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FEATURED Q&A

What Are Iran's Goals in Latin America?

Q President Barack Obama last month approved the "Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act," which the U.S. Congress passed earlier in the year. It calls for the State Department to design a plan that will "address Iran's growing hostile presence and activity" in the hemisphere within 180 days. What are Iran's goals in Latin America? What evidence, if any, is there of Iran undertaking illegal or harmful activities in the region? Is such a plan necessary? If so, what should it include?

A Stephen Johnson, director of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies: "The bill's genesis was foreign policy hawks' belief that the administration was ignoring Iranian activities in this hemisphere. In fact, various agencies, from the Justice Department to the Pentagon, have been tracking them. Last year, CSIS published a report that provided a timeline of engagement and detailed support for terrorism, trade, joint projects, finances, public diplomacy and military assistance. Support for terrorism seemed greatest during the 1990s. During the last decade, that activity was displaced by a sharp uptick in diplomatic engagement with Bolivarian Alliance countries. This included some 200-300 joint ventures worth \$20 billion with Venezuela (some real, some notional), as well as millions in aid projects to Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua. There have been announce-

ments of joint mineral exploration to include uranium prospecting. Iran also sent military assistance teams to Bolivia and Ecuador, ostensibly to teach counternarcotics techniques. We think that some of this is intended to antagonize the United States, while some is meant to prop up the government's image at home as a global power. Some of it may well mask technology or strategic materials transfers destined to aid Iran's nuclear and weapons programs. There is plenty of smoke, but lacking flames, there has been little U.S.

Continued on page 3



Colombia-FARC Talks Must Accelerate: Gov't Negotiator

Peace talks between Colombia's government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, rebels, must accelerate, Humberto de la Calle, the government's top negotiator, said Sunday. The talks are resuming after a holiday break. See story on page 2.

File Photo: Colombian Government.

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NEWS BRIEFS

**Earthquake Aid "Not Working":
Haiti's Michel Martelly**

International aid that donors pledged after Haiti's devastating 2010 earthquake is "not working," President Michel Martelly said Saturday on the three-year anniversary of the quake, BBC News reported. According to Martelly, the government has directly received only one third of the aid pledged. "Most of the aid was used by non-governmental agencies for emergency operations, not for the reconstruction of Haiti," he said. More than 300,000 people are still living in temporary housing.

**Nissan to Begin Production of
Note Subcompact in Mexico**

Nissan Motor Co. will start domestic production of its Note subcompact in Mexico for distribution throughout the Americas, the Japanese automaker said in a statement, Bloomberg News reported today. Nissan, the largest vehicle maker in Mexico, will assemble the five-door model at its plant in Aguascalientes. In 2012, Nissan produced more than 683,000 vehicles in Mexico, a 13 percent increase from the previous year, according to the Mexican Automobile Industry Association.

**Fitch Gives Paraguay BB-minus
Rating Ahead of Debt Sale**

Fitch Ratings gave Paraguay a rating of BB-minus as the country prepares for its first global debt sale since 2000, Reuters reported. The government is hoping to raise as much as \$550 million in February. Paraguay's economy is expected to grow next year as favorable weather improves agricultural production. Last year, poor harvests and an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease contributed to an economic contraction.

Political News

**Chávez's Condition Improving:
Venezuelan Government**

Ailing Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is responding to treatment and his health is improving, the government announced on Sunday. "Despite his delicate state of health following the complex surgical operation on Dec. 11, over the past few days the general medical evolution has been favorable and the president is strictly following medical treatment,"



Chávez

File Photo: Venezuelan Government.

Information Minister Ernesto Villegas said in a televised statement, BBC News reported. "The respiratory infection is under control, although the commander president still needs specific measures to deal with insufficient breathing." Villegas added that Chávez "is conscious, communicating with his family, his political team and the medical team treating him." Chávez has not been seen in public since his latest surgery, the fourth operation he has undergone for his still-undisclosed form of cancer. He missed his own inauguration last week, but the government has postponed his swearing-in indefinitely. Chávez's brother, Adán Chávez, denied in a statement on Friday that the president was in a coma and that his family was considering disconnecting disconnecting life support. "We know this is part of a dirty war by the necrophiliac opposition in this country," Adán Chávez, the governor of Barinas state, said in a statement, Bloomberg News reported. On Sunday, thousands of Venezuelans rallied across the country in support of Chávez. The shows of support came as the opposition has been arguing that it is unconstitutional for the government to postpone the president's inauguration. Chávez's opponents have been demanding that the government release more details about Chávez's health. Rights groups have also criticized Venezuela's broadcast agency for ordering

an anti-Chávez television channel to stop questioning the constitutionality of delaying the inauguration, the Associated Press reported. Last Wednesday, the National Telecommunications Council opened an investigation against Globovisión, which could lead to sanctions against the channel. Pedro Maldonado said that the channel is manipulating information and that it is illegal for stations to broadcast programming that "generates anxiety in the citizenry or disturbs public order." Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders criticized the government's investigation of Globovisión. "Is debate not allowed?" Reporters Without Borders said in a statement. "These proceedings are disproportionate and absurd."

**FARC Peace Talks Must Accelerate:
Top Government Negotiator**

Peace talks between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, rebels must begin moving more quickly, the chief government negotiator said Sunday, BBC News reported. "We must move ahead with responsibility, but at a faster pace," Humberto de la Calle said as he left for Cuba, where the talks opened in

“We must move ahead
with responsibility, but
at a faster pace.”

— *Humberto de la Calle*

November but paused for a holiday break. The talks have initially focused on land reform and are to also include discussions on ending the armed conflict, drug trafficking, victims' rights and guaranteeing political opposition and citizen participation. Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos has said he wants an agreement by November. "The government negotiating team is fully aware that the country is longing for a peaceful solution," said de la Calle. "That is why we have been taking a realistic approach and making sure we do not create false expectations over the out-

come of the talks." The FARC has rejected the November deadline, saying the issues are too complex for that time frame. The government and rebels "will have to take as long as necessary to reach peace," said Iván Márquez, the FARC's chief negotiator. The rebels have declared a unilateral cease-fire, which expires on Jan. 20. The government has refused to participate in the cease-fire.

Company News

Head of Wal-Mart's Latin America Operation Stepping Down

The head of Wal-Mart's Latin America operations is retiring, the retailer announced Friday. Eduardo Solorzano, who headed the company's operations in the region at the time company executives in Mexico were alleged to have been involved in bribes to speed store construction, is stepping down in March, *The Wall Street Journal* reported. Enrique Ostale, who has been with the Bentonville, Ark.-based retailer since 2009, will replace Solorzano. Although Solorzano is retiring from his position as chief executive of Wal-Mart Latin America, he will remain the chairman of Wal-Mart de México. "For 27 years, Eduardo has been a champion for our customers in Mexico and across Latin America, and we are pleased he's staying on as chairman of Wal-Mart de México," Doug McMillion, chief executive of Wal-Mart International, said in a statement. Last Thursday, Democratic members of the U.S. House of Representatives released documents that appear to show that Wal-Mart CEO Michael Duke and other executives knew about the bribery allegations, contrary to what the company said last month. The retailer refuted the statement, saying its previous remarks on the matter were misinterpreted. Wal-Mart and U.S. authorities are continuing to investigate the allegations.



File Photo: Wal-Mart.

Featured Q&A

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attention focused on a counteractive strategy. Such a strategy could include the State Department asking Congress to direct resources at targeted intelligence collection and analysis, the administration putting Latin America on its priority list, making U.S. engagement with allies more fluid and timely (currently, a single congressional staffer can put a hold on U.S. assistance, which has stalled hundreds of millions appropriated for the Central American Regional Security Initiative) and not over- or under-stating Iran's influence in the region. Overblowing it could be counterproductive, just as underestimating it would be irresponsible. Moreover, it should not become the only topic of dialogue with some countries, much as counternarcotics was in the 1990s."

A Douglas Farah, senior fellow at the International Assessment and Strategy Center:

"There is ample evidence that Iran and its non-state proxy, Hezbollah, are increasingly active in Latin America with the aim of both destabilizing the region and positioning themselves for possible retaliatory strikes should Israel or the United States attack Iran's nuclear facilities. There are two clear cases of Iran's willingness to use Latin America as a launching pad to attack inside the United States: the 2007 plot to attack John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York and blow up the natural gas pipeline network and the 2011 plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States. There is also a growing body of public cases of Hezbollah directly dealing cocaine with Los Zetas as well as Colombia's Marxist insurgents and Venezuelan trafficking groups. While the Iranian connection to the JFK airport plot was mentioned throughout the trial of those convicted for the crimes, the case record shows the Iranian government offered material and financial aid. The involvement of senior Iranian officials in the Saudi ambassador plot was clear enough for the Obama

administration to publicly denounce it. Iran is spending significant time and resources expanding its diplomatic and economic ties in Latin America. The 1994 car bombing attack against the

“There are two clear cases of Iran's willingness to use Latin America as a launching pad to attack inside the United States.”

— Douglas Farah

Jewish center in Buenos Aires shows that this is an ominous sign. The Iranian government used its diplomatic protection to plan and execute the attack that left 85 people dead. The diplomatic press, with the support of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, Bolivia's Evo Morales and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, has no economic rationale and is rooted solely in a strong and potentially violent anti-Americanism. The study is an important step in mapping out the real magnitude of that alliance."

A Ray Walser, senior policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation:

"Iran is pursuing a multi-pronged strategy in the Americas. On the overt side, it seeks international legitimacy, diplomatic recognition and support, trade and commercial opportunities and cultural influence. In this respect, Iran acts like a normal nation within the bounds of the international community. Yet, Iran is not a normal country. It is a theocracy with power ambitions committed to a dangerous, extremist agenda often advanced by a vanguard of zealots in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and its elite Quds Force. On the covert side, Iran pursues opportunities to circumvent trade and financial sanctions; seeks cover for spies, thieves and agents of influence; cultivates

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Featured Q&A*Continued from page 3*

friends in anti-American foreign militaries and security services; and seeks the capabilities to launch disruptive asymmetric and terror attacks against Israeli and U.S. interests in the Americas or in the United States in the event of a shooting war. While the extent of the Iranian security threat is hotly debated in Washington, a substantial body of evidence indicates that secretive ties in the region, especially with Venezuela and its allies, have grown in the past four years. Requiring the Obama administration to develop a strategy to counter Iran in the Americas entails high-level backing and institutional creativity. It demands an integrated, inter-agency effort to coordinate diplomacy with intelligence collection capabilities. It will also require active policy measures to neutralize or counter potential threats. If the incoming Obama foreign policy team does not embrace this strategic directive with the seriousness it merits, it will falter. Like many previous exercises in congressionally-mandate reporting, the bureaucracy will simply kick the Iranian can down the road until something awful happens."

A R. Evan Ellis, associate professor at the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies in Washington: "Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has built relationships with his counterparts in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua on the basis of shared opposition to the United States, seeking to bolster his domestic standing by showing Iran to be a global actor. Trade and financial mechanisms enabled by these relationships, including the Venezuela-

based International Development Bank, help Iran to mitigate the effects of international sanctions. Evidence of improper Iranian activities in Latin America is ample, yet subject to many interpretations. Examples directly linked to Iran include helping Venezuela develop a military unmanned aerial vehicle, factories which may be a cover for other activities and sending Quds forces into the region. Affiliated Hezbollah activities include 1992 and 1994 terrorist attacks against Jewish targets in Buenos Aires and the foiled 2011 plot, working with the Mexican Zetas criminal organization to kill the Saudi ambassador. The new law is more political symbolism than real help, since it provides no additional resources to combat the problem. Worse, it shows Congress forcing a foreign policy on the president, since everything that it does—declaring a policy and mandating the State Department to develop a strategy—could have been ordered by the president without a law, had he wished to do so. The focus on the State Department also erroneously suggests that the problem is a diplomatic one, whose primary objective is to limit Iranian inroads among mainstream states in the region, such as Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and Chile. Ahmadinejad is already a pariah in the region. The true problem is countering the collusion among regimes already disposed to do the United States ill."

The Advisor welcomes reactions to the Q&A above. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org with comments.

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