



**Chairman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
Opening Statement at Hearing:
“Ahmadinejad’s Tour of Tyrants and Iran’s Agenda in the Western Hemisphere”
February 2, 2012 at 10:00am**

Through a series of hearings and classified briefings, this committee has exercised due diligence and oversight to examine the threat to U.S. national security posed by Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities in our own Western Hemisphere.

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper stated this week, “Iranian officials – probably including Supreme Leader Ali Khameni – have changed their calculus and are now willing to conduct an attack in the United States.”

The Iranian regime has formed alliances with Chavez, Ortega, Castro, and Correa that many believe can destabilize the Hemisphere. These alliances can pose an immediate threat by giving Iran – directly through the IRGC, the Qods force, or its proxies like Hezbollah – a platform in the region to carry out attacks against the United States, our interests, and allies.

Some may question the Congressional focus on the Iran-Latin America nexus because they wrongly believe that Iran’s influence in the region is exaggerated. But let’s analyze what has occurred in Latin America due to the actions of the Iranian regime. Iran’s Ahmadinejad recently returned from his ‘Tour of Tyrants’ trip to visit Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Ecuador. Media reports have indicated an increased presence of Iran’s Qods Force in these countries, and offices of Iran’s intelligence service surfacing throughout the region. The fact that the military arm of a state-sponsor of terrorism has its operatives within multiple countries in our Hemisphere is certainly cause for alarm and merits Congressional focus.

In October of last year, we learned of the attempted plot by the Qods Force to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador on U.S. soil, using individuals they thought were from the violent Mexican Zeta drug cartel. Two months later, the Spanish language network Univision aired a documentary that depicted a 2007 cyber attack scheme by the Iranian Ambassador in Mexico, by diplomatic officials from the embassies of Venezuela and Cuba, and undercover Mexican students posing as extremists. The principals involved in this plot wanted to infiltrate U.S. government computer systems in the White House, FBI, CIA, and two nuclear facilities.

A Venezuelan diplomat connected with the plot later became the Venezuelan consul in Miami. Shortly after the documentary aired, my congressional colleagues and I sent a letter to the Department of State requesting an investigation of these claims and asking that if the Venezuelan consul was found to be involved in this plot, that she be designated *persona non grata* and be expelled from the United States. Last month, the State Department expelled the consul back to Venezuela.

In May of last year, the Iranian Defense Minister was in Bolivia to inaugurate a military training school for ALBA countries, financed by the Iranian regime. Meanwhile, Interpol has in place an arrest warrant

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for the Iranian Defense Minister in connection with the 1994 AMIA bombing in Argentina, the Jewish Community Center.

Additionally, in order to further expand their influence and extremist propaganda, Iran just launched a Spanish language channel that airs in Latin America and Spain.

Further compounding the problem is the increasingly diverse and extensive activities of Iran's proxy Hezbollah. The synergy between Hezbollah and the drug cartels in Latin America makes for a very powerful enemy and one that is challenging to identify. Our law enforcement agencies focusing on narco-terrorism and terrorist financing have had successes in penetrating these operations and gaining a better understanding of the nature, extent, and evolution of the links between Hezbollah and drug trafficking organizations.

Recently, the DEA led an undercover investigation called Operation Titan, which exposed a vast criminal network operating a drug money laundering pipeline through West Africa to Europe, the Middle East, and Colombia. In addition, last year, we learned of the investigations led by the U.S. into the Lebanese Canadian Bank that discovered a complicated web of high-ranking Hezbollah officials involved in the South American cocaine trafficking trade. Hezbollah has maintained a significant footprint in the Americas, including the Tri-Border region of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, to help raise funds for their criminal activities.

Media reports have indicated that Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11, spent some time in the Tri-Border Area in the late 1990s with Islamic extremists in the region helping to raise more funds for terrorist attacks. In Colombia, we have witnessed how another foreign terrorist organization, the FARC, is heavily involved in narcotics trafficking in South America. Therefore, it is not new to learn that terrorist organizations are actively using the drug trade and other existing criminal networks to raise funds and carry out their operations.

Since the Western Hemisphere is a hub for drug trafficking, the possible combination of threats creates a clear and present danger. Last month at the State of the Union, President Obama ignored the security concerns stemming from the region and the importance that Latin America plays to our economic prosperity and our national security. The administration's policy of dialogue with Iran has failed and a similar approach towards the ALBA countries in the region will fail as well.

When asked about Iran's activities in the Western Hemisphere, Director Clapper noted this week that "there is more to unfold here." This committee stands committed to "unfolding" the threats posed by Iran in the Western Hemisphere. We will continue to zero in on these concerns and engage all pertinent U.S. government agencies to ensure proper resources are being dedicated to counter these threats against U.S. national security, rather than wasted on unaccountable, corrupt governments.