

Are Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah Trying to Reprise Syria in Venezuela?

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Brief Analysis

U.S. rivals are diversifying their support for the Maduro government in familiar fashion, whether to parry the United States, exploit the crisis for profit, or both.

As Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro defies international pressure to resign, his allies in the Middle East, Russia, and elsewhere are doubling down on their efforts to score another geopolitical victory against the United States. The crisis risks morphing into a redux of the Syria situation, in which President Bashar al-Assad worked with a similar coalition of countries and militias to withstand an array of U.S.-led economic sanctions and military operations.

According to U.S. officials, Maduro's allies may be finding new ways to prop up the strongman. In addition to buying up sanctioned Venezuelan oil to buttress his government's finances, Russia is believed to have deployed around 150 military and security personnel in Caracas in recent months. Iran has commenced weekly flights to Caracas, potentially to ferry military supplies to Maduro. Meanwhile, Lebanese Hezbollah and Cuba have deployed a network of intelligence officials to help him maintain control of the military and the streets, according to Venezuelan and American officials briefed on the relevant intelligence.

If Maduro survives, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah would score another major victory against the West, essentially replicating their defense of Assad in the Western Hemisphere at a much lower cost in lives and treasure. They would also solidify a beachhead in Latin America through which to challenge U.S. allies while drawing from Venezuela's enormous energy and mineral wealth. U.S. officials are particularly concerned about Hezbollah's ability to exploit the weakened state to generate more revenue from narcotics trafficking.

PRESSURE ON WASHINGTON TO DO MORE

To deny a Maduro victory, the Trump administration has been imposing further sanctions on Venezuela and its allies, simultaneously working with National Assembly president Juan Guaido to split the military and political leadership from Maduro. Washington formally recognized Guaido as Venezuela's leader in January after accusing Maduro of fraudulently extending his presidency. Fifty-three other countries have followed the U.S. lead.

The Venezuelan opposition is pressing American officials to be even more aggressive, however. Steps now being considered by the administration include imposing secondary sanctions targeting any foreign firm or person that conducts business with designated Venezuelan entities. The Treasury Department is also studying whether to seize Venezuelan assets overseas, on the argument that they advance the Maduro government's criminal activities. In addition, Washington is seeking to offer greater financial and diplomatic incentives to Venezuelan political and military leaders who break from Maduro and support Guaido, whose attempt earlier this month to spur military defections failed.

MADURO'S TIES TO THE IRAN-RUSSIA AXIS

Maduro and his mentor, the late dictator Hugo Chavez, share a long history of aligning with Russia, Cuba, and Iran's "axis of resistance" against the United States and Israel. Chavez regularly met with former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a firebrand who threatened to wipe Israel of the map. Another veteran senior official, Minister of Industries and National Production Tareck El Aissami, has been designated a "drug kingpin" by the U.S. government and accused of bringing Hezbollah operatives to Venezuela. Earlier this month, the *New York Times* printed the contents of an internal Venezuelan intelligence assessment that concluded Aissami and his Syrian-born father had recruited and trained these operatives "with the aim of expanding intelligence networks throughout Latin America and...working in drug trafficking."

Because of these links, Maduro's foreign allies were able to bolster Maduro quickly after Guaido launched his rebellion with U.S. backing in January. Moscow began ferrying supplies to Caracas, and Russia's state energy company, Rosneft, increased oil purchases from Venezuela's sanctioned energy behemoth, PDVSA. Rosneft has virtually taken financial control of PDVSA ever since the company began defaulting on Russian bond investments.

These moves are in line with the conclusions of an unclassified U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report released in February, which described how Russia has sought to expand its military and intelligence capabilities in Latin America through its relationship with Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. The report cited open-source data showing that Russia shipped \$11 billion in arms to Venezuela from 2001 to 2013, making the Kremlin the largest weapons supplier to Caracas by a large margin. The report also documented that Venezuelan soldiers regularly attend Russian war games, and that Moscow has deployed long-range bombers in Venezuela "to display Russian capabilities in a historic U.S. sphere of influence." According to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Moscow holds so much sway there that it was apparently able to stop Maduro from fleeing Caracas earlier this month after Guaido sought to incite military defections. "He had an airplane on the tarmac, he was ready to leave this morning as we understand it, and the Russians indicated he should stay," Pompeo told CNN.

Tehran has likewise stepped up its diplomatic and financial support to Maduro this year. Iranian state media reported that Defense Minister Amir Hatami visited Caracas in January to discuss security issues, while senior Iranian officials traveled to Moscow in February to discuss support for Maduro. These trips echoed the secret Moscow meetings held by Russian and Iranian security officials in 2015, shortly before they launched a joint military operation to prop up the Syrian regime.

Moreover, the Trump administration has been alarmed by Iran's resumption of weekly flights to Venezuela in April, using national carrier Mahan Air. The Treasury Department sanctioned the airline in 2011 for allegedly **shipping weapons to allies in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy->

analysis/view/how-sanctions-are-affecting-irans-airline-industry) on behalf of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. U.S. officials worry that the Venezuela flights could be serving a similar purpose—especially since they commenced just a week after Maduro’s foreign minister, Jorge Arreaza, visited Lebanon and Syria to meet with two of Tehran’s closest allies: Assad and Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah.

HEZBOLLAH OPERATIONAL AND DRUG ACTIVITY

The Trump administration is becoming more concerned about Hezbollah as the Venezuela crisis drags on. The Iranian proxy militia has been active in Latin America for decades, often infiltrating Arab emigre populations to conduct operations. For example, investigators concluded that the group coordinated with Iran to bomb the Israeli embassy and Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s, with some senior Argentinian officials accused of complicity in the latter crime. More recently, the Treasury Department blacklisted the Lebanese Canadian Bank in 2011 on charges of laundering hundreds of millions of dollars of Latin American drug money into Hezbollah accounts in Beirut.

Today, top aides to Guaido allege that Hezbollah operatives have been working with Maduro’s government and Cuban intelligence to conduct surveillance on the Venezuelan opposition. They are also concerned that the group may be helping Maduro’s security forces conduct crowd control.

Yet Washington’s biggest fear is that Hezbollah will use Venezuela’s financial and political turmoil to increase its drug revenues at a time when Iranian support for the group has been sharply curtailed. According to members of Guaido’s government, cocaine sales out of Venezuela have skyrocketed this year as Maduro’s financial woes mount. Much like the Lebanese Canadian Bank case, U.S. agencies have sanctioned a number of senior Hezbollah and Venezuelan officials in recent years for allegedly colluding to launder drug money (specifically, Latin American cocaine sold in Europe) via accounts in Lebanon.

CONCLUSION

Senior U.S. officials remain confident that Maduro will not last through the end of the year, citing the crippling effects of the West’s financial war on his government and the country’s ongoing electrical blackouts. Yet these officials do not rule out using military force to oust him if the crisis persists, or if terrorist organizations like Hezbollah show signs of gaining a greater foothold in the country. As one senior official put it, “Let’s see where we are in the fall.”

Jay Solomon is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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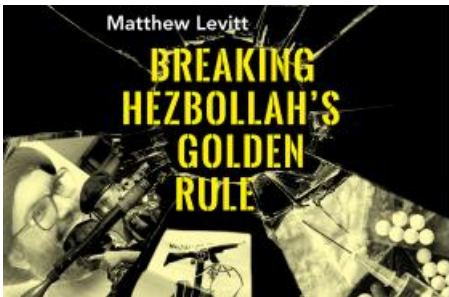
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