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Iran in Latin America: Malign Alliances, “Super Spreaders,” and Alternative Narratives

by Douglas Farah and Alexa Tavarez



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Cover: Venezuela's Foreign Affairs Minister Jorge Arreaza shakes hands with Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif during Ministerial Meeting of Non-Aligned Movement Coordinating Bureau in Caracas, Venezuela, July 20, 2019 (Reuters/Manauere Quintero)

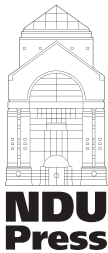
Iran in Latin America

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Institute for National Strategic Studies
Strategic Perspectives, No. 34

Series Editor: Denise Natali



National Defense University Press
Washington, D.C.
June 2021

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First printing, June 2021

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Executive Summary

Iran's ability to shape the information environment and spread the narrative of the United States as an imperialist force—perpetrating violence and instability in Latin America—has grown in recent years. These ongoing and multifaceted campaigns of disinformation and carefully curated messages are coordinated with Russian and Venezuelan state media companies and thousands of allied Internet and social media accounts. Together, these efforts pose a strategic challenge to U.S. interests and regional efforts to promote stability, democratic values, and the rule of law. While less visible than shipping gasoline to the Nicolás Maduro regime and other provocative actions, Iran's advances in Latin America's information space is not any less threatening than its more overt activities.

As part of its regional strategy, Iran has created a network of expanding echo chambers whose foundations are Iran's own HispanTV state-owned satellite platform; teleSUR, the Bolivarian radical populist network based in Venezuela; and RT en Español, the Russian state news service. These platforms operate in tandem with social media accounts on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram chat groups to coordinate narratives that are pushed from small platforms to mainstream media content in a relatively short period of time.

These narratives are then disseminated by a small corps of “super spreaders” and well-funded think tanks to push the same messaging across broader intellectual communities. Open-source data analysis identifies how these individuals act as cultural translators across different revolutionary settings and platforms. These crucial interlocutors hold various positions across a broad network of actors, including one senior member of the current Spanish government.

Ultimately, this Iranian-backed network is unified by a strong anti-U.S. ideology, providing a constant narrative of U.S. oppression and reckless exploitation of natural resources while portraying Iran as a key ideological ally of the radical populist Bolivarian Revolution. The overlap of messaging with Russian accounts and media platforms creates the narrative that the Iranian Revolution and the Bolivarian Revolution share a common set of anti-U.S. goals with Russia. There is no comparable U.S. counternarrative or sustained effort to counteract these ongoing narratives that have contributed to the waning political, military, and economic influence of the United States in Latin America.

This multifaceted and ongoing campaign is one of the primary reasons the Maduro regime and the Bolivarian Joint Criminal Enterprise (BJCE) continues to enjoy a large and surprising degree of legitimacy in the hemisphere. Iran's occupation of Latin America's information space

has grown in effectiveness and sophistication, as all three core media outlets have moved from the fringes to the mainstream of media relevancy. The messaging, largely devoid of Islamic religious content, is at its core a call and convergence center for a global alliance against the United States by Iran, Russia, and the BJCE. Our partner Ex Arca LLC, an information operations analysis company, provided the digital media analysis in this paper. Our partners at iTask provided research support.

Introduction

Most of 2019 looked grim for Iran's once robust efforts to form enduring alliances in Latin America. Staunch ally Evo Morales in Bolivia had fled after losing elections, and the interim government cut off diplomatic relations with Tehran.¹ The Maduro regime teetered on the edge of collapse, and Argentina had taken aggressive action against Iranian interests in South America, such as declaring Hizballah a terrorist entity. The tide seemed to have turned sharply against Iran's allies in the region from the network's peak times of influence during the first wave of leftist leaders elected in Latin America during the early 2000s.

Yet over the past year, Iran's theocratic regime has survived the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" sanctions regimen, falling oil prices, the assassination of key leaders, and the onslaught of the COVID-19 global pandemic. And in Latin America, Iran was unexpectedly bolstered by the return to power of strong allies in Argentina and Bolivia, coupled with the endurance of the Maduro regime in Venezuela, the Daniel Ortega regime in Nicaragua, and the Cuban regime. Against long odds, Iran is better positioned to pursue its long-term goals at the end of 2020 than at the beginning of the year.

Basking in these unexpected and sharp positive trends, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif made a triumphal tour of his nation's main allies to publicly reaffirm Iran's ties to the hemisphere. The multicountry tour is an essential part of Iran's public engagement in the Western Hemisphere as a partner of the revolutionary, anti-imperialist bloc of Bolivarian states we define as the Bolivarian Joint Criminal Enterprise (BJCE).² Both Iran and the BJCE view the United States as not only a common enemy but also the primary culprit for their deep economic and social crises.

When Zarif arrived in Caracas on November 5, 2020, he was met by his Venezuelan counterpart, Jorge Arreaza, who tweeted that "each high level visit deepens our strategic alliance and our brotherhood." He also affirmed Venezuela's right to purchase weapons, oil, and other products from each other.³ In a later interview with the Islamic Republic News Agency, Arreaza stated strengthening "strategic cooperation" with Iran was Venezuela's "top priority," given that both nations faced U.S. "blockades."⁴ He stressed that both regimes were "revolutionary, anti-imperialist, dedicated to being free, and facing common adversaries."⁵

Following a brief stop in Cuba, Zarif flew to La Paz, Bolivia, for the inauguration of new Bolivian President Luis Arce, a strong ally of Maduro and protégé of former Bolivian President Evo Morales. In addition to blasting the United States for wanting to subjugate Latin America to extract its natural resources, Arce immediately reestablished diplomatic ties with Iran and

Venezuela. Bolivia's interim government that took office in 2019 had broken relations with Iran and denied recognition to the Maduro regime, recognizing Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's lawful leader.⁶

Ultimately, the visit was the most visible example of Iran's official engagement in the hemisphere in 18 months. Recently, Iran's engagement has centered on gasoline shipments to the Maduro regime in May 2020 and a series of flights between the two nations to ferry out the gold used to pay for the fuel, and possibly deliver advisers, technicians, and equipment into Venezuela.

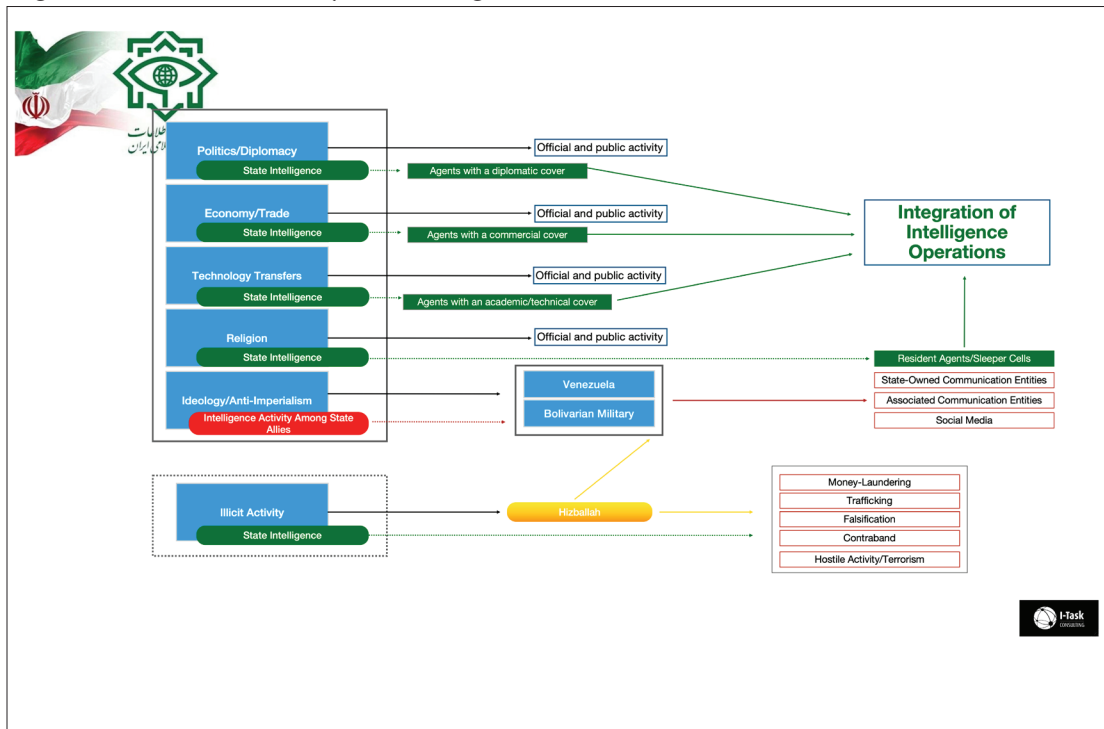
The Zarif visit, timed to Arce's inauguration, was preceded by Maduro's announcement of a new "Military, Scientific and Technological Council" that would allow the Maduro regime to develop its own weapons systems and defend itself against what the regime calls U.S.-sponsored military attacks by Colombia. This is the first formal public military weapons production link between the Maduro and Iranian regimes. When the United Nations' arms embargo on Iran expired on October 18, 2020, it opened the door to internationally sanctioned weapons transfers between the two nations.⁷ Maduro stated the new commission will bring together the "best minds" of the Venezuelan military to work with "sister nations," such as Iran, Russia, China, and Cuba to build a cooperative focused on military science and technologies.⁸

Although Iran is the focus of this paper, the Maduro regime's engagement with Iran is often carried out in tandem with the support of Russia. Four days after Zarif's visit, Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro's vice president; Astrúbal Chávez, cousin of the late Hugo Chávez and long-time leader of *Petróleos de Venezuela*, the state oil company sanctioned for massive money-laundering; and other senior Venezuelan officials arrived in Moscow to establish new anti-sanctions mechanisms.⁹ At the same time, reflagged Russian "ghost" oil tankers, using methods pioneered by Iran, were documented as moving millions of barrels of Venezuelan heavy crude to safe harbor from U.S. sanctions, likely as part of a triangulated exchange for Iranian gasoline.¹⁰

While the alignment of Russian and Iranian agendas is not new, the complementary and coordinated efforts by Iran and Russia to keep the Maduro regime afloat has proliferated across several arenas. Two strategic areas of convergence of interest are coordinated media and messaging campaigns with state media enterprises and weapons and defense fields, with a focus on aviation and the development of drones and light aircraft. This intersection is an important alliance that reshapes the military and diplomatic landscape and strengthens the hands of both extra-regional actors in the Western Hemisphere (see figure 1).

As Admiral Craig S. Faller, commander of U.S. Southern Command, stated in his 2020 posture statement:

Figure 1. Iranian Activity in the Region



The final malign actors—Maduro and his cronies in Venezuela—pose one of the most direct threats to peace and security in the Western Hemisphere. Emboldened by Russian, Chinese, Iranian, and Cuban protection and patronage, Maduro has allowed Venezuela to become a safe haven for the ELN [Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)], FARC [Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army)] dissidents, and drug traffickers while the Venezuelan people starve.

This vicious circle is framed by systemic issues of young democracies with weak institutions, rampant corruption, exploited by transnational criminal organizations, often better funded than the security organizations they face; external state actors that don’t share those values, China, Russia and Iran; and violent extremist organizations. They’re trying to advance their interests at the expense of U.S. and partner nation security.¹¹

Admiral Faller's statement frames how we examine Iran's influence on the information space in Latin America while working in tandem with other malign actors to weave a tapestry of a broad, persistent, and effective campaign to delegitimize U.S. interests, empower U.S. rivals, and weaken the foundations of democratic governance and the rule of law.

The Advance of Iran's Soft Power

With little fanfare or notice, Iran has been building and fortifying a web of soft power and sharp power engagement platforms across the hemisphere. While Maduro and Iranian leaders have publicly spoken of purchasing Iranian missiles and other advanced weapons systems, this interplay of hard power rhetoric is intertwined with the narrative of the United States as a looming and imminent threat to the region. Ultimately, the Iran-BCJE alliance has successfully positioned itself to dominate the information space in Latin America, with few overtly religious themes.

This information strategy uses two main typologies. The first is composed of basic stories building goodwill, sympathy, cultural affinity, and finding commonalities. These are stories about Muslims and/or Iranians spreading goodwill, Iranian embassies in the region participating in local cultural events, stories of tragedy and war in Yemen and Syria, and tales of heroism in overcoming adversity. To diminish the sense of Iran as a distant "other" in Latin America, HispanTV and other Iranian outlets often highlight the Shia Muslim belief in the Virgin Birth of Jesus to Mary, also a central tenant of the dominant Roman Catholic and evangelical faiths in Latin America, to bridge the cultural divide between Iran and Latin America.

The second typology consists of political narratives of U.S. imperialism, Israeli abuses, and anti-revolutionary actions both against the Iranian and Bolivarian revolutions. These narratives express the need for radical change in the world order, with the United States as the chief obstacle to that change. In each case, the narrative is spread by consistently pumping out stories that engage small but expanding echo chambers and developing like-minded followers and networks in social media platforms.

One example is IslamOriente, a Web site that publishes religious texts in Spanish and has a high number of real followers and tweets. The site, which often publishes Pablo Jofré Leal (a Chilean national who also appears as a correspondent for RT TV, HispanTV, and teleSUR), threads the line between political and humanitarian and also discusses Islamic art, the Koran, and Palestine. Focusing on these seemingly mundane topics while weaving in bits of political and humanitarian texts underlies a pro-Iranian narrative that builds a false sense of credibility in the account as a nonpolitical source.¹²

The tweets focus on sending readers to the IslamOriente Telegram account and to its Facebook page, where they host Islamic art and humanitarian stories.¹³ Overall, the rhetoric is meant to draw readers in and condition them to have empathy and common understanding with the Iranian community. Ultimately, building goodwill in a nonthreatening matter allows Iranian actors to later push their more problematic political and strategic agenda.

Other key elements of this network are quasi-academic institutions that produce books that are then sold across multiple platforms and universities and host forums for leaders of the BJCE, Iran, Russia, and other allies to propagate political ideological content and network. Well-funded think tanks and research organizations produce policy and position papers that weave the Bolivarian and Iranian revolutionary rhetoric into a compelling anti-U.S. tapestry. This has a broad appeal to the region's traditional and powerful traditional leftist groups as well as to radical populists.

The direct impact of these joint efforts on perceptions of the population of these efforts is difficult to precisely gauge, although there has been a considerable erosion in Latin America of the population's positive views of the United States. The Pew Research Center found the percentage of people in Latin America who viewed the United States favorably tumbled from a median of 66 percent in 2015 to 47 percent in 2018. In Mexico, where the three primary networks discussed here compete most directly with U.S. media outlets, the U.S. favorability ratings fell from 66 percent to 36 percent in that same period.¹⁴

Key events, such as Zarif's Latin America visit, the assassination of Iran's leading nuclear scientist Moshen Fakhrizadeh on November 27, 2020, and the development of Russia's Sputnik COVID-19 vaccination in turn provide content for the media platforms discussed below. Ultimately, the coverage of these events creates a chain of self-reinforcing echo chambers of the joint Iran-BJCE narrative, falsehoods, and attacks that spread to an expanding pool of media and Internet outlets. Furthermore, these platforms carry extensive and unquestioning praise of the Iranian and Maduro regimes, regional allies, and, to a lesser degree, Russia.

Three main outlets were identified as strategic platforms for converging Iranian-BJCE narratives: HispanTV, the Iranian state Spanish news site; teleSUR, the Bolivarian news outlet founded by Hugo Chávez; and Russia's RT en Español. These outlets often share not only similar narratives on key world events, but also, in at least three cases, the same journalist was published in all three mediums, often repeating the same story verbatim across the platforms:

- HispanTV. The least well-known medium that carries Iran's version of events and propaganda most prominently is HispanTV, Iran's Spanish-language satellite station that

broadcasts 24/7 across Latin America. In 2010, Iran launched HispanTV to provide a platform for anti-American and anti-Western narratives for a Latin American audience.¹⁵ HispanTV hosts very little programming directly on Islam but rather focuses on perpetuating distinct narratives to counter “Western-made order,” “capitalism,” and “American government and culture.”¹⁶ HispanTV has 36 correspondents in 27 countries, most of whom are Venezuelan and also report for teleSUR. The outlet transmits satellite news to all countries in Latin America and offers free programming on YouTube and Facebook.¹⁷ What is particularly interesting is the little-known role of Iranian funding of HispanTV through several Spanish companies and front groups tied to the Podemos Party that has strong links to the Maduro regime and the BJCE.

- teleSUR. The Venezuelan media outlet was launched by Hugo Chávez in 2005 as a “socialist alternative to CNN,” designed to spread the radical populist ideology of the Bolivarian Revolution. The Chávez/Maduro regimes have footed about 80 percent of the costs and provided the main studio facilities in Caracas, although Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Cuba reportedly make small financial contributions.¹⁸ Argentina, under the Fernández de Kirchner government, initially supported the media outlet until the Mauricio Macri administration (2015–2019) later blocked teleSUR transmissions to Argentina. However, the current Fernández de Kirchner government has resumed teleSUR broadcasting.

- RT en Español. The Russian television station based in Moscow began transmitting to Latin America in 2009 and has bureaus in Managua, Caracas, Havana, Buenos Aires, Madrid, Miami, and Los Angeles. Due to its high-quality production, rapid delivery of breaking news, and extensive network of correspondents, RT en Español has become one of the most influential mediums in the Western Hemisphere, giving Russia a relatively cheap delivery platform for its narrative. As Admiral Faller noted in his posture statement:

The disinformation campaign that Russia has been on is truly about, in all instances, painting the United States in an inaccurate light. One example is reporting that I was on the border of Venezuela about to lead an invasion force. Another example was they twisted it just enough in an article in RT, to say that I had said something that was at odds with the vice president of the United States, which was just complete baloney.

*Their largest by volume, outside of their Russian-language effort in social media, is in Spanish. You have to ask, what's the national interest of Russia in that disinformation here in our neighborhood and around the world? And it's concerning to us.*¹⁹

One of the key elements driving the overlapping interests of these groups is the constant referencing of each other and their allies on their own networks. Each medium has a relatively small number of voices that are represented, but the repetition and ties to other media and the Internet make this small group seem like an overwhelming army of diverse voices. As a result, the narrative gains traction as it is cited across platforms—and in turn legitimizing the media outlets as credible and reliable sources of information.

An IBI Consultants study in 2019 showed the frequency with which this network of media outlets cites each other to create the echo chambers. Prensa Latina, the Cuban official news agency and HispanTV, for example, referenced each other 8,710 times, or about 1,000 times a year or almost 3 times a day. TeleSUR and HispanTV quoted each other about once a day for the period under study.²⁰

One example of creating an echo chamber is one of the most popular features on the HispanTV Web site called Polimedios, an aggregation of pro-Iranian and BJCE news items from affiliated media. All are presented as independent actors, giving the impression that the global media is broadly reporting the same things. One recent menu of stories included “Iran and Latin America close ranks against the United States”; “Iran and Cuba blast illegitimate U.S. sanctions”; “Bolivia: Goodbye to the coup mongers”; “Iran can buy and sell weapons”; and “Venezuela is now freeing itself from the blockade.”²¹

Samuel Robinson Institute

One of the newest intellectual centers is the well-funded Samuel Robinson Institute (SRI) in Caracas, founded in October 2020, and with direct ties to the Iranian regime. SRI, named for Simón Bolívar’s famed teacher Simón Rodríguez who used the pseudonym Samuel Robinson, offers a high-profile platform for Bolivarian leaders and their Iranian allies to host events that present an alternative narrative to the humanitarian and human rights crises in both countries. The institute’s full-time researchers are a “who’s who” of leading BJCE intellectuals and top-selling authors. SRI is the newest and most influential of the think tanks that acts as a convergence center for Iranian/Bolivarian thought and intellectual content. Because it offers a safe space under Maduro regime protection, it does not serve as an academic center but as one where like-

minded people who often cannot travel easily can meet safely. For example, former Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa has multiple pending arrest warrants in Ecuador and can only travel to countries where he trusts the authorities, as he does when contributing to SRI.

According to its Web site, SRI falls under the umbrella of Misión Verdad (Truth Mission), an investigative media outlet based in Caracas, which is “dedicated to analyzing the process of the war against Venezuela.”

Misión Verdad was created in 2012 and is led by Gustavo Borges Revilla, a Venezuelan national with at least 10 years of experience in covering Latin American politics for various film and television outlets such as Ávila TV and Amazonia Films. Misión Verdad claims to be an independent media outlet, although its source of funding is unknown.²² Most of its critical content is directed toward Colombia, the United States, and the geopolitics of the shared border between Colombia and Venezuela.

Borges is the executive director for both SRI and Misión Verdad. Also, the design and tone of both are nearly identical, and all the writers for SRI also write for Misión Verdad.²³ In an interview with Multimedios VTV, Borges stated that Venezuela is among one of many countries being asphyxiated by maximum pressure strategies and sanctions. He added a major problem is that these countries do not have networks for reflection, intellectual thought, or analysis to unite these countries and create solutions.²⁴ Ultimately, the goal of SRI is to forge these networks across academic, political, and cultural spheres, which Borges identified in his interview as lacking.

SRI officially launched on October 28, 2020, and the site’s domain was registered by Borges 2 weeks prior.²⁵ Within days of its launch, the SRI Twitter account received various welcoming tweets from high-profile Bolivarian leaders such as Nicolás Maduro, Evo Morales, Ricardo Patiño—a Correa crony wanted for massive corruption in Ecuador—and Tarek William Saab, the Maduro regime’s attorney general.²⁶

On November 5, 2020, Zarif spoke at the institute’s inaugural event, and shortly after Zarif’s visit, Arreaza was announced as a permanent investigator at the think tank.²⁷ Zarif thanked the Venezuelan people for hosting him and spoke openly about the relationship between the oil sectors of Iran and Venezuela. Although this political relationship has flourished over the years, Zarif added that U.S. aggression has made it impossible for Iran and Venezuela to enjoy the natural resources abundant in both countries. “The U.S. is terrorizing the populations of Venezuela, Iran, Cuba, China, and Russia in areas where they are not allowed to fulfil their political objects,” Zarif stated. “That is the definition is terrorism.”²⁸

Ultimately, the Iranian connection comes full circle with the inauguration of Acre in Bolivia, a significant victory for both the BJCE and Iran. To further cement the point, Evo Morales, Arce's mentor, was a keynote speaker at an SRI December 7, 2020, conference on the "Dialogue Among Civilizations." He was accompanied by Ecuador's Rafael Correa, who is pushing the candidacy of his own protégé in Ecuador, given his inability to run in person due to pending criminal charges, including kidnapping.²⁹

The "Dialogue Among Civilizations" conference was held the day after Venezuela's parliamentary elections, and in his speech, Morales congratulated Venezuelans for participating in the democratic elections.³⁰ Despite the fact that Venezuela has the highest homicide rate in the hemisphere and is among the top five most violent countries in the world, Morales added, "the international press says, 'there is dictatorship, there is violence.' However yesterday we could testify: here there is no violence; here there is peace, tranquility, and yesterday there was a grand celebration of democracy."³¹

Cultural Translators and "Super Spreaders"

A key feature of the echo chambers is cultural interpreters—super spreaders—working across multiple platforms. Several individuals who work for at least two of the three outlets in the study appear on the main Web sites in the echo chamber and repeat each other's reporting on an ongoing basis, including anti-U.S. and anti-Israel attacks, defenses of Iran, and praises of the Maduro regime and its allies. These individuals were identified through data-mining of bylined journalism reports:

- Pablo Jofré Leal, Chile (HispanTV, teleSUR, RT en Español, Sputnik News, IslamOriente, and multiple Web sites).
- Pablo Iglesias Turrión, Spain (HispanTV, teleSUR; he is a member of Spain's governing coalition).
- Carlos Aznarez, Argentina (HispanTV, teleSUR, RT en Español).
- Leonardo del Grosso, Argentina (HispanTV, teleSUR).
- Marcelo Colussi, Argentina (HispanTV, teleSUR, RT en Español).

Pablo Jofré Leal is among the most prolific of the interlocutors. Jofré often writes for different media outlets using the same script word for word and then appears on television interview shows to repeat the message. However, perhaps the most influential and visible of the super spreaders is Pablo Iglesias, a young, charismatic Spanish politician who leads the left-wing Podemos Party.³²

Pablo Iglesias: The Convergence Paradigm

Pablo Manuel Iglesias Turrión has emerged as an ideal interlocutor for the Iranian-BCJE alliance given his political fame throughout the Spanish-speaking world as the charismatic voice of the left. As both the Maduro and Iranian regimes have struggled for legitimacy in Europe and Latin America, Iglesias serves as an ideal bridge among different audiences and constituencies favoring the broad Iranian/Bolivarian, anti-U.S. agenda. His accessible, eloquent, and constant defense of the Bolivarian and Iranian revolutions and his party's own leftist agenda make him a ubiquitous presence in the media not only in revolutionary circles in Latin America but also across Europe.

Ultimately, Iglesias is a key node in the Iranian-BJCE network due to his role as a host and producer at HispanTV. His weekly show *Fort Apache* ran from late 2012 until August 2019 and was widely popular on YouTube. The show involved Iglesias leading roundtable discussions dedicated to attacking U.S. policy in Latin America, Europe, Iran, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. He was paid by the Iranian state as well as BJCE. At the same time, he was appearing regularly across teleSUR and a host of Bolivarian Web sites and conferences. His production team included Spanish counterparts with ties to Podemos. Iglesias and other members of Podemos previously engaged in producing other shows for leftist media outlets such as *La Tuerka*, a predecessor to *Fort Apache*, produced by the Asociación Cultural Producciones con Mano Izquierda.³³

Meanwhile inside the Spanish government, Iglesias has facilitated the movement of the Maduro insiders between Venezuela and Spain, despite EU sanctions limiting their travel. In his current position as deputy prime minister and minister of social rights, Iglesias arranged a meeting with Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro's vice president, in January 2020, although she is banned from Spain for massive human rights abuses.³⁴ When the foreign minister blocked Rodríguez from leaving the airport, she met Iglesias in the VIP lounge with close associates of Iglesias, including Spain's minister of transportation and Podemos leader José Luis Ábalos. Rodríguez was accompanied by Félix Plasencia, the Maduro regime's minister of tourism and foreign trade and long-time interlocutor with Iran.³⁵ While the aircraft was on the ground, several suitcases were reportedly taken off of Rodríguez's aircraft by accredited Venezuelan diplomats in Madrid

as “diplomatic pouches,” meaning they could not be examined by customs agents. Although the contents of the suitcases are not confirmed, it was most likely cash.³⁶

During the inauguration of Bolivia’s President Arce in November 2020, Iglesias was seated with Bolivarian luminaries and Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif, as well as invited to private events, highlighting his strategic value to the Iranian-BCJE alliance.

Previous investigations on Iglesias and his close circle reveal the link among Podemos, Venezuela, and Iranian regimes and is not limited to disseminating anti-U.S. narratives. From 2002 to 2012, the three main leaders of Podemos—Pablo Iglesias, Íñigo Errejón, and Luis Alegre Zahonero—were accused of accepting more than \$4 million USD (€3.7 million) from the Chávez government via consulting agreements through the Centro de Estudios Políticos y Sociales (CEPS).³⁷ Another investigative journalist publication revealed more than \$10 million USD (€9.7 million) in Iranian money flowed through the company producing the HispanTV shows, produced by 360 Global Media. The reports found that Spanish law enforcement found 67 suspicious transactions from Iranian government sources to the 360 Global Media, mostly through the Emirates National Bank of Dubai.³⁸

The influx of Venezuelan money arrived shortly before Podemos became the fourth most voted political force in Spain in May 2014, although the party had only been registered 3 months prior.³⁹ With the help of the Venezuelan consulting fees, Iglesias attracted 80 percent of the vote based on his platform for change and managed a low-budget campaign using social media. As a result, Podemos secured five seats in the European Parliament in 2014, including one for Iglesias.

Records found by Spanish media show that about half of CEPS consulting work, worth almost \$2 million USD (€1.6 million) was purchased by the Chávez government.⁴⁰ CEPS was likewise contracted to introduce a social security system in Venezuela, host classes on globalization, and measure the socioeconomic perceptions of Venezuelans. The Chávez government also signed agreements with the group to provide them with significant tax breaks. Indeed, CEPS accounts from 2012 illustrated the foundation did not pay taxes on its “profits.”⁴¹

This activity occurred while Iglesias and his counterparts—who remain his core group of people throughout his projects—worked at CEPS. From 2006 and 2007, Iglesias served as a board member for CEPS and oversaw “strategic analysis for the Venezuela presidency.” Errejón, who served as the campaign chief for Podemos, also managed the accounts at CEPS for several years.⁴² Nonetheless, the revelations of the ties of Iglesias to Podemos, Iran, and the Maduro regime have not dimmed his luster. While no longer a program host, he still appears regularly on HispanTV, teleSUR, and many other media outlets.

Case Study: Mohsen Fakhrizadeh

The assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh provided a discrete event to analyze how Iran quickly shapes narratives, disseminates information, and portrays the Iranian voice. The following case study walks through five stages of development and spreads a narrative following the assassination of Fakhrizadeh. The data collected focuses on the first 7 days after the assassination, scraping all links (shortened and long form) from HispanTV that were shared across social media platforms. Ultimately, this high-profile event illustrates the interplay of different platforms, converging in HispanTV, that make the network so effective.

Introducing the Narrative. In the first 7 days after Fakhrizadeh's death, HispanTV published 136 articles painting Fakhrizadeh as a martyr, Israel as the perpetrator, and the United States as the accomplice. During the first full day, HispanTV published 35 articles on Fakhrizadeh's death, which included six videos of on-air commentary. While most articles on HispanTV do not name authors, the first on-air segment published by HispanTV was by Pablo Jofré Leal. Ultimately, HispanTV created the messaging surrounding the assassination through its articles and content and actively spread it through social media.⁴³

Mainstreaming. The first major push to introduce mainstream audiences to the narrative was accomplished by leveraging social media to disseminate the story quickly. On Facebook, the first post from HispanTV technically happened before HispanTV's article announcing Fakhrizadeh's death. The first post by HispanTV was on Facebook on November 27, 2020, at 13:50 GMT, followed shortly thereafter by a string of edits.⁴⁴ The Facebook link included a now dead link to an article that appears to have been replaced by a later addition article published at 13:59 GMT.⁴⁵

Figure 2, based on Ex Arca research, illustrates how information was spreading on Twitter via the first five Twitter users who tweeted HispanTV content related to Fakhrizadeh. Based on a time series analysis of the user's behavior, @jotace7777 (green) is a bot account, and @gquintinb (purple) and @exosapiens (pink) are trolls. As illustrated in the timeseries map, @jotace7777 has fairly even tweeting intervals—most tweets going out around 09:00 GMT and then tapering off around 23:00 GMT. Otherwise, the rest of the accounts appear to be operated by individual users.⁴⁶

The next post on Facebook came at 15:20 GMT and this post included a photo of Fakhrizadeh, but not a link to an article.⁴⁷ This was followed by the first tweet at 15:38 GMT using the same photo with no link by username @bracamontelea15 (red), which was followed quickly by a tweet about 10 minutes later by @jotace7777. The @jotace7777 post was the first time the

Figure 2. Time Series Map of First Five Twitter Users Linking to Articles from HispanTV About Death of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, November 27–December 8, 2020

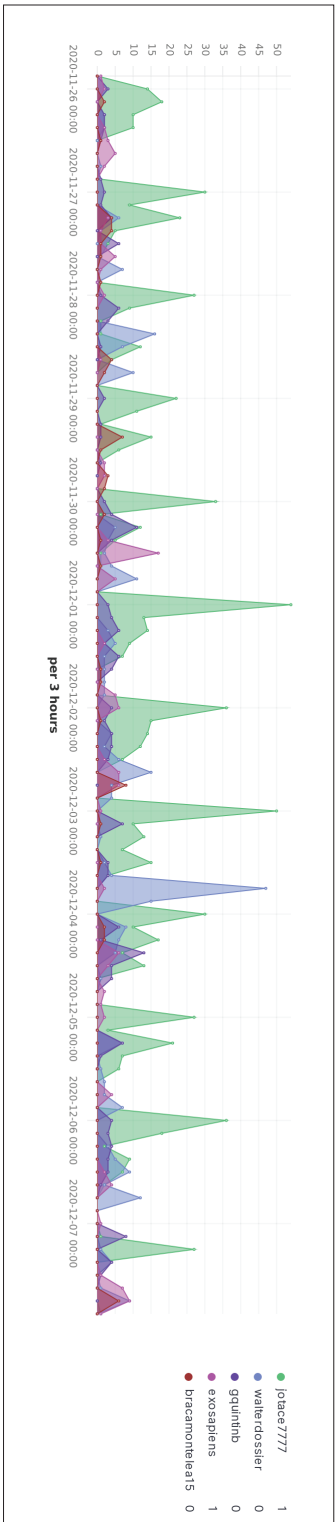
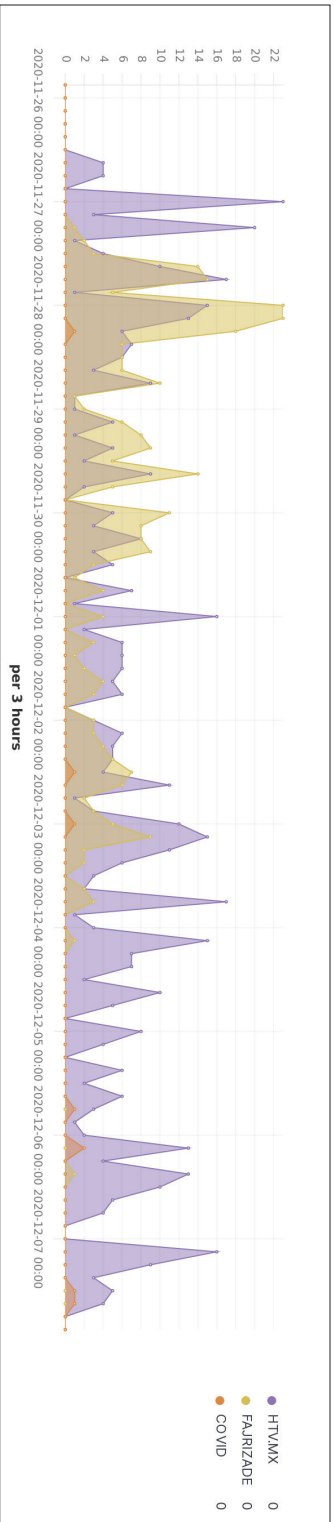


Figure 3. Time Series Map of HispanTV Tweets, November 27–December 8, 2020



HispanTV link to announce Fakhrizadeh's death was tweeted. After this point, there was a rapid increase in the number of HispanTV links related to Fakhrizadeh being tweeted.

The users identified here do not necessarily have a large following, but they have slightly different audiences, each providing a new community for the message to reach. Each account self-reports to be left wing, but each one's geography and followers help to differentiate it from the others:

- “Leandro Bracamonte” reports to be in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and is a Persian literature teacher by trade.
- “JC” reports to be from Abya Yala (Patria Grande), which is in Northwest Colombia and Southeast Panama.
- “Quintin Banders” is named after a Cuban general who fought against the Spanish and does not report a location (most likely a troll).⁴⁸
- “Walter Martínez,” one of the amplifiers in this network, is based in Caracas, and is a well-known journalist with his own show on teleSUR.
- “Christian Nader” reports to be from Islote de Ahuehuetlán, a pre-Hispanic era town in Mexico.

After the first five users tweeted about Fakhrizadeh, we see HispanTV articles about Fakhrizadeh continue to spread until around December 5, when the activity in the form of tweets and the articles slow down.

Ex Arca data clearly show the difference in emphasis given to the Fakhrizadeh killing compared to other major issues in the news, such news related to COVID-19, as shown in figure 3. Purple illustrates tweets with links to HispanTV articles from November 27, 2020, to December 8, 2020, capturing activity before and after the assassination. Meanwhile, the overlay in yellow represents multisource tweets about the assassination, which surpassed tweets sharing links to HispanTV articles.

Super Spreaders. Traditionally, early propagators employ group super spreader dynamics, in which the active user spreads the same content into dozens of groups simultaneously and/or to large audiences on any platform. However, this was not the case for HispanTV. Individual

users were responsible for the story on Twitter, and, as stated earlier, they did not maintain large followings on other platforms.

Walter Martínez was the only exception, given that he is a well-known Venezuelan journalist. Ex Arca analysis determined Martínez used his large, engaged audience to continually spread the message. Other groups such as the Bolivarian news organization Terc3ra republished and quoted articles from HispanTV, further pushing the narrative into Bolivarian circles.⁴⁹ Terc3ra, coupled with consistent tweeting by Walter Martínez, firmly supplemented the pro-Iranian HispanTV narrative into Bolivarian networks. Ultimately, Martínez was the most prolific tweeter of the narrative over the 7 days, although the rest of the users were all self-reported Bolivarian supporters.

Normalization. Super spreader dynamic continues, but the narrative is now in a broader left-wing audience. This is seen as the Iranian narrative continued to flourish on additional media Web sites without reference to HispanTV while using many of the same narratives.

Role of Ambassadors. A final component of the Iranian-BCJE alliance is the role that Iranian embassies play in shaping the narrative and gathering intelligence. This multifaceted approach helps explain the veteran diplomatic corps that Iran employs in the region that has virtually no trade ties, few shared cultural touchstones, and minimal religious and historic commonalities. Yet most ambassadors have served in multiple capacities in the hemisphere and have been engaged in Latin America for decades, are highly proficient in Spanish, and came out of the Mohsan Rabbani network that is responsible for a broad swath of Iranian intelligence activities excluding the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Rabbani, who directs Iran's Latin America policy, is the subject of an Interpol Red Notice requesting his arrest for his role in orchestrating the 1994 bombing of a Jewish center in Buenos Aires that left 85 people dead and hundreds wounded. It was the worst terrorist attack in the Western Hemisphere until 9/11.⁵⁰

Perhaps the most influential Iranian diplomat in the hemisphere is Hojjatollah Soltani, the regime's current ambassador to Venezuela. According to his official biography, Soltani is on his second tour as ambassador to Venezuela since August 2019, with his first tour lasting from 2012 to 2014. Soltani has been involved with Venezuelan affairs through the Iranian Office of the Americas since at least 2001 and is fluent in Spanish. He served in the Iranian embassy in Caracas from 2001 to 2006, then returned to Iran as the deputy director of the Office of the Americas from 2006 to 2007. The following 2 years he was assigned to Bolivia, giving him a primary role when the relationship between Iran and the BJCE reached its zenith.⁵¹

One of Solatani's known vehicles for recruitment and messaging is the Venezuelan Center for Studies of Iran (Centro Venezolano de Estudios sobre Irán), founded in 2018 and likely a forerunner to the SRI, charged with academic study of Venezuelan-Iranian relations.⁵²

In Bolivia, Morteza Tafreshi presented his credentials to the new president Luis Arce, a protégé of the former president and staunch Iran ally, Evo Morales. The relations between La Paz and Tehran were interrupted when Morales lost the presidential elections of 2019, leading to a conservative, single-year interim government that broke relations with Iran and Venezuela. In welcoming Zarif and announcing the renewal of diplomatic ties, Arce declared that Iran is "always welcome in Bolivia."⁵³ Tafreshi coordinated the visit of Zarif to Arce's inauguration and was among the most prominent and visible members of the diplomatic corps throughout the event. Tafreshi has also held several high-profile events to promise Iranian investment and support for Bolivia's energy and manufacturing sectors.⁵⁴

Furthermore, Tafreshi took the unusual step of writing an op-ed published in *La Razón*, a leading Bolivian newspaper, denouncing the Fakhrizadeh assassination as an "act of terrorism" and demanding a strong international response to reports that Israel and the United States were behind the attack. He served as ambassador in Bolivia when Morales was in office and appears to have stayed in Bolivia despite the breaking of relations in 2019, given that he wrote an op-ed piece for *La Razón* demanding sanctions be lifted on Iran.⁵⁵

Abolfazi Khazaei Torshizi, Iran's ambassador in Chile since 2015, displays a different profile from the others, including a strong public diplomacy background. According to his online biography, he is a civil engineer by training and began his revolutionary career as deputy director of public affairs for the Foreign Ministry in 1982, when the revolution was at its most violent and militant. In 1998, he was named director of public affairs of the Foreign Ministry for the second time before moving to the Iranian embassy in Cuba. After other high-level assignments, he was named the Foreign Ministry's director for South America in 2011 before moving to Chile in 2015.⁵⁶ In Chile, he has kept an exceptionally low profile, with virtually no media or diplomatic appearances.

Given that both HispanTV and RT en Español have their main Latin American offices in Santiago, Chile, Torshizi, with a long and successful background in media management and public affairs, is a natural fit. While his entire career has not been spent in Latin America, he has held senior positions across multiple geographic portfolios, likely showing a broader understanding of the world than his cohorts. This strong background in information and public affairs likely translates into a deeper understanding of how to message non-Iranian and non-Islamic audiences.

Conclusions

Iran uses a wide spectrum of tools to shape the narrative and media environment in Latin America. The regime has successfully created a network of echo chambers with Russia, Venezuela, and the BCJE to push the anti-U.S. message far beyond the confines of any single member of the network.

HispanTV, teleSUR, and RT en Español—along with hundreds of interconnected Web sites and social media accounts across multiple platforms—are the main pillars of their current efforts. The small corps of super spreaders are key messengers in disseminating misinformation by reporting across the main outlets to amplify messages to portray Iran, Russia, and the BJCE as enlightened revolutionary forces fighting to end U.S. imperialism. To date, the United States and other regional allies have not developed comparable counternarratives to displace Iran's efforts in Latin America.

In recent years, these joint efforts have grown in effectiveness and sophistication. All three media outlets have moved from the fringes of media relevancy to the mainstream, while thousands of Web sites and social media posts reinforce the message and push it across academia, activist communities, and the public. Well-funded think tanks such as SRI further legitimize the message, while lending intellectual left to the primary arguments that touch all corners of the echo chambers.

Ultimately, this multifaceted and ongoing campaign is one of the primary reasons the Maduro regime and the BJCE continue to enjoy a large and surprising degree of legitimacy in the hemisphere. The electoral triumph of Luis Arce in Bolivia to return the Bolivarians to power; the return of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as vice president of Argentina; and the growing weakness of the Chilean, Peruvian, Ecuadoran, and Colombian governments allied with the United States are clear indicators of the narrative's overall effectiveness.

While the visible efforts of Iran in the hemisphere and alliance with Venezuela in exchanging gasoline for gold and possible purchase of weapons are a legitimate concern, they are easily understood. The broader long-term and effective efforts to delegitimize U.S. interests, embolden malign actors, and undermine pillars of democracy are harder to quantify but perhaps the greater challenge to the hemisphere.

Recommendations

Iran's influence is often discussed in only military and economic capacities, although this report demonstrates Iran's soft power engagement is just as critical to its regional strategies.

Ultimately, the nuances of Iran's occupation in Latin America's information space are difficult to quantify although it actively counters U.S. interests in the region. Policymakers should consider the following recommendations as the United States transitions into new executive leadership and aims to reestablish alliances in Latin America:

- Readdress U.S. policy framework toward Latin America. Within the past 10 years, U.S. policy in Latin America has increasingly focused solely on curbing drug-trafficking and illegal migration. In a region as economically, socially, and politically diverse as Latin America, a multifaceted approach is needed to address the complexities of the region. Furthermore, maximum pressure policies such as economic sanctions are often counter-intuitive to U.S. objectives by forcing malign actors to continue using illicit means to fund their regimes and meanwhile feeding into the anti-U.S. narratives of the BJCE, Iran, and Russia. Ultimately, U.S. policy in Latin America cannot rely on punishing malign actors without empowering democratic actors and providing alternatives to corruption and institutional failure.
- Develop mechanisms for positive engagement. Iran has actively engaged across Latin American communities primarily through cultural centers and mosques. Groups such as IslamOriente have generated easy access to Muslim texts and teachings of Islamic culture via its vast library of free resources translated to Spanish. Furthermore, Muslim teachings often focus on supporting the family, a value that is also shared by many Latin communities. These centers facilitate the convergence of cultures that are seemingly similar despite the physical distance of their origin. U.S. policymakers should consider developing similar mechanisms to bridge communities across the Western Hemisphere, perhaps beginning with diaspora communities residing in the United States and developing cultural exchange programs and promoting education and cultural centers.
- Establish ongoing network analysis of malign actors. As pointed out at length, networks are the bedrock for Iran's operations in Latin America. However, these networks are dynamic and have fluid structures across various platforms and hemispheres. A robust effort is necessary to understand how these actors interact with each other daily and how the network shifts over time to fit regional strategies.

- Actively support independent media. Iran's state sponsorship of media outlets in Latin America is at the core of this analysis. The United States can counter these narratives by supporting homegrown independent media and using regional networks to disseminate narratives through social media. Plenty of independent news outlets exist in the region that are actively reporting on human rights abuses and corruption perpetuated by the BJCE. U.S. policymakers should consider mechanisms to amplify these platforms and unify them across a broader network.

Appendix: Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative fieldwork, quantitative analysis, open-source data-mining in English and Spanish, and data-scraping. From a qualitative perspective, vetted field researchers talked to confidential sources on the ground in Venezuela. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, however, they could not conduct field research, which is normally a key facet of their methodology. Research products were solicited from another consulting group based in Chile, which also uses open-source resources to develop research products. In addition, the researchers monitored Iran's activity in Latin America across social media platforms and open sources by developing Twitter lists to produce daily monitoring reports on relevant activity. Finally, Ex Arca, an open-source data partner, carried out data-scraping and data-analysis across multiple social media platforms to determine patterns of communications and other nodes in these information networks.

Overall, this multifaceted approach facilitates a broader understanding of how Iran develops narratives in Latin America and is not limited to its more overt military and economic engagement in the region. The analysis presented in this study focuses primarily on mapping out the malign actors as part of this Iranian-Bolivarian Criminal Joint Enterprise network and how they have amplified their voices by developing echo chambers. This study does not intend to represent the full scale of Iran's influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Notes

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⁵³ “‘Iran Always Welcome in Bolivia’: Arce Urges Closer Tehran-La Paz Ties,” *Pars Today*, November 12, 2020, available at <https://parstoday.com/en/news/iran-i129324-iran_always_welcome_in_bolivia%E2%80%99_arce_urges_closer_tehran_la_paz_ties>.

⁵⁴ IBI Consultants field research, November 2020.

⁵⁵ Morteza Tafreshi, “Levanten las sanciones de EEUU contra Irán” [Lift U.S. Sanctions Against Iran], *La Razón*, April 24, 2020, available at <<https://www.la-razon.com/voces/2020/04/24/levanten-las-sanciones-de-eeuu-contra-iran/>>.

⁵⁶ “Embajador Señor Abolfazl Khazaei Torshizi,” Embajada de la República Islámica de Irán, available at <<https://chile.mfa.gov.ir/es/generalcategoryservices/10599/embajador>>.

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