

An Opportunity to Block Iranian Influence in Latin America

Danny Citrinowicz | No. 1983 | May 15, 2025

Moves advanced by the Trump administration toward countries in Latin America—aimed at strengthening US security, particularly by accelerating the campaign against drug trafficking and illegal immigration into its territory—create a unique opportunity to mobilize the administration to take actions that challenge Iran’s expanding presence on the continent.

The resumption of flights operated by Iran’s Quds Force to Venezuela highlights Tehran’s ongoing efforts to expand its influence in Latin America. Iran views Venezuela as a critical “gateway” for its activities. This close relationship between Iran and Venezuela is reflected in arms transfers, as well as economic and political cooperation. Venezuela, for its part, leverages these ties to threaten its neighbor, Guyana, amid their ongoing territorial dispute.

Iran’s efforts are not confined to Venezuela. Bolivia, which signed a deal to acquire drones from Iran in 2023, and Nicaragua are also key partners supporting Iran’s destabilizing strategy in Latin America. Moreover, Tehran views political changes in the region—particularly the election of left-leaning regimes in Brazil, Chile, and Colombia—as creating a “favorable working environment” for expanding its influence. Iran assumes these governments share its goal of resisting “Western influence,” and thus works to expand political, security, and cultural ties with them.

In contrast to previous US administrations, which largely ignored Iran’s growing presence in Latin America, the Trump administration has opened a unique window for formulating and implementing a strategy to curb Iran’s expansion. Since its inauguration, senior officials, led by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, have invested significant efforts in securing the southern US border against threats such as drug trafficking, illegal immigration, and terrorism. As part of this campaign, the administration seeks to enlist relevant Latin American countries, using a “carrots and sticks” policy—rewarding those who cooperate and punishing those who do not with measures such as [tariffs](#).

Simultaneously, the administration is taking steps to reduce Chinese influence in Latin America, including efforts to regain control over the Panama Canal. It is also exerting pressure on Venezuela, not only over illegal immigration but also because of Caracas’s close ties with Tehran, which the United States views as a threat to its national security and to its regional allies, [who may face aggression](#) from Venezuela. These moves align with the Trump administration’s broader view of Iran as a critical threat to the United States and its vital interests—not just in Latin America.

The convergence of the administration’s focus on Latin American security and its perception of Iran as a major threat creates a rare opportunity to advance a series of actions against Iran’s

expanding presence on the continent. The Trump administration views Iran's influence in Latin America as even more threatening than that of China, Russia, or the continued smuggling of arms, drugs, and people into the United States. It appears serious enough to warrant decisive action.

It is necessary to seize this window of opportunity and promote an action plan with the Trump administration, aimed at distancing the Iranians from Latin America. This plan should include, among other things, the following principles:

1. Given Venezuela's central role in Iranian activity in Latin America, the United States should significantly escalate pressure on Caracas to impose costs for its support of Tehran. Actions should target the Quds Force's ability to maintain the air route between Tehran and Caracas, which enables Iran to transfer arms to its allies in Latin America, including targeting countries in Africa where the Quds Force's aircraft refuels en route to Venezuela. Efforts should also be made to disrupt the presence of Quds Force personnel in Venezuela. It is worth noting that regime change in Venezuela and the end of Nicolás Maduro's presidency would constitute a major setback to Iran's ambitions in Latin America.
2. The United States should significantly increase economic and political pressure on countries that maintain close relations with Tehran, such as Bolivia and Nicaragua. It must also clearly signal to other Latin American states that deepening ties with Iran will come at a high cost.
3. Most of Iran's activity in Latin America is based on its soft power network—mainly control over Shiite religious centers, cultural centers operated through its embassies, and academic branches of Iranian universities, led by al-Mustafa University (already under US sanctions). The Trump administration should urge regional governments to close these institutions.
4. The United States should deepen its security and intelligence ties with countries vulnerable to Iranian threats due to their proximity to Israel and the United States, such as Argentina, Guatemala, and Paraguay. Such efforts would send a clear message that proximity to the United States requires countries to distance themselves from Iran and refrain from purchasing military capabilities from it. Additionally, the United States should take measures against specific individuals advancing Iranian influence in the region.
5. It is crucial to allocate resources to expose the links between Iran, Hezbollah, and drug smuggling networks into the United States. [Previous investigations](#) have shown that Hezbollah, Iran, and Latin American drug traffickers have deep ties, using smuggling profits to fund Hezbollah's activities. Given the urgent need of Iran and Hezbollah to rebuild Hezbollah's military wing after confrontations with Israel, it is highly likely that efforts in this area will intensify.

Given Iran's involvement in attempted attacks in recent years against Israeli interests and individuals in Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil, effective action is also needed to dismantle the local terror infrastructures that facilitated these plots.

US moves against Iran's presence in Latin America would signal a willingness of the Trump administration to expand its campaign against Iran's negative influence beyond the Middle East. This approach could positively resonate beyond Latin America. Encouraging countries in

Africa and Asia to curtail Iranian activity within their borders to avoid facing US countermeasures. Such an effort would significantly increase pressure on the Iranian regime.

Ultimately, the Trump administration's desire to greatly expand security and diplomatic activity in Latin America to safeguard vital US interests—combined with its perception of Iran as a major threat—provides fertile ground for building a focused strategy to weaken Iran's presence in the region. If successful, Iran's ability to directly threaten the United States—through attacks launched from areas like Venezuela—or indirectly—through terrorist operations—would be significantly undermined, as would Iran's ability to control Latin America's natural resources, economic assets, and large Shiite populations across the continent. Despite the Trump administration's current chaotic conduct, the fact that Latin America remains a pillar of its foreign policy—especially given its interest in reducing diplomatic presence elsewhere, such as in Africa—indicates a genuine opportunity to advance such a strategy with the administration.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg