

Venezuela Strengthens Its Relationships in the Middle East

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Aug. 20 — Venezuela has long cultivated ties with Middle Eastern governments, finding common ground in trying to keep oil prices high, but its recent engagement of [Iran](#) has become a defining element in its effort to build an alliance to curb American influence in developing countries.

In a visit late last month to Tehran by President [Hugo Chávez](#) and his oil minister, Rafael Ramírez, the two countries agreed to produce jointly nearly a dozen products, including crude oil and medicines. In a further sign that their ties have taken on a new dimension, the two countries are speaking in a more unified voice in their criticism of Israel and the United States.

The strengthening of ties has turned Iran into Venezuela's closest ally outside Latin America, adding clout to Mr. Chávez's efforts within [OPEC](#) to increase revenue through output limits by oil-exporting countries. Venezuela has also become the most vociferous defender of Iran's nuclear program at a time when Iran feels increasingly isolated.

"We stand by Iran at every moment, in any situation," Mr. Chávez said in Tehran, where he received the golden High Medallion of the Islamic Republic from President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#). Venezuela, Syria and Cuba were the only countries to oppose referring Iran to the [United Nations Security Council](#) at a meeting in February of the [International Atomic Energy Agency](#).

Though Venezuela maintains close economic ties with the United States, relations have been strained by verbal sparring between the Bush administration and Mr. Chávez.

Mr. Chávez has also shown recent interest in strengthening ties with Syria, sending his deputy foreign minister, Alcides Rondón, to Damascus last week. Mr. Chávez continues to push for tighter relations with close trading partners of the United States. He is scheduled to arrive in China on Tuesday for a six-day visit aimed at finding ways to ship more Venezuelan oil to Chinese refineries. He is also expected to visit Malaysia and Angola.

Now, with Iranian investment in Venezuela climbing fast, what began as a trickle of ventures has evolved into the most vivid example of Venezuela's move to reshape its foreign policy and distance itself from the United States by reaching out to countries on the margins of American influence, including Belarus, Zimbabwe and Cuba.

Hundreds of Iranian tractors are already rolling off an assembly line at a plant in Venezuela's interior, and Khodro, the Iranian car manufacturer, plans to produce 5,000 Samand sedans a year at factory near Caracas starting in November.

With Venezuela vying for a nonpermanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, the ties with Iran have led to additional friction with the United States.

In testimony last month before the House Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation, Frank Urbancic Jr., the principal deputy coordinator for counterterrorism in the State Department, said Venezuela's close relations, including intelligence operations, with Iran and Cuba helped illustrate a "near complete lack of cooperation" with American efforts to fight terrorism.

The Bush administration further irked Mr. Chávez last week by appointing J. Patrick Maher, a longtime [Central Intelligence Agency](#) official, to oversee intelligence-gathering operations on Venezuela and Cuba. A comparable post had existed previously only for Iran and North Korea. Mr. Chávez ridiculed the move and said he had captured four people accused of spying for the United States, though the American Embassy here said it had no knowledge of such apprehensions.

The Bush administration's more aggressive stance has drawn sharp rebuttals from officials here, who contend the United States is planning military action against Venezuela with an eye to controlling the country's petroleum resources, the largest conventional reserves outside the Middle East.

Petropars, the Iranian national oil company, said it could invest as much as \$4 billion in petroleum ventures in Venezuela to produce crude oil and natural gas. "We want to help them," said Mohammad Ali Talebi, a Petropars representative in Venezuela and director of a venture that may extract sulfur-laden heavy oil in an eastern region there.

Venezuela has also supported Iran's effort to price oil in euros instead of dollars, a move aimed at weakening the influence of American investment banks and hedge funds, and the creation of an oil exchange in Iran to trade such contracts.

"Geopolitically, the most important front for Chávez in the world at this moment is Iran," said Alberto Garrido, a historian who is writing a book on Venezuela's ties to Muslim countries. "Chávez, together with his closest advisers, have defined the strategic alliance with Iran as a means with which to counter American power."

The ties with Iran have fueled theories among Mr. Chávez's fractious opponents — though without any substantiation — that Venezuela could be sending uranium from its Amazonas state to Iran in exchange for nuclear technology. There have also been unsubstantiated claims that Mr. Chávez wants eventually to replay the Cuban missile crisis.

Venezuela has repeatedly said it has no plans to develop nuclear weapons. Mr. Chávez said in Tehran that he would support an effort to develop a nuclear energy program by [Mercosur](#), the South American trade bloc that Venezuela recently joined.

A strong relationship between Venezuela and Muslim countries is nothing new, dating to the formation of OPEC in Baghdad in 1960, largely the brainchild of a Venezuelan oil minister. An approximation with Iran may have gotten under way in the mid-1990's by Norberto Ceresole, an Argentine sociologist known for his anti-Semitic views who was a Chávez adviser. Mr. Chávez later distanced himself from Mr. Ceresole, who died in 2003. After Mr. Chávez was elected in 1998, he made relations with Iran a priority in his push for OPEC to raise oil prices.

Recent statements by Mr. Chávez in Iran and other Muslim countries, however, are increasing concern here in Caracas that Mr. Chávez is aligning himself too closely with Muslim leaders who have little in common with Venezuela's generally inclusive and pluralistic political system. While in Qatar, Mr. Chávez said in an interview with [Al Jazeera](#) that Israeli military actions in Lebanon were "being carried out in the style of [Hitler](#), in a fascist fashion."

After the fighting between Israel and the Lebanese [Hezbollah](#) militia began, Mr. Chávez recalled his highest-ranking diplomat in Israel. Then, in his weekly television program, Mr. Chávez accused Israel of a "new Holocaust." The authorities in Jerusalem responded by recalling Israel's ambassador in Venezuela, Shlomo Cohen, for consultations.

"We have to categorically reject the comments for attempting to make the Holocaust banal," said Fred Pressner, president of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela. But some Jewish leaders here also said earlier this year that comments by Mr. Chávez about the "descendants of the same ones who crucified Christ" were too hastily interpreted as anti-Semitic.

Political analysts here said the comments about Israel and other recent moves, like the appointment of Nicolas Maduro as foreign minister, were evidence of a radicalization of foreign policy that had stronger ties with Iran at its center. Mr. Maduro, who has stepped down as speaker of the National Assembly to take the post, had traveled to Iran in February to show explicit support for its nuclear program.