

WHY CUBA IS A STATE SPONSOR OF TERROR

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On December 17, 2014, President Barack Obama announced his administration's intention to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba after more than fifty years of mutual animosity between the communist government and the United States. Unleashing speculation about its timing and rationale, the move shifted attention away from U.S. policy in Latin America, while raising an opportunity to focus attention on Cuba's dubious record in the region and their broader foreign policy.

In its initial meetings with U.S. diplomats, Cuba demanded its removal from the State Department list of countries sponsoring terrorism. The State Department was instructed to perform a six-month review to assess whether Cuba should be removed from the list, which includes Iran, Sudan, and Syria. Six months later, on May 29, 2015, the U.S. officially lifted its designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terror pending any rebuttal from the U.S. Congress. Cuba had been placed on the U.S. list in 1982, citing Havana's role in supporting leftist insurgents in Latin America. Its continued presence on the list was tied most recently to its provision of haven to the members of the Basque separatist group ETA as well as Colombia's left-wing FARC guerilla group.

Many regional analysts argue that both ETA and the FARC are not as active as they once were. Furthermore, the latter is negotiating a peace agreement with the government of Colombia. Therefore, they insist, Cuba's standing as a state sponsor of terror is no longer warranted. The U.S. State Department guarantees it conducted a thorough review to back its recommendation to remove Cuba from the list and

received assurances from the Cuban government that they will not support terrorist groups in the future. This determination, however, fails to account for the mounting evidence indicating the Cuban government's strong relationship with Iran, the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism.

The State Department's own 2014 Country Reports on Terrorism details Iran's vast support for terrorist activities, including funding Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime in Syria, supporting Hamas and Hezbollah in its attacks against Israel, and supporting rebel groups in Yemen and Bahrain. Iran and Hezbollah are also the architects of the second largest Islamist terrorist attack in the Western Hemisphere, the bombing of the AMIA cultural center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1994. To this day, the AMIA attack has not seen justice nor does Iran or Hezbollah accept any responsibility for the attack.

Cuba's strategic relationship with Iran is increasingly evident through an annual economic summit between the two nations or via mutual trade and training in medical biotechnologies. In 2003, the Cuban government even helped the Islamic Republic block U.S. broadcasts of uncensored Farsi-language news through a clandestine compound on the outskirts of Havana. But, arguably, its most nefarious service to Iran is the Cuban government's extending cooperation in helping Venezuela (and possibly other Latin American countries) provide fraudulent immigration documentation to Iranian and other Islamist extremists seeking to slip unnoticed into the Western Hemisphere.

A PASSPORT TO TERROR

From 2009 to 2011, Latin America was the largest prior embarkation region for improperly documented Iranians migrating to Canada seeking refugee status. According to the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), the majority passed through Caracas, Venezuela. Canadian officials indicated that airport and airline personnel in Caracas are implicated in providing fraudulent documentation to recently arrived Iranians in Venezuela. In 2011, at least 65 percent of the fraudulent violations in Caracas involved Iranians making refugee claims to come to Canada.

This data point is just a sample of an intelligence and immigration pipeline that has been built to bring Islamic extremists into North America through a permissive environment in Latin America. Cuba is the architect of this pipeline.

According to Sebastian Rotella, an award-winning foreign correspondent and senior investigative reporter at *ProPublica*, a joint intelligence program is in place between Cuba, Venezuela, and Iran providing systematic smuggling of arms, operatives, and cash between Iran and Latin America.¹ This recent phenomenon is not a simple act of negligence on the part of Cuban and Venezuelan authorities, but rather an orchestrated scheme that began in earnest when the late President Hugo Chávez came to power in Venezuela in 1998.²

Throughout Hugo Chávez's 14-year tenure in Venezuela, the late autocratic President became known for his infamous Bolivarian missions. Named for Simón Bolívar, who played a key role in northern South America's independence from Spain, these missions are social programs designed to sway the "hearts and

minds" of Venezuela's popular sectors towards *Chavismo*, all the while tightening restrictions on civil liberties.³

At the core of Chávez's Bolivarian missions was a nationwide initiative known as *Misión Identidad* (Mission Identity), meant to provide national identity cards to all Venezuelans in order to facilitate access to the increasing number of social services provided by government-run Missions.⁴ Like many of Chávez social programs, *Misión Identidad* also had a covert purpose.

In 2003, a year after Chávez survived a failed coup d'état, he launched *Misión Identidad* and immediately asked his Cuban allies for help. Heading this effort for Cuba was the infamous *Comandante* Ramiro Valdés, first chief of intelligence of Cuba's G-2 and a former Minister of Interior (MININT). *Comandante* Valdés recruited José Lavandero García, Vice Chancellor of the University of Information Sciences (*Universidad de Ciencias Informáticas*—UCI), a state university led by Ramiro Valdés that reports to the Cuban Ministry of Information and Communications.⁵

Based in Venezuela since 2001, Lavandero García quickly drafted a 218-page proposal under the auspices of Albet Engineering and Systems, Inc., a Cuban state-owned firm that has become a primary software developer for the Venezuelan government. After four revisions, Hugo Chávez and Ramiro Valdés approved the plan in 2004 and Mr. Lavandero García began overhauling the information systems of the Venezuelan passport and naturalization agency, formerly known as ONIDEX, *Oficina Nacional de Identificación y Extranjería*.⁶

1. Sebastian Rotella, "The terror threat and Iran's inroads in Latin America," *ProPublica*, July 11 (July 18 corrected), 2013, <http://www.propublica.org/article/the-terror-threat-and-irans-inroads-in-latin-america> (accessed May 3, 2014).

2. Venezuela has a record of providing training and giving refuge to non-state actors such as the Basque ETA. See, e.g., Lisa Abend, "Are Basque terrorists being trained in Venezuela?" *Time*, October 5, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2023566,00.html> (accessed May 4, 2014); Frances Martel, "Fugitive ETA terrorist sentenced to 3,000 years found in Venezuelan mall," *Breitbart*, May 22, 2014, <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Peace/2014/05/22/Fugitive-ETA-Terrorist-Sentenced-to-3-000-Years-in-Prison-Found-in-Venezuelan-Mall> (accessed May 23, 2014).

3. Joel D. Hirst, *The ALBA: Inside Venezuela's Bolivarian Alliance*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing, May 2012.

4. Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, SAIME, "¿Qué es el SAIME?" n.d., <http://www.saime.gob.ve>, (accessed May 2014).

5. See, Adriana Rivera, "El cubano que diseñó el SAIME," *El Nacional* (Caracas), November 24, 2013, http://www.el-nacional.com/siete_dias/cubano-diseno-Saime_0_305369576.html (accessed December 19, 2013).

While the Cubans worked on the technical aspects of *Misión Identidad*, Chávez relied on a group of young aspiring politicians from the socialist student group “Utopia 78” based out of the *Universidad de los Andes* (ULA) in Mérida, Venezuela, to join this Bolivarian mission and work alongside the Cubans.⁷ In 2005, once the prototype system was complete, the initial managers of ONIDEX who would implement the new system were selected from this group.

Hugo Cabezas, the current governor of Trujillo state in Venezuela, who had long-standing ties to Hugo Chávez dating back to the mid-1990s, was the original director general of ONIDEX in 2003. Cabezas led a team of handpicked individuals who oversaw ONIDEX’s bureaucratic and political transition to what is now called SAIME, *Servicio Administrativo de Identificación, Migración y Extranjería*. SAIME was created in 2009 and was initially managed by Dante Rivas Quijada, a direct disciple of Hugo Cabezas and close confidant of the Cuban regime. Designed and implemented by Cuba, SAIME has four times the capacity of the previous system. It has the capability of storing biometric data and much more sophisticated information security protocols.

Beholden to the Cuban regime and managed by Venezuelans sympathetic to the revolution, *Misión Identidad*’s immigration system facilitates the entry of Cuban agents into Venezuela, embedding themselves into various facets of the Venezuelan social missions and national security apparatus. Aside from Cubans, this group also used SAIME to facilitate the travel of Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs), Colombian guerrillas, and Islamist terrorists. This has been spearheaded by Venezuela’s Tareck El-Aissami, a key ally of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah.

THE MAN IN MÉRIDA

Tareck Zaidan El Aissami Maddah is a 39-year-old Venezuelan politician, who was born into a wealthy,

upper middle class family of Lebanese and Syrian descent in the town of El Vigía, in the state of Mérida, Venezuela. He was brought up with a radical ideology from an early age as his father, Zaidan El Amin El Aissami (aka Carlos Zaidan), is an ardent supporter of Islamic *Jihad* (or the Holy War) and maintains strong ties to Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, an Iraqi military commander and leader of the so-called “Iraqi Resistance.”⁸

Tareck El Aissami, currently the Governor of Aragua state, has used his political prominence to establish intelligence and finance conduits with Islamic countries, namely in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Iran. El Aissami also used his close relationship with Hugo Chávez, and more specifically with Chávez’s older brother, Adán, to establish a political career that began in 2002 with stints as a PSUV (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* – Venezuelan United Socialist Party) congressman from his home state of Mérida. He also served as the Deputy Minister of Public Safety, prior to becoming the Minister of Interior and Justice from 2007 to 2012.

Like Hugo Cabezas, Tareck El Aissami was part of the “Utopia 78” student movement from the *Universidad de los Andes*, and in 2003 worked alongside Cabezas in the *Misión Identidad* program. El Aissami’s role, however, was focused on using his family’s connections and proximity to Venezuela’s political power to build bridges with Islamic countries in the Middle East.

Over the years, Tareck El Aissami developed a sophisticated, multi-layered financial network that functions as a criminal-terrorist pipeline bringing militant Islamists into Venezuela and surrounding countries, and sending illicit funds from Latin America to the Middle East. His network consists of close to 40 front companies that own over 20 properties with cash, vehicles, real estate, and other assets held

6. Ibid.

7. “Utopia 78” was a socialist student movement born out of the 1992 graduating class of the ULA (Universidad de los Andes) in Mérida, Venezuela. Hugo Cabezas, the original leader of the group, established a relationship with Hugo Chávez after he was released from prison in 1994, through his older brother Adán Chávez, who taught political science classes at ULA.

8. Anna Mahjar-Barducci, “Venezuelan minister hangs out with Hezbollah,” *Gatestone Institute*, February 11, 2011, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/1878/venezuelan-minister-hezbollah> (accessed April 14, 2014).

in 36 bank accounts spread throughout Venezuela, Panama, Curacao, St. Lucia, Southern Florida (Miami) and Lebanon.⁹ This network became integrated with the larger Ayman Joumaa money-laundering network¹⁰ that used the Lebanese Canadian Bank to launder hundreds of millions of dollars and move multi-ton shipments of cocaine on behalf of Colombian and Mexican DTOs.¹¹

El Aissami's role in this larger money-laundering network was to use his position as the Venezuelan Minister of Interior and Justice, with direct oversight over SAIME, to facilitate passports, visas and other documentation to members of Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and other Islamist militants from the Middle East. In addition, Tarek El Aissami established a courier network managed out of the Venezuelan consulate in Amman, Jordan, through a close friend, Husam Al Aissami.¹²

Regional intelligence officials estimate that at least 173 individuals from the Middle East were provided passports and national ID cards in Venezuela during the period April 2008 to November 2012, overlapping the tenure of Tarek El Aissami. Among the more notable persons of interest was Suleiman Ghani Abdul Waked, right hand man of Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah,¹³ as well as Munther Yacoub, who was arrested in Canada in 2004 on charges of contraband smuggling to Iraq and other countries in the Middle East.¹⁴

TIES THAT BIND

Following Iran's recent nuclear agreement with the UN Security Council's five permanent members

(China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom and the United States) plus Germany, effectively known as the P5+1 Powers, the Islamic Republic is preparing to enter a new era in its revolutionary history. In Latin America, this means it will naturally seek a stronger strategic partnership with its most fraternal ally there: the Republic of Cuba. Historically, the Castro regime has relied heavily on external alliances, dating all the way back to the 1959 Cuban revolution. After all, it was Cuba's close alliance with the Soviet Union that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Today, it is the Castro regime's relatively quiet relationship with Iran that provides them enhanced capability to project their influence abroad.

This relationship extends to shortly after the dawn of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In 1981, Cuba became the first country to officially recognize the new Islamic Republic by inviting it to open its first embassy in Latin America. Since then, Cuba has been Iran's go-to ally in expanding its regional foreign policy portfolio.

It was predictable, then, that approximately a month before the passing of Hugo Chávez, Iran sent a special envoy to Havana to meet with President Raúl Castro to discuss its next moves in the Americas. Later that year, a spate of visits took place between Tehran and Havana, including a trip by the Cuban vice president to attend the inauguration of Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani. For his part, Rouhani has not been shy about professing his support for Cuba, issuing a directive in mid-2014 to amend a proto-

9. Author interviews with Latin American intelligence officials (April 2014).

10. Ayman Joumaa was indicted in November 2011 by a federal grand jury in the Eastern District of Virginia for being an international drug kingpin that directed Hezbollah's fundraising activities in the Americas.

11. Jo Becker, "Beirut bank seen as hub of Hezbollah financing," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/14/world/middleeast/beirut-bank-seen-as-a-hub-of-hezbollahs-financing.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1& (accessed April 22, 2014).

12. Casto Ocando, *Chavistas en el Imperio: Secretos, Tácticas y Escándolos de la Revolución Bolivariana en Estados Unidos*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing, March 7, 2014.

13. Another POI is Milad Bou Nassereddin, a relative of Ghazi Nassereddin who is listed as a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" by the U.S. Treasury Department.

14. "Ontario man, businesses charged over Iraq deals," June 18, 2004, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1156198/posts> (accessed December 5, 2013).

col and increase commercial shipping with the island.

Economic ties are also maturing. Some six years ago, Iran extended a \$768 million credit line to Havana, although the Castros did not take advantage of the offer at the time. Havana is now seeking to remedy this state of affairs; the Castro regime is trying to clear its debt to Iran in an attempt to gain greater economic assistance from the Islamic Republic. This aid will doubtless be provided in exchange for increased Iranian access to the region in a post-Chávez era.

As sanctions are lifted against the Islamic Republic, several Latin American allies are standing in line to receive benefits from the more than \$110 billion Iran is expected to receive. Cuba is at the front of the line. By the time of this writing, it is reported that Russia airlifted 2,000 Cuban troops to Syria to join the fight against the Islamic State and rebel forces. Curiously, this takes place only days after the General Director for North and Central America from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Relations, Dr. Masoud Islami, paid a visit to the island to meet with various Cuban officials including Raúl Castro. After Dr. Islami's visit, the head of the Cuban Armed Forces, General Leopoldo Cintra Frías, visited Syria to coordinate ground forces with Russia in their support for the Assad regime.

For some observers, Cuba's support to Iran and Russia in fighting Islamic extremists in Syria is a sign of positive development in the Castros stance on terrorism. However, both Iran and Syria are still on the U.S. State Department's State Sponsors of Terrorism list and for good reason. Iran still supports the most capable of all Islamic terrorist entities, Lebanese Hezbollah, and just two years ago the U.S. was contem-

plating attacking the Assad regime in Syria for launching chemical weapons on its own civilian population. Unless the U.S. government wants to pick which terrorist and terror-sponsor regimes it supports, and which it decides to attack, then a consistent policy of no support to any terrorist entity or terror-sponsor state should be upheld. This includes Iran and Syria, who remain on the list.

BACK ON THE LIST

Considering the impact that 19 hijackers had through their attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, it becomes ever more imperative to recognize that hundreds of potential threats can be embedded in North America through an immigration scheme orchestrated by Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba. The Cuban and Venezuelan government's pivotal role in providing legitimate (albeit fraudulent) passports and other documentation to hostile forces from throughout the Middle East should be of utmost importance to national security officials in the United States. Of equal concern, however, is their potential impact on our Latin American neighbors whose territories are becoming havens for Islamic extremists operating in the shadows and spaces of state-less territories all too prevalent throughout the region.

Immigration security is a key function of any legitimate government. Most countries use their immigration security protocols to protect their citizens from hostile threats abroad, including Islamic extremists. The Cuban government, however, has manipulated willing regional governments immigration protocols to the benefit of Islamic terrorist groups. This is a violation of Cuba's willingness to stand against international terrorism, and strong justification for their continued standing as a State Sponsor of Terror.