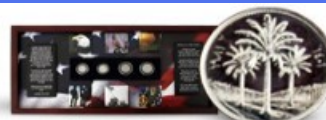


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# Mario Loyola

March 18, 2009 4:00 AM

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## All Along the Watchtower

The War on Terror has arrived in Latin America, and is headed our way.

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By Mario Loyola

Ronald Reagan helped to usher in a hopeful wave of democratization in Latin America. In one country after another, multi-party elections ended decades of single-party rule and military dictatorship. But today, that legacy is under threat — and so is our own homeland. The southern front in the War on Terror, which runs through Latin America’s institutions of state, is cracking under a combined assault of political revolution, Islamist terrorism, and the world’s most heavily armed drug cartels.

On Colombia’s frontiers, the radical “Bolivarian” governments of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia have embraced Iran, and are in league both with revolutionary terrorist movements such as the FARC and with drug traffickers. In the Caribbean zone, states are drowning in a tidal wave of drug- and weapons-smuggling — and increased extremism among its Muslim immigrant communities. In Mexico, massive drug cartels compete for control of the drug trade, deploying dizzying numbers of heavily armed paramilitaries. The violence has begun to reach our own cities.

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There may be no direct connection between recent kidnappings in Phoenix and high-profile visits by Hugo Chávez to Tehran. But connect the dots, and you will see a transnational extremist-terrorist wave challenging the institutions of liberal democracy in Latin America. If that wave begins to win in Latin America, we will soon be facing it here at home, with potentially grave consequences for our security and our way of life.

America’s “defense-in-depth” against this wave consists of Colombia, Central America, and Mexico. All three lines of defense are under assault and in danger of failing.

## IRAN'S ALLIES TAKE ON COLOMBIA

In the Western Hemisphere, the most dangerous development of the last decade is perhaps the alliance between Venezuela and Iran, which has allowed the mullahs to expand dramatically their reach in Latin America. Hezbollah has long been present among the immigrant Syrian and Lebanese communities of the Tri-Border Area between Brazil and Argentina. Hezbollah has been linked to bombings of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992 and the Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires two years later, in which a total of 115 people were killed and 500 injured. Hezbollah's illicit activities in this region of South America were arrestingly documented in a 2002 *New Yorker* article by Jeffrey Goldberg.

The problem has only grown more serious since then. The public love-fest between Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez is just the tip of a sinister iceberg. Weekly flights from Teheran to Caracas are not monitored for personnel or cargo, in violation of international norms, mimicking the process by which Beirut's International Airport became a hub of the terrorist underworld. Iran's intelligence services cooperate with those of Venezuela, which have kept busy in recent years helping the radical regimes of Bolivia and Ecuador purge themselves of anyone with ties of sympathy to the U.S.

In the wake of Israel's Gaza operation, there were signs of coordination on propaganda: Chávez had a chilling warning for Venezuela's large Jewish community: "Tell your government in Israel to stop this genocide and leave Palestinian lands." A *Kristallnacht*-style attack on the main Jewish synagogue in Venezuela was carried out by a large group of thugs that spent most of the night wreaking havoc in the compound before making off with computers that contain the names and addresses of most of Venezuela's Jews. Chávez denied responsibility and blamed the opposition, just as he did when bands of pro-Chávez thugs destroyed the facilities of Venezuela's last vestiges of independent media.

The "Bolivarian" revolution of Hugo Chávez — essentially, a reprise of the Cuban revolution in slow motion — has been mimicked in Ecuador and Bolivia, all of which have embraced Iran, revolutionary movements such as the FARC, and narco-traffickers. Those are the elements of the narco-radical threat that Colombia has been fighting for decades — and which it continues to face now on its frontiers, where neighboring governments have become, de facto, enemy governments. Last year, in the course of a raid by Colombia's armed forces that killed one of the FARC's key leaders, computers were captured that — as later verified by Interpol — contain clear evidence of high-ranking Venezuelan officials' offering weapons and money to the FARC — an organization that has put Colombia through a terrifying decades-long civil war.

Colombia appears to have turned the corner against the FARC, and to some extent also in the drug war. The once-nightmarish city of Medellín has become a showcase of President Alvaro Uribe's success in fighting the enemies of democracy in his own country. Combining "people power," through civil society and cultural programs, with "alliance power," through the U.S.-sponsored Plan Colombia, Uribe has been a rare success in our hemisphere's War on Terror. But Plan Colombia has now largely run its course. Meanwhile, the narco-radical forces continue to get stronger, and President Obama's left-wing base has weakened America's support for Colombia at a critical juncture. The travesty of our failure to pass the Colombia Free Trade Agreement remains a serious self-inflicted wound in our fight against terrorism, a clear sign that the U.S. government has yet to grasp the gravity of the situation facing us in Latin America — or the precious value of allies in dealing with it.


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