interior, Minister of Interior and Justice from 2008 to 2012, Governor of Aragua state from 2012 to 2017, Executive Vice-President of Venezuela from January 2017, and finally Minister of Petroleum from April 2020. It was precisely during his tenure at the Ministry of the Interior that, according to former Treasury Under-Secretary Marshall Billingslea, El Aissami directly supervised the issuance of more than 10,000 Venezuelan passports between 2010 and 2019 to Middle Eastern nationals, primarily Lebanese, Iranian, Iraqi, and Jordanian citizens, documents that served as "*keys*" granting Hezbollah access to more than 130 nations.

The articulation of the Iranian and Venezuelan proxy network sponsored the military, political, and criminal activities of the FARC-EP in Colombia and Hezbollah in Venezuela (Farah, 2012). This operational fusion transformed Venezuela into a state from which the Iranian proxy network ramified into Colombia's internal conflict, criminal drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico, including Los Zetas, and the rest of the Bolivarian axis in Nicaragua and Bolivia, reproducing patterns of weak governance and illicit financial flows oriented toward simultaneously sustaining both the armed group and the regime that sponsors it.

The connection between El Aissami and Hezbollah also materialized through diplomatic intermediaries identified by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. Among the most prominent was Ghazi Nasr al Din, a former member of the Venezuelan Embassy staff in Damascus, who, together with his brother Ghasan, recruited Venezuelan Arabs to travel to Lebanon and used his diplomatic position to provide financial support to the organization. In 2020, the Department of Justice formally charged him with narco-terrorism, money laundering, and embezzlement, while the State Department offered ten million dollars for information leading to his arrest.

Paradoxically, one month after the indictment, Maduro appointed him Minister of Petroleum, thereby reinforcing the energy ties between Iran and Venezuela as a means of circumventing Western sanctions. In 2014, Robert Morgenthau, district attorney of New York, confirmed that El Aissami had facilitated the issuance of Venezuelan passports and the naturalization of Hamas and Hezbollah members (Center for a Secure Free Society, 2014). In April 2024, El Aissami was arrested and executed by the Maduro regime itself, which accused him of “*Treason to the Fatherland*” in the context of an internal dispute over the monopoly of oil revenues. This outcome illustrates the fragility of loyalties within authoritarian regimes and Hezbollah’s proxy networks.

Propaganda, Disinformation, and Iranian Power on the X Network

“Today, the enemy is targeting our beliefs, our values, and our minds... This is a cognitive war and a media war.” (Khamenei, 2019, speech to members of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting)

Digital platforms and social media have facilitated the proliferation of disinformation and “*Fake News*”, which distort public debate and create new theaters for state propaganda (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Iran has harnessed the Internet and the information revolution to build networks of official propaganda and support for left-wing regimes in the region through the sponsorship of fake profiles and groups on X. The propaganda disseminated by regime leaders, official media outlets, and inauthentic groups has redefined Iran’s role in the region, reaching Spanish-speaking, Arabic-speaking, and English-speaking audiences.

Major General Hossein Salami and the “Cyber Battalions”

Major General Hossein Salami, a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard during the Iran-Iraq War and commander of the Guard’s Air Force, oversaw the development of a vast apparatus of digital warfare, propaganda, and disinformation (Frenkel & Wakabayashi, 2019). On September 6, 2022, in a public speech that generated significant international attention, Salami boasted that the Iranian guard had 2,000 organized and active cyber battalions, declaring the virality of audiovisual content, operations, and digital infrastructure. Salami also called for the activation of the “*National Intelligence Network*”, that is, the transformation of Iranian cyberspace into something analogous to that of North Korea, and for reaching global audiences. Salami was killed on June 13, 2025, in an Israeli airstrike on Tehran; however, the cyber battalion infrastructure he designed and publicized remains operational.

Ruhollah Mo’men Nasab and the “IRGC Latinas” in the Anatomy of Official Iranian Propaganda on X

Ruhollah Mo’men Nasab, former head of the Digital Media Center of the Ministry of Culture and secretary for cyberspace activities of the Popular Front of the Forces of the Islamic Revolution, publicly acknowledged the fabrication of fake profiles on X and confirmed that the disinformation network is part of a psychological warfare campaign (Murray & Linvill, 2026). He added that the regime has developed software for automated tweets and retweets and has opened at least 256 profiles to accelerate and amplify the process. The methodology described by Mo’men Nasab, which includes visual identity theft, the impersonation of activists, and mass-amplification software, mirrors the pattern documented in the “*IRGC Latinas*” group, reflecting an institutional continuum between internal operations to suppress dissidents and political influence propaganda directed at Latin America.

The most revealing and well-documented vehicle of Iranian disinformation targeting Latin American audiences is the network of fake profiles discovered and analyzed by the *Media Forensics Hub*, where researchers identified and examined at least 62 profiles affiliated with the Iranian guard (Murray & Linvill, 2026). These profiles can be grouped into two categories, one operated in Spanish while feigning to be located in the Americas and another operated in English while feigning to be located in the British Isles. All the profiles systematically amplify politically divisive propaganda and disinformation aligned with anti-imperial narratives designed to exploit regional fault lines and advance the interests of the Iranian regime.

The 13 Latin profiles use AI-generated profile images and are linked through the “*Iran Android App*” and the “*West Asia Android App*”. Likewise, the “*Venezuelan*” and “*Chilean*” profiles describe themselves as followers of “*chavismo*” and “*Maduro*”. The most thoroughly documented profile was @AnaRodri, suspended following the investigation, whose biography read, “*Daughter of migrants, a dreamer and resilient. No to discrimination and imperialism*”, reaching tens of millions of users (Murray & Linvill, 2026).

What makes this operation particularly effective in the Latin American context is its choice of identity vector, namely Latin women, daughters of migrants, chavistas, and anti-imperialists. This construction of a fictitious persona precisely replicates the archetypes of political mobilization that characterize the social base of the Bolivarian axis regimes, enabling Iranian propaganda to circulate organically within communities that already share its interpretive frameworks regarding American imperialism and solidarity with Maduro (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Subsequent investigations by BBC Verify, which ex-

amined new location data from X, also suggested that these accounts were operated from Iran.

Peyman Jebelli and the Media Reach of HispanTV and Press TV

Peyman Jebelli, the Iranian official appointed as director of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) and former director of the IRIB's sub-directorate for foreign affairs, has advanced the replacement of qualified managers with individuals loyal to the Iranian guard, with the aim of disseminating anti-American, pro-Palestinian, and revolutionary rhetoric (Álvarez, 2024). In November 2022, the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the European Union designated Jebelli and IRIB staff members for their role in restricting freedom of expression in Iran and for their propaganda activities. Under his leadership, HispanTV and Press TV operate as the two most active media arms on X and television directed at Spanish-speaking and Latin American audiences.

The @Nexo_Latino profile, affiliated with HispanTV, has 49,600 followers on X and publications that reach between 5,000 and 25,000 likes and up to one million impressions. At the beginning of 2026, HispanTV also had 92,900 followers on Instagram, 50,100 on Telegram, and 44,100 on X, where it disseminates anti-Israel propaganda and the program *Palestina Desclasificada*, following the strategy deployed by the Russian outlet RT, making it an influence tool oriented toward persuading audiences and ensuring that its particular interpretation of international reality prevails (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The @PressTV profile, for its part, has 568,600 followers on X, with individual publications surpassing one million impressions and averaging between 2,000 and 22,000 likes per tweet. Press TV represents Iran's official media apparatus and has the broadest global reach within Tehran's disinformation ecosystem (Murray & Linvill, 2026). For Latin America, anti-American, anti-Israeli, and Global South solidarity narratives predominate, systematically amplified through profiles aligned with the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. Specifically, Iranian programming is rebroadcast through the Venezuelan regime's Telesur network, where the messaging, while more subtle, is equally toxic and antisemitic.

“Operation Epic Fury” and the Question of Democratic Transition Prospects in the Region

The events that unfolded between mid-2025 and early 2026 have introduced unprecedented variables into the architecture and prosopography of Iranian influence over left-wing regimes in the region. In June 2025, Israel attacked Iranian nuclear facilities, killing several military leaders. In December of the

same year, massive protests in Iran, triggered by the decline of the rial, threatened the legitimacy and sustainability of the regime, leaving a toll of brutal repression and at least 3,500 fatalities (Mansour, Al-Shakeri Haid, 2025). On January 3, 2026, the United States detained Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, securing control of the oil industry and weakening the regime from within.

On February 28, 2026, “*Operation Epic Fury*” eliminated Ayatollah Khamenei and destroyed much of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, meaning that the Iranian network lost its principal ally in Latin America and its supreme authority in Tehran. The detention of the Venezuelan dictator carries grave implications for the resilience of the “*Axis of Unity*” between Iran and Venezuela and for left-wing revolutions in the region, as it exposes Iranian front operations on Isla Margarita, where Hezbollah runs drug trafficking and money laundering networks (Jerusalem Post, 2026).

Indeed, in 2022, under Maduro, Iran and Venezuela agreed to a twenty-year framework covering the oil, petrochemical, and defense industries, through which Maduro aligned his country with Tehran's “*Axis of Resistance*”. This agreement opened the legal framework for Venezuelan production of the “*Zamora V-1*” drone, based on the Iranian “*Shahed 131-136*” used by Russia in Ukraine, and paved the way for the presence of Iranian Revolutionary Guard naval advisors in Venezuelan military exercises. Maduro's detention was, therefore, a direct blow to the military dimension of the axis, not merely a political shift but the dismantling of Iran's principal operational module in the hemisphere (Jerusalem Post, 2026).

Following the operation, the Iranian regime and Latin American authoritarian regimes also activated the dissemination of official propaganda to assert discourses of resistance and struggle against imperialism. At least 47 X profiles associated with the “*IRGC Latinas*” used the personas of immigrant women, activists, and progressives to reject U.S. immigration policy and American military operations, sharing videos of anti-American protests outside Trump Tower, anti-Israeli political memes, and disinformation about U.S. military casualties (Murray & Linvill, 2026). The network has generated 59,403 pro-Iranian and pro-revolutionary posts, mutually amplifying regime rhetoric and viralizing an alternative reality accessible around the clock.

The question dominating current academic and geopolitical debate revolves around the prospects for democratic transition in Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba, unlikely in the medium term, but which, if realized, could dismantle the Iranian and Latin American “*Axis of Resistance*” (Diamond, 2002). Bearing in mind the prosopographical network analyzed and its legacies in public diplomacy, proxy networks, and digital propaganda,

the evidence suggests that the network would not disappear automatically because it does not depend solely on the Iranian state and left-wing governments. Rabbani, for instance, operates from Qom but retains decision-making capacity and operational reach in the region. Assad directs HispanTV from Qom, yet the Islamic network he embedded over decades has developed a life of its own. Barakat was detained, but the “*Barakat Clan*” continues to operate in the Tri-Border Area.

An Iranian transition, particularly one toward a reformed authoritarian regime willing to negotiate and align with Washington, could withdraw ideological and financial support from Latin American regimes and Hezbollah’s operations in the region, but would not fully dismantle them (Mansour, Al-Shakeri & Haid, 2025). Nevertheless, the architecture of Iranian influence in Latin America has been weakened and rendered more vulnerable than it appeared a decade ago. The suppression of several of its leaders and operational modules has initiated a process of geopolitical and hemispheric reconfiguration.

Final Thoughts

The historical, theoretical, and prosopographical analysis developed here demonstrates that Iranian influence in Latin America does not respond to isolated and situational dynamics, but rather to a systematic, sustained, and multidimensional geostrategy oriented toward the perpetuation of revolutionary projects and authoritarian regimes. Through the articulation of public diplomacy, proxy networks, and digital propaganda operations, Iranian leaders have managed to embed themselves in the governmental, social, and terrorist dynamics of the region. This process has contributed to the sustenance of left-wing regimes and the progressive weakening of democratic institutions throughout the region.

Likewise, the identification and analysis of prosopographical profiles reveals that the Iranian authoritarian architecture depends on a hybrid network of political, religious, operative, and media actors operating under varying degrees of autonomy and capacity for action. The figures of Mohsen Rabbani, Edgardo Assad, and Tareck El Aissami illustrate the regime’s capacity to forge transnational loyalties and reproduce its governance model in the region. In this sense, the so-called “*Axis of Resistance*” represents a paradigmatic alliance among the regimes of Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, in which, beyond their historical and religious differences, what binds them is indoctrination, support for illicit networks and armed groups, and disinformation as a means of mutual legitimation and survival within the international system.

Finally, recent events, including “*Operation Epic Fury*” and the partial dismantling of key leadership figures, point

to a reconfiguration of the influence network rather than its disappearance. Although the loss of powerful figures weakens the articulation of the axis, the legacy and resilience of its decentralized structures poses significant challenges for democratic transition processes in Iran and the region. The analysis of Iranian projection in Latin America is therefore not only indispensable for tracing the recent history of the authoritarian turn among left-wing governments in the region, but also for anticipating the future mechanisms of alliance and forms of resistance among authoritarian regimes.

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