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Latin America's Second "Pink Tide" Opens Avenues for Iranian Influence

Executive Summary

Latin America is currently experiencing a resurgence of the political left and far left, as left-leaning and far-left leaders now [govern](#) the majority of countries in the region. We define the start of this resurgence, sometimes termed a second “[Pink Tide](#)” — (the first having occurred in the early 2000s) — as December 2018, when Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador entered office; his election was the first in a wave of notable left-wing electoral victories in Latin America. As Latin America trends left, it also increasingly rejects United States (US) influence, which formerly played an outsized role in regional affairs, thereby opening avenues for China, Russia, and Iran to expand their activities in the region. While [Chinese](#) and [Russian](#) diplomacy and investments in Latin America have been examined extensively, less has been made of Iran’s efforts to deepen its ties to the region.

In light of changing leadership in Latin America, Iran has developed new opportunities to increase its political and economic footprint in South and Central America, finding increasingly fertile ground for partnerships in some of the region’s most powerful countries including Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, and Chile. Tehran’s inroads are visible in its bilateral diplomatic engagements, resulting in new economic and political partnerships. With its close ally, the Nicolás Maduro government in Caracas, Venezuela, Tehran has reached broad-ranging agreements and increased trade, allowing both sides to weather the effects of international sanctions. Tehran has also strengthened agreements with old allies Cuba and Nicaragua through joint COVID-19 pandemic response efforts, and in other deals meant to mitigate the effects of international sanctions. Meanwhile, Iran is working to expand its influence in the region through covert state-sponsored information operations on social media, state-controlled news media, and networks of Iran-backed cultural centers that promote Iranian government narratives along with Shi’a Islam.

Key Findings

- Since 2018, Iran has gained soft power¹ in some of the region’s largest economies, including Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, and Chile, due to significant changes in the political postures of these governments.
- Iran has made progress in its economic and political partnerships with its steadfast allies, including Venezuela — and, to a lesser extent, Cuba and Nicaragua. Most notably, Iran and Venezuela have significantly increased their energy trade to circumvent and mitigate sanctions.
- Outside of government-to-government channels, Iran gains influence in the region using online media, including covert state-sponsored information operations on social media, and influences Latin American audiences through Iran-backed cultural and religious centers.

¹ In this report, we will define “soft power” as Harvard professor Joseph Nye has done in the [Wall Street Journal](#): “The ability to get what one wants by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment”.

Background

Mohsen Rabbani — an Iranian cleric who served as the Iranian cultural attaché in Buenos Aires and was [tied to](#) the bombing of a Jewish community center there in 1994 — once [described](#) Latin America as a “virgin area” and opined that “[Iran has] a solid support against the imperialism and Zionist intrigues being an important aid in favor of [its] presence” in the region. Iran capitalized on the opportunities Rabbani discussed, building its influence in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and even “penetrated the governmental structure of many Latin American nations”, according to an analysis published by Small Wars Journal. Iran achieved this regional access thanks to the political trend referred to as the “Pink Tide”, which saw many countries in the region [elect](#) left or far-left leaders, including Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and Evo Morales in Bolivia.

This leftward trend in Latin America created openings for Iranian influence in the region, as these governments generally opposed US influence and were willing to forge alliances with the US’s adversaries. In the past several years, Latin America has experienced what many refer to as a second “[Pink Tide](#)” — another swing to the left after a previous years-long trend to the right. As of March 2023, left-wing politicians [lead](#) all of the region’s largest countries. This report considers the second “Pink Tide” as starting in December 2018, when Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (“AMLO”) took office. Recently the second “Pink Tide” has gained momentum, with the notable elections of presidents Alberto Fernández (Argentina - 2019); Pedro Castillo (Peru - 2021; removed from office in December 2022); Gabriel Boric (Chile - 2022); Gustavo Petro (Colombia - 2022); and Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva (“Lula”, Brazil - 2022). Lula’s electoral victory in October 2022 made him the 11th progressive or leftist leader [elected](#) president in the region within 5 years.

The left-wing and populist leaders discussed in this report vary in their politics. Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega, and Cuban president Miguel Mario Díaz-Canel are far-left [authoritarians](#). Brazil’s Lula [embraces](#) “socialism”, and Chile’s Boric [promotes](#) “social democracy” of the European style (despite being called a “communist” by critics). Argentina’s Fernández has been [called](#) “center-left” but has also been [considered](#) “increasingly radicalized”. AMLO of Mexico is [considered](#) a “left-wing populist” whose party [opposes](#) “neo-liberalism”. Colombia’s Petro is a former Marxist guerrilla fighter who now [calls himself](#) a “Catholic progressive”. The leaders vary in their domestic and foreign policies, including in their stances toward Iran, the US, China, and Russia. However, taken in aggregate, they represent a dramatic leftward turn in the region’s politics and maintain a markedly less-friendly stance toward US government involvement in the region.

Latin American states have significantly [bolstered](#) relations with China and distanced themselves from the US — once the predominant superpower influencing regional affairs. Geopolitical analysts have closely monitored Beijing’s considerable ascent in Latin American geopolitics, along with Moscow’s more modest [increase](#) in involvement in the region following a post-Soviet decline. However, much less attention has been given to the ways in which Tehran has strengthened its foothold in Latin America as a direct result of the changes in leadership and political tone encompassing the latest Pink Tide. Although Iran’s influence is undeniably smaller, its opportunities and activities in the Latin American region deserve close analysis in light of the Iranian government’s persistently [malign](#) and destabilizing

activities in the countries in which it attains influence, including its government's [sponsorship](#) of, and direct [involvement](#) in, terrorism. Meanwhile, Iran has maintained and cultivated its older alliances with traditional allies in Latin America, especially Venezuela, to create new political footholds and business deals.

Pursuing New Alliances and Opportunities

Brazil

As Latin America's [largest](#) country and economy, Brazil holds outsized power in the hemisphere and represents an important frontier for Iranian influence efforts. While Iran and Brazil have long [engaged](#) in bilateral trade — including under Lula's predecessor, right-wing former president Jair Bolsonaro — Iranian-Brazilian ties are growing under Lula, who has a long history of close cooperation with Iran. During his previous time in office, Lula [visited](#) Iran to meet with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini in May 2010, and expressed his support for Iranian nuclear research. In 2010, Brazil under Lula was 1 of only 2 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) members to vote against sanctions on Iranian nuclear activities.

In late February 2023, the Lula government allowed 2 Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) warships of the 86th Flotilla to [dock](#) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, before a highly publicized and anticipated Panama Canal [transit](#) (which, for unknown reasons, [did not occur](#)). Iranian warships do not typically operate in the Americas, and, according to Behnam Ben Taleblu, an Iran expert at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies [cited](#) by US Naval Institute News, "[The deployment] was part and parcel of the Islamic Republic's diplomatic strategy to break out of the box of being a pariah regime". The expansion of IRIN operations to Brazil underscores the connection between rising Iranian soft power and the realization of military opportunities in the region.



Figure 1: IRIS Dena docked at the Gamboa general cargo terminal in the Port of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on February 27, 2023 (Source: Insikt Group analysis of satellite imagery from Powered by Planet: SkySat 50cm, courtesy of [SkyWatch](#))

Another sign of tighter ties between Iran and Brazil is the launch of a new direct containerized cargo shipping line between Iran and Brazil, announced in early April 2023. An Iranian member of the Iran-Brazil Joint Chamber of Commerce, Hamed Qaderi, described the new line as “a major positive development in trade ties between the two countries”, according to Iran’s Fars News Agency. Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) will operate the service.²

Despite Lula’s history of strong relations with Iran, Iranian-Brazilian relations were already developing under Bolsonaro, thereby presenting a counterpoint to the argument that these ties have *only* been growing under left-wing Latin American governments. Despite Bolsonaro’s ties to the US and tensions with Iran over political issues — such as his [support](#) for the US strike that killed Qasem Soleimani in January of 2020 — the Brazilian and Iranian governments [put aside](#) differences to maintain a close trading relationship in their respective national interests, as Iran is a top importer of food products from Brazil. Iranian Foreign Minister Nasser Kanaani, while congratulating Lula on his electoral victory, even acknowledged that the bilateral relationship had grown close under Bolsonaro, saying, “relations between the two countries, especially in the areas of economy and commerce, have been on the rise during the past years”.³

² <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14020122000290/Iran-Lanch-Direc-Carg-Shipping-Line-Brazil>

³ <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/478219/Iran-congratulates-Brazilians-over-Lula-s-presidential-victory>

In June 2022, Iran [applied](#) for membership to the BRICS union of countries, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The Bolsonaro government [supported](#) Iran's bid. In late August 2022, Brazil's foreign ministry secretary of the Middle East, Europe, and Africa, Felix Haczynski de Nóbrega, flew to Iran for the 11th round of Iran-Brazil political talks.⁴ Speaking at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2022, Brazil's foreign minister Carlos Alberto Franco França described Iran as a "reliable economic partner", and representatives of the 2 governments talked of boosting agricultural and technological cooperation. Iran looks to Brazil as a means to achieving food security, with deals on the horizon for the cultivation of various crops in the South American country for export to Iran. In September 2022, the mayor of Rio de Janeiro met with the Iranian ambassador to Brazil and expressed that "Iran has a special place in Brazil's foreign relations," and that Brazil seeks to "expand cooperation ... in the fields of tourism and oil and gas", according to Iran's Fars News Agency."⁵

Colombia

The June 2022 [election](#) in Colombia of former Marxist guerrilla fighter Gustavo Petro offers Iran an opportunity to draw closer to Colombia, and represents a major departure from the country's previous political trajectory. Long considered the US's closest ally in the region, Colombia had never before elected a leftist president, and for decades had enjoyed a close relationship with the US and [received](#) billions of dollars in anti-drug trafficking and security cooperation funding from the US government under a policy called Plan Colombia. The pro-US former Colombian president Iván Duque [ended](#) ties with Venezuela in 2019 after repeated conflict and tensions with the neighboring authoritarian-controlled country, which Iran counts as its closest ally in the region. Petro ran on a platform of normalizing relations with Venezuela, and opened the border to trade in September 2022 following 7 years of partial closure and 3 years of full closure.

Compared to his predecessor, President Petro is much more receptive to Iran: Iranian vice president Mohammad Hosseini [traveled](#) to Colombia in August of 2022 to attend Petro's inauguration, and, according to HispanTV, [held](#) a "strategic meeting" with Colombian Foreign Minister Álvaro Leyva Durán "in which the two 'highlighted the fraternity between the two countries and reviewed the ways to consolidate bilateral relations'". Petro has spoken out publicly in support of Iran, and condemned the US strike that killed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) commander Qasem Soleimani in 2020, when Petro was a senator. In a social media post following the January 2020 US-orchestrated [assassination](#), Petro claimed that "Soleimani was the architect of the defeat of ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham] Islamic fascist fundamentalism" and that "the US only strengthens the worst of the Middle East".⁶

Israel-associated, Washington, DC-based think tank Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) [published](#) an analysis of Iran-Colombia relations under President Petro in late October 2022. MEMRI assessed, based on what appears to be a comprehensive review of HispanTV's social media activities, that Iran's aims for a Petro-led Colombia include:

⁴ [https://www.\[.\]tasnimnews\[.\]com/en/news/2022/08/30/2766441/iran-sees-no-limit-to-development-of-ties-with-brazil-fm](https://www.[.]tasnimnews[.]com/en/news/2022/08/30/2766441/iran-sees-no-limit-to-development-of-ties-with-brazil-fm)

⁵ [https://www.\[.\]farsnews\[.\]ir/news/14010707000241/,%CC%AF%G-H%CC%98G-%EF%BF%BD1'F-%2F1-1H'\(7-%1,%EF%BF%BD-\(12%EF%BF%BDD](https://www.[.]farsnews[.]ir/news/14010707000241/,%CC%AF%G-H%CC%98G-%EF%BF%BD1'F-%2F1-1H'(7-%1,%EF%BF%BD-(12%EF%BF%BDD)

⁶ [https://www.\[.\]presstv\[.\]ir/Detail/2022/06/21/684291/Colombia-president-elect-Petro-General-Soleimani](https://www.[.]presstv[.]ir/Detail/2022/06/21/684291/Colombia-president-elect-Petro-General-Soleimani)

1. The end of US-Colombia military cooperation;
2. Giving Iran “free rein to continue spreading ... Islamic revolutionary ideology”; and,
3. Petro mending ties with Venezuela, implementing the existing Colombian peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and reaching peace with the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group.

MEMRI judges that these policy changes, collectively, would empower Hezbollah’s activities in Venezuela and, by extension, empower Iran. To some degree, Petro is working toward these conditions — he has opened the border with Venezuela, and has agreed to [pursue](#) peace negotiations with the ELN. And although he has not renounced military cooperation with the US and is unlikely to do so, Petro has [reversed](#) direction on counterdrug policy and operations from that of his predecessors who [worked](#) closely with the US on Plan Colombia.

Argentina

Far-left politician Cristina Fernández de Kirchner is the former president, and current vice president, of Argentina, and has long been accused of maintaining a cozy relationship with Iran. Fernández de Kirchner [chose](#) President Alberto Fernández as a candidate because she was too mired in corruption charges to run for her own third term. In January 2015, Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman, who was [investigating](#) the Jewish center and Israeli Embassy terror attacks in Argentina in the 1990s, was found murdered in his home, hours before he planned to publicly accuse Fernández de Kirchner of covering up Iran’s involvement in the attacks. Nisman believed Fernández de Kirchner wanted to conceal Iran’s role to preserve the bilateral relationship between the 2 governments. The case was [based on](#) wiretaps of Fernández de Kirchner’s close associates, who agreed to drop charges against Iranian officials in connection to the attacks in exchange for an “oil-for-grain” deal. An Argentine judge subsequently called for the arrest of Fernández de Kirchner for treason, accusing her of making a secret deal with Iran regarding the terror attacks in order to obtain favorable trade terms. Fernández de Kirchner was quick to deny the allegations, and she was not arrested due to legal immunity as she was serving in the Senate at the time.

In June of 2022, the Argentine government — in which Fernández de Kirchner is believed to play an outsized role given her [hand-selection](#) of the president — made international headlines for [grounding](#) a Venezuelan cargo jet at a Buenos Aires airport and detaining Iranian crew members on terrorism concerns. The plane was seized at the request of the US Department of Justice, and according to US and Latin American law enforcement officials, the plane’s pilot was a senior IRGC official. Formerly, the plane was owned by Iran’s Mahan Air, which is [under](#) US sanctions for its involvement in arms smuggling. Ultimately, in October 2022, all passengers were cleared by an Argentine court to depart Argentina, including the Iranian nationals, due to lack of evidence of nefarious activities. Opposition politicians claimed the plane was coordinating an intelligence operation. Argentine lawmaker Gerardo Milman [alleged](#) that “the Argentinian government had aligned with ‘the Caracas-Tehran-Moscow regime’”, and that the plane’s pilot had images on his phone of “missiles, aircrafts aimed at Israel”. He

implied that the Argentine government was covering up a “Venezuelan-Iranian intelligence operation” by focusing instead on immigration regulations surrounding the crew members.

Chile

Although we cannot point to any major, specific gains that Iran has made in Chile from a political or economic standpoint since the current president of Chile (Gabriel Boric) took office, his strong [support](#) for Palestine and [criticism](#) of Israel and the US have likely made Iranian government officials view him as a sympathetic figure with whom they should increase engagement; additionally, the presence of Iranian cultural centers in Chile provide venues for Iranian influence operations in the country. Writing about young, far-left politician Gabriel Boric’s election to the Chilean presidency in December 2021, Iranian state-owned news site Pars Today [surmised](#) that “a new hope could be dawning across Latin America” and described the election as detrimental to the interests of the US and Israel in the region; similarly, the Jerusalem Post [described](#) it as “an opportunity [for Iran] to raise its assets and protect its profile”. Iran’s approval of Boric likely owes to his alignment with Iran’s geopolitical objectives in Latin America. For example, he projects a staunchly pro-Palestinian view in the Israel-Palestine conflict as a “[harsh critic](#)” of Israel — an issue Iran has long [exploited](#) and which it has a strong interest in perpetuating, as evidenced by its support to Palestinian terror organizations like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Boric [supports](#) the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement for products exported by Israeli businesses in the West Bank.

Iran exerts influence through cultural centers in Chile. For example, Iran reportedly [maintains](#) 2 cultural centers in Chile, including 1 in Santiago run by someone the Jerusalem Post identifies as a Hezbollah-affiliated cleric from the tri-border area between Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. Iranian cultural efforts in Chile have gained momentum by aligning with various indigenous and left-wing causes, according to an analysis by the Jerusalem Post. The US Department of Treasury has sanctioned businesses in Chile for ties to Iran-supported, US-designated terror organization Hezbollah. Chile has not designated Hezbollah as a terror organization.

Drawing Closer to Long-Time Allies

Venezuela

Venezuela has maintained close relations with Iran for decades; however, these ties tightened significantly in recent years. In February 2023, Venezuela’s foreign minister said relations between the 2 countries were in the “best condition”.⁷ Most notably, Iran and Venezuela have made significant moves forward in energy cooperation to mitigate the effects of US sanctions. Iran has reportedly [exported](#) shipments of crude oil to Venezuela for refinement since at least May 2022, following a February 2022 oil cooperation memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by the 2 sides at the 6th Summit of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum in Qatar, and a May 2022 visit by Iranian oil minister Javad Owji to Venezuela to meet with Maduro, as well as his Venezuelan counterpart, then-Minister of Petroleum

⁷ [http://www\[.\]javanonline\[.\]ir/fa/news/1142568](http://www[.]javanonline[.]ir/fa/news/1142568)

Tareck El Aissami.^{8 9} The 2 countries have increasingly [traded](#) complementary energy products, “swapping Venezuelan heavy oil and other commodities for Iranian gasoline, condensate, refinery parts and technical assistance” over the past several years, according to Reuters. In October of 2022, Iran opened its first extraterritorial oil refinery in El Palito, Venezuela — a development announced by Owji. The facility reportedly has the capacity to refine 100,000 barrels of crude oil per day. Iran’s [provision](#) of crude oil, as well as gasoline and other condensates, to Venezuela, allows Venezuela to ship more of its export grade products to Asia. Iran has even [built](#) 2 Aframax (80,000-120,000 deadweight metric tons) petroleum tankers for Venezuela as of June 2022, according to Middle East Monitor. A third tanker was delivered in September 2022¹⁰, and an additional tanker was on order.

Iran and Venezuela have increased cooperation outside of energy, including in manufacturing and other industries. In June of 2022, Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro [traveled](#) to Tehran for historic meetings with President Raisi. While there, Maduro signed a 20-year “cooperation road map” with Iran, with the aim of increasing bilateral relations. During the meetings, the 2 leaders engaged in familiar and predictable rhetoric, praising each other for “incredible resistance against threats and sanctions by enemies and imperialism”. However, they also signed strategic agreements to increase bilateral trade, as well as cooperation in the science and technology sectors, among others. Subsequently, in September 2022, Iran and Venezuela reached a deal at an “Industrial Scientific and Technological Expofair” in Caracas for Venezuela to produce 4 Iranian car models.¹¹¹² The Expofair featured 200 business roundtables and resulted in the signing of 60 MoUs meant to deepen scientific and technical cooperation between the 2 countries.¹³

The 2 governments met again in September 2022 at the UNGA, where, according to Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Venezuelan minister of foreign affairs Carlos Faria “highlighted the Venezuelan leader’s determination to grow closer ties with Iran”.¹⁴ In early February 2023, Iran’s foreign minister Amir-Abdollahian traveled to Venezuela and met with Maduro, at which time they [agreed](#) on the importance of expediting various projects between the 2 countries, according to pro-Hezbollah Al Mayadeen news outlet. Additionally, they [discussed](#) “defense of their national interests in the face of external pressures” in what Maduro described on social media as a “productive” meeting.

In January 2023, Moscow-controlled Spanish language outlet Sputnik Mundo reported that the Iranian government was in negotiations with Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua to construct and maintain power stations and sewage systems in those countries.¹⁵

In addition to maintaining commercial and political agreements, some reporting suggests that Iran has supplied Venezuela with weapons and established production of armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in the South American country. In February 2022, Israel’s then-defense minister, Benny Gantz,

⁸ [https://english\[.\]almayadeen\[.\]net/news/politics/maduro-iranian-oil-minister-stress-development-of-energy-tie](https://english[.]almayadeen[.]net/news/politics/maduro-iranian-oil-minister-stress-development-of-energy-tie)

⁹ [https://english\[.\]almayadeen\[.\]net/news/politics/el-palito-first-iranian-built-overseas-refinery-opened-in-ve](https://english[.]almayadeen[.]net/news/politics/el-palito-first-iranian-built-overseas-refinery-opened-in-ve)

¹⁰ [https://en\[.\]mehrnews\[.\]com/news/191498/Venezuela-receives-third-oil-tanker-built-by-Iran-Maduro](https://en[.]mehrnews[.]com/news/191498/Venezuela-receives-third-oil-tanker-built-by-Iran-Maduro)

¹¹ [https://english\[.\]almayadeen\[.\]net/news/politics/el-palito-first-iranian-built-overseas-refinery-opened-in-ve](https://english[.]almayadeen[.]net/news/politics/el-palito-first-iranian-built-overseas-refinery-opened-in-ve)

¹² [https://english\[.\]almayadeen\[.\]net/news/economics/in-defiance-of-us-sanctions-venezuela-to-manufacture-4-irani](https://english[.]almayadeen[.]net/news/economics/in-defiance-of-us-sanctions-venezuela-to-manufacture-4-irani)

¹³ [https://en\[.\]mehrnews\[.\]com/news/191642/Iran-Venezuela-sign-60-MoUs-to-strengthen-bilateral-ties](https://en[.]mehrnews[.]com/news/191642/Iran-Venezuela-sign-60-MoUs-to-strengthen-bilateral-ties)

¹⁴ [https://en\[.\]mfa\[.\]ir/portal/newsview/694489/Iranian-Venezuelan-FMs-discuss-closer-cooperation-on-all-fronts](https://en[.]mfa[.]ir/portal/newsview/694489/Iranian-Venezuelan-FMs-discuss-closer-cooperation-on-all-fronts)

¹⁵ [https://sputniknews\[.\]lat/20230102/iran-negocia-con-cuba-nicaragua-y-venezuela-para-construir-centrales-electricas-1134253964.html](https://sputniknews[.]lat/20230102/iran-negocia-con-cuba-nicaragua-y-venezuela-para-construir-centrales-electricas-1134253964.html)

[alleged](#) that Iran was supplying Venezuela with “precision guided missiles” to be fitted on Iran-designed Mohajer-type UAVs, referencing a November 2020 appearance by Nicolas Maduro on Venezuelan state television where he appeared with what Aurora Intel [identified](#) as a Mohajer-6 UAV. Iran has [provided](#) assembly kits for surveillance drones to Venezuela since 2007; in November 2022, the Washington Institute theorized that Iran may be “[outsourcing](#)” production of drones to Venezuela, for subsequent air transfer to Russia for its use on the battlefield in Ukraine.

Previously, in June of 2021, Politico and US Naval Institute (USNI) [reported](#), citing unnamed US government officials, that 2 Iranian naval vessels were believed to be [transiting](#) to Venezuela—likely to transfer military materiel. Satellite imagery provided by Maxar Technologies to USNI in late April 2021 showed 1 of them [loaded](#) with 7 fast-attack craft before departing from Iran. This followed a warning from then-president of Colombia Ivan Duque in August 2020 that Venezuela was [seeking](#) to purchase missiles from Iran. President Maduro did not confirm Duque’s allegation, but mockingly described it on television as a “good idea”, instructing his defense minister to look into short and medium range Iran may have available. Ultimately, the 2 navy vessels changed course and [transited](#) to Russia instead of Latin America, likely [owing](#) to effective US diplomatic efforts to prevent the voyage to Venezuela. Despite ultimately failing to reach Venezuela, Iran’s brazen attempt to conduct a navy voyage to Venezuela, likely to transfer military materiel, suggests that Venezuela and Iran increasingly maintain a military relationship.



Figure 2: Maduro and Raisi meet in Tehran, June 2022 (Source: [Aljazeera](#))

Cuba

Iran has notably increased its bilateral engagement with Cuba. In a clear example of the camaraderie enjoyed by the 2 governments, Mohsen Rezai and Cuban president Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez met in Managua, Nicaragua in January 2022 at the inauguration of Daniel Ortega, and agreed to strengthen their relationship to counteract US sanctions.¹⁶ According to Chinese state-run media network Xinhua, Diaz-Canel advocated for increased cooperation with Iran on trade, science, and technology and praised bilateral cooperation that has taken place in the fight against the coronavirus as “a great success in the fight against...the common enemy”.¹⁷ Per the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the 2 countries [pledged](#) to strengthen cooperation in the medical and pharmaceutical industries going forward, after Cuba sent Iran many doses of its domestically developed COVID-19 vaccines. Diaz-Canel also affirmed Cuba’s support for Iran’s pursuit of “peaceful nuclear energy”.¹⁸

Subsequently, in May 2022, Cuba’s deputy prime minister, Ricardo Cabrisas, traveled to Tehran and met with Iranian foreign minister Amir-Abdollahian during the 18th iteration of the Iran-Cuba Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation.¹⁹ At the time of writing, the forum has met 18 times, indicating the depth of Tehran-Havana ties. At this most recent iteration, the 2 sides signed 13 agreements in pharmacy, biotechnology, energy, food, and health, according to Iran’s state-run Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA).²⁰ Cabrisas reportedly “[stressed](#) the necessity of drawing on the two countries’ economic potential to advance the two sides’ interests”. IRNA also reported, based on a July 2022 interview with Cuba’s ambassador to Tehran, Alberto Gonzalez Casals, that the 2 sides were making efforts to directly connect Iranian and Cuban banks and Cuba was seeking to establish a direct flight between Tehran and Havana. In September 2022, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Cuba’s foreign minister, Bruno Rodriguez, affirmed that Cuba’s “leadership is determined to expand ties with Iran”.²¹

Subsequently, on February 5, 2023, Amir-Abdollahian and Diaz-Canel met during the former’s trip to Latin America to advance their 2 countries’ bilateral cooperation, including in the medical field, and to discuss circumventing sanctions, according to Iranian state media.^{22 23}

Nicaragua

Iran maintains a close relationship with Nicaragua’s government, led by President Daniel Ortega, who was elected to his fourth term in 2021 in a highly controversial election that many Western countries have [called](#) undemocratic. The Ortega government [allowed](#) Mohsen Rezai, Iran’s vice president for economic affairs, to attend Ortega’s January 2022 inauguration ceremony. Rezai was in command of

¹⁶ <https://english.news.cn/20220112/6198ddc92d704787b58bd736d116e098/c.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/20220112/6198ddc92d704787b58bd736d116e098/c.html>

¹⁸ <https://en.irna.ir/news/84610331/Iran-proposes-setting-up-Joint-Economic-Union-with-Latin-American>

¹⁹ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/05/15/2710973/fm-calls-cuba-iran-s-strategic-partner>

²⁰ <https://en.irna.ir/news/84816442/Western-media-missioned-to-remove-freedom-seeking-figures-from>

²¹ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/09/27/2779461/iran-not-to-walk-away-from-negotiating-table-fm-says-about-jcpoa-talk>

²² <https://en.isna.ir/news/140111612051/Iran-Cuba-stress-on-expansion-of-cooperation-in-fields-of-medicine>

²³ <https://kayhan.ir/en/news/112131/cuba-iran-discuss-cooperation-to-thwart-us-sanctions>

the IRGC at the time of the Iran-orchestrated bombing of a Jewish community center in Argentina in 1994, and is widely believed to be behind the terror attack; in October 2022, Argentina's department of justice [called on](#) Qatar to arrest Rezai for his role in this bombing.

In September 2022, Iranian foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian met with his Nicaraguan counterpart, Denis Ronaldo Moncada Colindres, on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York. According to Iran's state-run Mehr News Agency, the 2 agreed to develop bilateral relations in all areas, with a focus on the economic sphere.²⁴

In February 2023, Amir-Abdollahian traveled to Nicaragua and met with President Ortega, where the 2 discussed "ways to thwart US sanctions", according to Iran's Tehran Times. Amir-Abdollahian indicated that President Raisi is planning to travel to Nicaragua during an upcoming trip to the Latin American region.²⁵



Figure 3: Iranian and Cuban government officials meet in Tehran at the 18th Iran-Cuba Joint Commission on Economics in May 2022 (Source: [IranPress.com](https://iranpress.com))

Iranian Influence Efforts

Iranian influence efforts in the western hemisphere, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, appear to be far less robust than those of China and Russia. However, Iran disseminates propaganda and promotes its influence in the region, in the form of traditional Spanish-language media, social

²⁴ [https://en\[.\]mehrnews\[.\]com/news/191793/Iran-Nicaragua-FMs-emphasize-developing-economic-ties](https://en[.]mehrnews[.]com/news/191793/Iran-Nicaragua-FMs-emphasize-developing-economic-ties)

²⁵ [https://www\[.\]tehrantimes\[.\]com/news/481590/Iran-s-active-diplomacy-in-America-s-backyard](https://www[.]tehrantimes[.]com/news/481590/Iran-s-active-diplomacy-in-America-s-backyard)

media, and religious and cultural instruction. As Latin American audiences increasingly reject Western messaging and embrace anti-US views, Iranian influence efforts are likely to gain increasing exposure and reach.

Iranian influence operations in Latin America through traditional and social media are not new, but they have been noted in high numbers during the current “Pink Tide”. In October 2019, Meta [shut down](#) 38 Facebook accounts, 6 pages, 4 groups, and 10 Instagram accounts for participating in coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) originating from Iran, targeting audiences in Latin America. These accounts and pages promoted Iranian state-sponsored information operations which projected media narratives on Hezbollah, the war in Yemen, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, among other topics.

In addition to influence efforts through media, Tehran exerts influence using its cultural and religious centers in the region.

HispanTV / Nexo Latino

HispanTV is a Spanish-language, Iranian state-owned subsidiary of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). According to an archived HispanTV website, the outlet began [operating](#) its website in Tehran in 2010. Its mission includes “[promoting] rapprochement between the people of Iran, Hispanoamerica, and those of the Middle East”. On social media, the outlet uses the moniker Nexo Latino. It maintains a presence on Youtube ([NexoLatino](#)), Facebook ([nexolatino](#)), Telegram ([hispanTVcanal](#)), urmedium.com ([hispanTV](#)), Instagram ([hispan_tv](#)), and another Western mainstream social media platform ([@nexo_latino](#)). It promotes a pro-Iranian political agenda that aligns closely with the agendas of Russia, China, Venezuela, and the Palestinian government. HispanTV also “[thrives](#) on disinformation as part of its attempts to manipulate and influence regional stakeholders to confront Western democracies,” according to the Anti-Defamation League’s vice president for international affairs, Sharon Nazarian.

The network maintains the website “[www\[.\]hispanTV\[.\]com](#)”, based at Number 4, 2 East Street, Farhang Avenue, Saadat Abad, Tehran. The outlet maintained, as of late April 2023, multiple social media accounts distributing similar content to that of its official domain. It counted 4,500 subscribers on YouTube (@NexoLatino) and 18,796 on Telegram (@hispanTVcanal). Its Instagram (@hispan_TV), Facebook (Nexo Latino), and another Western mainstream social media platform account (@Nexo_Latino) counted 11,500, 21,000 and 4,212 followers, respectively, as of April 26, 2023. A TikTok page ([@nexolatino](#)) bearing the network’s name had 16,900 likes; however, it is not clear that this is officially operated by HispanTV because it is not listed on HispanTV’s official website.

A June 2021 study published by the National Defense University (NDU) Institute for Strategic Studies (INSS), which is funded by the US Department of Defense, [named](#) HispanTV as a “foundation” of Iran’s “regional strategy” [focused on Latin America]. The study asserted that Iran “has created a network of expanding echo chambers” including HispanTV, Venezuelan outlet TeleSUR, and Russia Today’s Spanish-language outlet, RT En Espanol. NDU goes on to explain that through social media and think tanks, Iran is able to disseminate a “constant narrative of US oppression ... while portraying Iran as a

key ideological ally of the radical populist Bolivarian Revolution” — a socialist and nationalist movement initiated by the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez; the original slogan of the movement was “Motherland, socialism, or death”. Late 2022 articles posted by @Nexo_Latino on social media promoted political narratives embraced by Venezuela and its close allies, including September 11 [conspiracy](#) theories, pro-Russian narratives such as Donetsk and Luhansk (Ukraine) [celebrating their referendums](#) to join Russia, and US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces [shuttering schools](#) in Syria.

Iran-Backed Cultural Centers and Hezbollah

Iran-backed cultural centers are scattered throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, [reportedly spreading](#) Islamic Republic geopolitical influence and exporting the ideology of the Iranian Revolution. Some sources allege that these cultural centers coordinate overtly malign activities: Wall Street Journal columnist Mary Anastasia O’Grady [alleges](#) that the centers are directed by Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), and Arab News [alleges](#) the centers “act as hubs for recruiting spies and building popular support for Iran”.



Figure 4: Iran-backed cultural center in Quito, Ecuador, adorned with photograph of slain Quds force commander Qasem Soleimani (Source: [PlanV](#))

According to Emanuele Ottolenghi, an expert on Iranian activities in Latin America, these religious and cultural centers [sponsor](#) travel by Latin Americans converting to Shi'a Islam to Qom, Iran for religious and cultural education. Ottolenghi asserts, "when they come back [to Latin America], their role is clear –promote their religion and the Iranian regime. The cultural centers seem to be the most convenient way to do so as it allows them to organize events, publish texts in Spanish or spread their message on social media". These cultural centers are [allegedly](#) directed by an organization called Islam Oriente, based in Qom. Islam Oriente, according to Ottolenghi, is directed by cleric Mohsen Rabbani, the aforementioned conspirator in the bombing of the AMIA Jewish Community Center in Argentina in 1994.

Islam Oriente [reportedly](#) works through Caracas, Venezuela-based Centro de Intercambio Cultural Iraní Latinoamericano ("CICIL"; Iranian-Latin American Cultural Exchange) and collectively the 2 organizations coordinate the activities of the various centers in the region. US government-funded [Radio Farda](#) and US-based, Spanish-language online newspaper Infobae [assert](#) that Rabbani maintains close ties to current HispanTV host and Shiite cleric Edgador Ruben Assad, also known as Sheik Suhail Assad. Assad has [reportedly](#) helped to establish more than 20 Iran-backed cultural centers in Latin America and frequently lectures at Latin American universities. Assad has also appeared on several countries' terror watchlists, according to Radio Farda.

A 2019 article published in Infobae [asserts](#) that Assad is closely tied to Iranian Intelligence and the IRGC. According to Infobae, Assad is active at the Centro de Cultura Islámica (Islamic Cultural Center) in the Los Condes neighborhood of Santiago, Chile, and at the CICIL in Caracas, Venezuela, both of which had posted photos of Hezbollah military leaders on their Facebook pages as of 2019. Assad, who [said](#) in an interview that the Holocaust is an "opinion" of historians, reportedly lives in Iran and spends half the year in Latin America, and has denied working for Iran or Hezbollah but credits Iran with representing his Shi'a ideology "as a political structure".



Figure 5: Sheik Suhail Assad gives a sermon on Facebook live in April 2022 (Source: [Facebook](#))

The Centro de Cultura Islámica (Santiago) Facebook page [posted](#) a live sermon by Assad as recently as April 2022. The institution's Facebook page (@centromusulmanadeChile) had more than 12,000

followers as of March 2023. The CICIL in Caracas [maintained](#) a smaller social media following, with its account, @islamenvzla, having 2,300 followers as of March 2023.

In Peru, independent Iran news site IranWire [reported](#) that an individual named Edwar Husain Quiroga Vargas was closely associated with the 2021 electoral campaign of Pedro Castillo, the since-[impeached](#) former left-wing president of Peru. Quiroga Vargas [allegedly](#) studied in Iran with Mohsen Rabbani and founded an Islamic Fundamentalist organization called Inkarrí Islam, which, [according](#) to Peruvian outlet Peru21, is being monitored by international counter-terrorism authorities. The same article asserts that Quiroga Vargas has opened 5 Islamic centers in Peru, and helped at least 25 Peruvians travel to Iran to study with Rabbani. According to Joseph Humire, director of the US think tank Center for a Secure Free Society, Quiroga Vargas acts directly on behalf of an Iranian intelligence network in Peru, however Insikt Group has not verified this.

Latin American converts to Shi'a Islam who become involved in leading these centers enthusiastically repeat Iranian government talking points. For example, an article by Ecuador's independent news site Plan V examining the Ecuadorian-Iranian Cultural Center in Quito, Ecuador, [quotes](#) the center's president in calling the US' presence in the Middle East an "invasion". A leader at the Center further described General Soleimani's ill-fated visit to Iraq (where he was killed in a US strike) as a legitimate diplomatic mission. The Center also acknowledges that it engages in "constant collaboration" with the Iranian Ambassador to Ecuador but denies that this constitutes "political" activity.

Culture Centers in Latin America under Suspected Iranian Government Influence (Non-Comprehensive List Based on Open-Source Intelligence)		
Location	Organization	Source
Unspecified	Islam Oriente	Radio Farda
Buenos Aires, Argentina	Al-Tauhid Mosque	Radio Farda
Sao Paulo, Brazil	Islamic Benevolent Religious Organization and Arresala	Radio Farda and Counter Extremism Project
Sao Paulo, Brazil	Centro Islamico do Brasil and Arresala (media wing of the former)	Radio Farda , IranWire , Counter Extremism Project , Emanuele Ottolenghi testimony to US Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Quito, Ecuador	Centro Cultural Ecuatoriano-Iraní	PlanV
Caracas, Venezuela	Centro de Intercambio Cultural Iraní Latinoamericano (CICIL)	Radio Farda and Infobae
Santiago, Chile	Centro de Cultura Islámica	Infobae

Table 1: Non-comprehensive list of Iran-backed cultural centers and clerics in Latin America (Source: [Radio Farda](#))

United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) also [asserts](#) that Al-Mustafa University, in Qom, Iran, sends Lebanese missionaries to Latin America — which has a substantial Lebanese diaspora — to gain influence with Lebanese expatriates and proselytize; notably, “exporting Iran’s Islamic Revolution” is the “core goal” of the university, according to UANI.

Outlook

Iran is very likely to continue to capitalize on opportunities presented by left-wing and anti-American leaders in Latin America to further expand its presence in the region, with a focus on energy deals and other economic partnerships. Meanwhile, it will continue to pursue food security through agricultural deals such as its agreements with Brazil. Tehran’s goals in Latin America are likely multifold, but they almost certainly include expanding trade relationships to mitigate the effects of US sanctions and ensure food security; developing strong political partnerships to expand Iran’s international sphere of influence; and expanding military power in the region. Iran will almost certainly seek to increase trade relationships, cooperation agreements, and diplomatic engagements with its steadfast allies in the region, as well as with the region’s more powerful countries with relatively new left-wing governments, especially Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, and Chile. Iran will also use the BRICS mechanism (if it can successfully join the union) and other multilateral bodies to legitimize its presence and appear as a responsible and influential power broker in the region.

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