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FUTURE WAR PAPER

By Way of Proxy:

Iran's Future War against the United States in Latin America

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF OPERATIONAL STUDIES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Disclaimer.....	i
Table of Contents.....	ii
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Primer on Proxy Wars.....	3
III. Latin American Socio-Political and Economic Environment and Iran.....	4
IV. Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America.....	6
V. Iran's Proxy in Latin America.....	9
VI. United States' Legal Justification for Military Intervention in Latin America.....	9
VII. The Panama Canal as a Possible Catalyst for US Military Intervention.....	12
VIII. Conclusion.....	13
IX. Notes.....	15
X. Bibliography.....	16

Today, America poses a threat to peace and security in the world. Therefore, the slogan "Death to America" is no longer used only by our people. Today, you see throughout the world people setting fire to the effigy of the American president and chanting the slogan "Death to America."

– Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, March 2006

I. INTRODUCTION

The US Department of State has stated that Iran's influence is waning in Latin America; on the other hand, US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and the intelligence community believe the opposite to be true.¹ Continued focus by the US on the Middle East since 2001 has come at the expense of Latin America. Partners in Latin America are frustrated by the low prioritization of the region and they are turning to those who will listen to them, particularly Iran. Iran's influence in Latin America is growing at the same time that American influence is waning and anti-American sentiment is growing. Compounding things, Iranian sponsored transnational terrorist group Hezbollah has established itself throughout Latin America. This combination of factors poses a threat to American interests and the stability of the region. This essay will argue that Iran's cultural, diplomatic, economic and military penetration of Latin America demonstrates a rational, sequential process that places Iran in a favorable position to provoke US military involvement. Furthermore, it will show that it is plausible that Iran, by proxy, could incite US military involvement in Latin America in order to draw American attention and resources away from the Middle East.

The United States is hindering Iran's nuclear and hegemonic interests. At the same time, the United States' prolonged and substantial military presence in the Middle East since 2001 has drained American resources (blood and treasure) and public support for further meddling in regional affairs. It is in Iran's interest to debilitate the US in any way it can. A proxy war in Latin America would drive the US to reallocate resources that would otherwise be allocated to the Middle East where Iran has its primary interests. Iran's main proxy in Latin America is

Hezbollah, which is aligned with drug cartels and other criminal organizations. With Hezbollah, Iran can, has and will influence regional actors to act on their behalf for actions detrimental to US interests.

The Latin American political and economic environment is veering towards a populist, anti-American posture in which Iran is thriving. The governments of Venezuela (Hugo Chavez/Nicolas Maduro), Bolivia (Evo Morales), and Ecuador (Rafael Correa) have diplomatic, economic and military ties with Iran. These three countries have led the way for the founding of a unified front against American intervention: the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of the Americas (ALBA). Furthermore, ALBA has created its own currency, the Unified System for Regional Compensations (SUCRE), which has as its purpose the overthrow of the dollar as the main currency in Latin America. The political and economic environment of Latin America is being exploited by Iran, and permits Iran and its proxies freedom of movement throughout the region.

Iran has penetrated to some degree all of Latin America in terms of culture, economics, diplomacy, as well as militarily. Iran or its proxies use cultural or religious centers to infiltrate communities in Latin America. Iran has a vast network of corporate fronts that it uses for laundering money and evading sanctions and international logistics. It has built military training facilities in Venezuela and Bolivia. At these facilities, the Iranians indoctrinate locals and further the anti-American sentiment. In short, Iran has a foothold in Latin America, has relative freedom of movement there and has a vast and diverse network in place that, once mature, it will be able to organize, train, and equip proxies to further Iran's interests. It is apparent that Iran's and the US interests are at odds.

The United States has legal and historical precedence of military intervention when its interests and/or prestige has been threatened in the region. The Monroe Doctrine and its multiple interpretations (corollaries) have demonstrated that the United States has a legal precedent for intervention. In addition to the Monroe Doctrine, following World War II the United States led the implementation of the Rio Treaty of 1947. The Rio Treaty is a collective defense agreement for the Americas, which is still in force, and requires collective intervention against aggression towards any of its members. History has shown that the US will use military force to further its interests in Latin America, therefore a substantial threat could trigger involvement. A possible catalyst for military intervention could be a threat to the Panama Canal. The canal is a major interest for the United States; therefore, if threatened or attacked, the United States would be forced to intervene.

The above said the United States has not intervened militarily to counter Iranian or Hezbollah influence in any significant manner. However, by presenting a clear threat to the homeland, major interests, or American pride, Iran and its proxies may provoke the United States to intervene.

II. PRIMER ON PROXY WARS

In this essay, a *proxy* is defined as “a non-state paramilitary group receiving direct assistance from an external power,”² whereas, *proxy warfare* is defined as “the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome.”³ In other words, actors who want to wage war use third parties as supplementary means or as a substitute for direct employment of their own forces.⁴ The main factor is the shared interest in weakening, defeating, or destroying a common enemy.⁵ As Thucydides argued in his history of the Peloponnesian War, states are motivated to wage war by fear, honor and interest.⁶ However,

there may be no political will for direct military intervention due to associated risks of defeat or escalation, lack of domestic or international support, aversion to loss of life, high financial costs of lengthy deployments, or other factors.⁷ In such cases, the option of sponsoring non-state actors to engage in war by proxy may present itself.⁸ Therefore, the rational decision for states worried about the political, economic, and social impact of direct military engagement is to avoid deploying one's troops.⁹

Wars by proxy are as old as war itself. Thucydides tells the story about the civil war in Corcyra that triggered the Peloponnesian war in 411 BC. During the civil war, the Peloponnesian backed oligarchy engaged the Delian League backed demagogues of Corcyra.¹⁰ During the Napoleonic Wars, England's Duke of Wellington used Spanish and Portuguese proxy fighters to counter the French occupation on the Iberian Peninsula from 1808 to 1813, as described by Clausewitz in *On War*.¹¹ Finally, during the initial phases of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (October to December 2001) the US used the indigenous Northern Alliance (with the help of Special Operations Forces and airpower) as a proxy force to fight the Taliban without risking a significant use of its own ground forces.¹² Iran cannot afford to engage the US with its own troops; therefore, it is plausible that Iran will further its interests via proxy, and Latin America provides the right environment to foment such engagement.

III. LATIN AMERICAN SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT AND IRAN

Since the ascension of Hugo Chavez to power in 1999, much of Latin America has been in the midst of another "Bolivarian Revolution." The purpose of this "revolution" is to challenge the United States and the rest of the Western world's "system of rule of law and representative democracy, and seeks to replace it with a new authoritarian model of governance."¹³ As a

critical step to further the revolution an alliance of likeminded Latin American nations emerged, the *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, ALBA). Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro formed ALBA on December 2004. ALBA presents an alternative to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) and, since its inception; ALBA has dominated the political dialogue in Latin America.¹⁴ ALBA is composed of ten member states: Antigua & Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, St. Vincent & Grenadines, and Venezuela.¹⁵

In 2009 the ALBA nations implemented the *Sistema Unico de Compensacion Regional* (Unified System for Regional Compensation, SUCRE) as the common trade currency amongst ALBA nations. The SUCRE is a virtual currency intended to break the US dollar hegemony in Latin American trade and replace the US dollar as the common currency.¹⁶ Much like the Euro, the value of the SUCRE is derived from a basket of currencies weighted accordingly based on the size and strength of the individual member economies.¹⁷

In order to shield itself against international sanctions, Iran has used virtual and international currencies.¹⁸ The SUCRE gives Iran an avenue to shield its financial and criminal activities in Latin America. Using the SUCRE, ALBA banks can bypass international financial authorities and give Iran a direct offset for its accounts without relying on US correspondent accounts.¹⁹

ALBA's relationship with Iran encompasses three connections: diplomatic, economic, and clandestine actions. In the diplomatic arena, Iran continues to receive diplomatic support from the ALBAs on votes at the United Nations. In addition, now Iran has eleven embassies across the region.²⁰ Economically, Iran uses ALBA's virtual currency, the SUCRE, to launder its sanctioned funds and gain access to US dollars.²¹ At the same time, Iran provides a much-

needed infusion of unrestricted funds to the poorer ALBA countries that can be used for political purposes.²² Finally, Iran uses the ALBA nations as clandestine ports of entry for its Quds Force and Hezbollah operatives. Once in country, Quds and Hezbollah operatives infiltrate criminal organizations in order to fund its worldwide operations and recruits, indoctrinates, and trains locals in order to bolster Iran's paramilitary proxies in the region.²³ In turn, the ALBAs enable a permissive environment for illegal drug trade and money laundering (Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador have become virtual narco-states).²⁴ These shared interests and connections enable a relationship among odd bedfellows, "a revolution that will bring about what Iran's ayatollahs, Chavez and Castro have called a "New World Order."²⁵

IV. IRAN'S STRATEGIC PENETRATION OF LATIN AMERICA

Since the 1980s we have seen Iranian activity in Latin America with its main proxy Hezbollah becoming entrenched in the "Triple Frontier" where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet. In 1992, Hezbollah carried out a suicide bombing against Israel's embassy in Buenos Aires and in 1994 they bombed the Argentine-Israel Mutual Association also in Buenos Aires.²⁶ Although these actions highlight mostly the "terrorist" threat posed by Hezbollah, they indirectly illustrate Iranian interests in the region to which the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, has declared openly that the Islamic Republic is committed to expansion in Latin America.²⁷

Joseph Humire, from the Center for a Secure Free Society, argues: "At the strategic level, Iran's penetration [of Latin America] involves a gradual transition from an informal presence to a formal one, while simultaneously focusing on increasing military and paramilitary activities."²⁸ He describes Iran's penetration as a systematic, long-term operation, which he divides into four phases. The first phase, "Cultural," commenced in the 1980s with a covert presence in a few countries under the cover of commercial and cultural organizations. This penetration enabled

Hezbollah to embed in existing Islamic populations and establish infrastructure for collection and recruitment.²⁹ Iran's infiltration is deeply rooted in the use of cultural centers throughout the region. It has capitalized in outreach to indigenous populations throughout Latin America that represent the political base for Bolivia's Evo Morales, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, and Peru's Ollanta Humala.³⁰ According to SOUTHCOM, Iran has established over 80 "cultural centers" in a region that is overwhelmingly Christian.³¹ Supposedly, these centers are intended to improve Iran's image and increase its political influence in Latin America. To further their cultural impact, in 2012 the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Company (IRIB) launched HispanTV, a Spanish-language television channel beamed from Tehran to 14 countries in Latin America.³²

The second phase, "Diplomatic," began with the rise of the ALBAs that enabled Iran to more than double its embassies (to eleven). At the same time, Humire notes that Iran "continued covert activities that allowed Iran to establish a command and control structure throughout the region, utilizing both its formal embassies and an informal network of regional mosques and Islamic charities."³³ Hugo Chavez's death did not hamper the relationship between Iran and Latin America. In 2009, both Venezuela and Bolivia broke diplomatic ties with Israel over its military offensive in Gaza. Bolivia's Evo Morales has continued to solidify his relationship with Tehran and has hosted several high-ranking visits from Iranian officials to include hosting the 2014 G77 Summit in Santa Cruz.³⁴ In Ecuador, President Rafael Correa continues to expand his relationship with Iran and Syria. In 2014, Ecuador hosted an "Iran-Ecuador Parliamentary Friendship Group" that met in the capital, Quito, to discuss political and economic enterprises between the two nations.³⁵

In the third phase, "Economic," once relations have been formalized with host nations, Iran commences economic aid (promised or actual) as seen in particular with Venezuela, Bolivia,

Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Iran's trade with Latin America has doubled from 2005 where it annually averaged about \$1.33 billion to 2012 where it averaged at \$3.67 billion.³⁶ In regards to raw materials, in the mid-2000s Iran started uranium mining activities in Venezuela's eastern border. In 2010, Tehran signed an agreement with Bolivia for the mining of lithium, tantalum, and thorium, all minerals used in the production of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.³⁷

The final phase in the penetration, "Military," Iran enters into formalized military agreements with host nations. For example, Iran has signed multiple agreements with Bolivia and Venezuela that provide Iran "with dual-use materiel for its strategic programs, in exchange for military technology and training."³⁸ In May 2011, the *Escuela de Defensa del ALBA* (Defense School of ALBA) was established in Warnes, Bolivia. The intent of this school is "to provide political and ideological training to military leaders while instructing civilian leaders in the art of asymmetric military strategy."³⁹ Iran helped build this school, and administers, and provides military advisors, making Bolivia a base for Iran's operations.⁴⁰ In 2005, the Chavez regime opened two operations centers on Venezuela's Margarita Island, which are operated by Hezbollah and Quds Force. In return, they have committed to train Venezuelan paramilitaries as well as FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) guerrillas in Colombia as demonstrated by the Iranian manuals found during a raid of a FARC camp in Ecuador in 2008.⁴¹ Humire concluded that as of 2014, Iran had completed all the phases of its penetration in Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, and, in turn, Iran has initiated the process in the rest of Latin America.⁴²

The Iranian relationship with Latin America is not only an "anti-American crusade." It is a symbiotic relationship in which each benefits the other. Thanks to Venezuela, Iran has been able to establish itself in Latin America where it can endure sanctions and preserve its

hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East. Venezuela has benefited from Iranian pledges to Latin American governments by legitimizing the cause of the Bolivarian Revolution.⁴³ Overall, the Latin American environment has provided Iran a sanctuary for expansion and lodgment for its proxies.

V. IRAN'S PROXY IN LATIN AMERICA

Iran's main proxy in Latin America is a Shia group that originally emerged from the 1979 Arab-Israeli conflict under a series of different names until finally consolidating the organization in 1985 into Hezbollah.⁴⁴ Hezbollah has evolved into what the US Department of State calls "the most technically-capable terrorist group in the world."⁴⁵ The Islamic Republic funds Hezbollah in excess of \$200 million per year.⁴⁶ Support comes in both cash as well as in the form of equipment, weapons, training, and logistical assistance. Hezbollah has an operational base in Venezuela that it uses for financial gain – drug trafficking and other criminal enterprises – and as a base to carry out attacks against Western targets.⁴⁷ One such criminal enterprise was seen with the case of Lebanese-Colombian Ayman Joumaa, a kingpin of a large money-laundering network that enabled the movement of cocaine shipments from Mexico and Colombia to the Middle East, raising tens of millions of dollars for Hezbollah.⁴⁸ Hezbollah has been in Latin America since the 1980s and had continued expanding with little intervention from the US.

VI. UNITED STATES LEGAL JUSTIFICATION FOR MILITARY INTERVENTION IN LATIN AMERICA

Derived from President Monroe's 1823 address, the Monroe Doctrine declares three propositions: the non-colonization principle, the warning against European meddling, and the non-interference or isolation principle. The non-colonization principle declared that the

“American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.”⁴⁹ The second proposition warned against European meddling by stating, “We owe it, therefore to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety.”⁵⁰ The final proposition declared the non-interference or isolation-principle, which in the original message stated: “Our policy in regard to Europe, which was adopted at an early stage of the wars which have so long agitated that quarter of the globe, nevertheless remains the same, which is, not to interfere in the internal concerns of any of its powers.”⁵¹

Since its inception, the Monroe Doctrine has been used throughout the years by multiple US administrations as justification to use force against any threat to US interests in the Americas. In 1904, President Roosevelt interpreted the Monroe Doctrine issuing a statement of US-Latin American policy that asserted the right of the US to intervene in a Latin American country in order to prevent European intervention, often motivated by debt collection. This interpretation (the so called Roosevelt Corollary) transformed the Monroe Doctrine from a defensive to an offensive doctrine of foreign policy in the Caribbean and Central America that became the basis of justification for US intervention in Latin America for several decades after.⁵²

From 1930 to 1945 the “Good Neighbor Policy” temporarily discontinued the Roosevelt Corollary by calling for the recognition of “equality among American states, and emphasized collective and individual responsibilities for inter-American affairs.”⁵³ However, in 1946 the Braden Corollary was instituted in order to prevent Argentina’s President Juan Peron from coming to power, with the justification that inter-American security was threatened by Peron’s

fascist views.⁵⁴ In 1947, President Truman issued National Security Report #68 which ensured that American foreign policies would serve to protect American interests and that no part of the world and no means could be ruled out.⁵⁵ In the 1950s, the Kennan Corollary was instituted to prevent Soviet intervention in Latin America by any means possible, including backing dictators in the region.⁵⁶ Finally, in the 1980s, President Reagan invoked the Monroe Doctrine (Reagan Doctrine/Corollary) as part of his anticommunist foreign policy. The Reagan Doctrine included supporting anticommunist guerrillas and fighting Soviet and Cuban backed regimes in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Reagan's interpretation ("Rollback") was used to justify the intervention in Nicaragua against the *Sandinistas* (by way of the *Contras*) and the 1983 invasion of Grenada.⁵⁷

In 2013, US Secretary of State John Kerry announced to the Organization of American States (OAS) that the "era of the Monroe Doctrine is over."⁵⁸ This assertion is representative of the Obama Administration's policy toward Latin America, which has materialized in the scaling back of highly successful initiatives such as "Plan Colombia."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, just as the "Good Neighbor Policy" was abandoned before, one can imagine such a reversal with subsequent administrations.

A key treaty that justifies US military intervention in Latin America is the Rio Treaty. Signed on September 1947 (ratified in 1948), the Rio Treaty (also known as the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance) provides that "any attack on an American nation will be met by collective sanctions in line with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter."⁶⁰ The OAS last invoked the treaty against Cuba in 1962 and during the Dominican Civil War in 1965.⁶¹ More recently (2012), the US Congress passed the "Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act," which called for the development of a comprehensive strategy to address Iran's penetration in the

Western Hemisphere.⁶² Thus, the US has legal and historical precedence of intervening in Latin American countries when it fears that its interests or prestige may be threatened. In Latin America there are multiple areas that are of strategic interest to the US, but the Panama Canal provides its own legal and historical precedence of US military intervention.

VII. THE PANAMA CANAL AS A POSSIBLE CATALYST FOR US MILITARY INTERVENTION

The Panama Canal has had a long history of US military intervention. Moreover, international laws and treaties have backed all US interventions. Ratified in 1977, the Torrijos-Carter treaty includes two parts: the Neutrality Treaty and the Panama Canal Treaty. The Neutrality Treaty ensures that Panama will not deny passage to vessels based on political leaning or involvement in a conflict. However, a condition was added by the US, known as the "Deconcini Reservation" that stipulates: "the US can use military force in the event of closure of the Canal."⁶³ President H.W. Bush invoked the Deconcini Reservation in 1989 for the invasion of Panama (Operation JUST CAUSE).⁶⁴

The Canal is of great economic importance to the US. Transit through the Canal accounts for about 5% of the world trade and links over one hundred world trade routes. The US relies on the Canal for commerce more than any other country. About 12% of US waterborne freight and 15% of US exports traverse the Canal. It is estimated that over 65% of cargo transiting the Canal either originates or terminates in the US.⁶⁵ Closure of the Canal, even if temporary, could devastate the US economy. For example, after the attacks of 9/11, the US closed its seaports and airports for a week. During that one week, container shipping lost over \$1 billion a day.⁶⁶

Multiple analysts and security experts agree that it would be fairly easy to close the Canal. An attack on any one of the locks, or blockage caused by a sunken ship in any of the narrow cuts along the Canal, would effectively close the Canal.⁶⁷ This vulnerability stems in part from the disbanding of the Panamanian military in 1990. Today, the National Police Force, the National Air-Naval Service, and the National Border Service, which in all account to 20,000 effectives, primarily provide protection of the Canal.⁶⁸ But they are as best a minor obstacle to any actor (state or non-state) committed to closing the Canal.

With such economic impact and vulnerability, the Panama Canal presents a formidable catalyst for US military intervention. It is plausible that Iran and/or its proxies could incite other parties in the region to threaten the Canal, thus inciting a war that presents, considerable gain and low costs to Iran, and few benefits and high costs to the US. For example, the Iraq War (2003-2011) cost the US an average of \$300 billion per year in direct and indirect costs as well as inflicted considerable damage on American national pride and international prestige.⁶⁹ Even a fraction of these costs would divert resources from the Middle East, thus effectively giving Iran breathing room for its own interests.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Iran's cultural, diplomatic, economic, and military penetration of Latin America shows a rational, sequential process that places Iran in a favorable position to provoke US intervention. It is plausible that Iran, by proxy, could incite US military involvement in Latin America in order to draw American attention away from the Middle East and to discredit the US in the eyes of Latin Americans.

Multiple Latin American governments have embraced Iran as a strategic partner. Iran has a penetrated, to various degrees, every country in Latin America. It continues to use a long-term,

systematic, scheme on in the region by both direct and indirect methods. With their proxy, Hezbollah, Iran establishes cultural and religious centers, followed by formal diplomatic and economic relations, culminating in military cooperation and training.

The United States has legal and historical cause for military intervention in Latin America. From the Monroe Doctrine and its multiple corollaries to the Rio Treaty and the Panama Canal Neutrality Treaty, legal provisions exist that allow for and mandate American military intervention, when its interests are threatened. In particular, the Panama Canal presents Iran with a formidable target for exploitation. However, Iran's motives are not clear with regard to inciting a proxy war with the United States. Nevertheless, its systematic penetration of Latin America suggests that military capacity in the region is desired by Iran.

Latin America encompasses everything south of the US border (with the exception of a few English speaking countries). US disregard for Latin American has opened the door to other powers to intervene, filling the void. America's involvement in the Middle East for the past fourteen years has affected its economy and way of life and at the same time the US has enjoyed relative peace and stability in the Western Hemisphere since 1990 (Panama). US policymakers have become complacent. Any type of armed conflict in Latin America would create an economic and social crisis in the region which would require the US to intervene.

In that regard, Iran and Hezbollah may only be the tip of the iceberg of threats to US interests in Latin America. Iran and Hezbollah have developed associations with major drug cartels such as *Los Zetas* and transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) such as *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13). These organizations present a major threat on their own, and the implications of Iran, its proxies or other powers using cartels and TCOs only make the Latin American problem even more complex.

IX. NOTES

¹ General John Kelly, *Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly, United States Marine Corps, Commander United States Southern Command before the 114th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee*. Posture Statement. (Washington DC: USSOUTCOM), 2015.

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