

## **The Odd Couple: Iran and Venezuela's Union Through Anti-U.S. Imperialism and Oil.**

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### **Introduction**

Since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> which we never cease to stop being reminded of, George W. Bush and Tony Blair have staged a few press conferences, standing at podiums as the heads of two of the strongest forces known to the world today. This is hardly a new sight though. Leaders of world powers have always staged such events: Churchill and Roosevelt held similar events as did Hitler and Mussolini. A few years before these men it was Clemenceau and Wilson. However, today we are experiencing a different kind of unity. It is a unity between two nations which are far from being superpowers. This is union of Hugo Chavez and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Venezuela and Iran. While in the past superpowers united to push their plans on those which where, at best, of relatively equal strength as themselves, Chavez and Ahmadinejad are more like two ants shouting up at an elephant known as the United States. They are united under a common banner of Anti-U.S. imperialism and hegemony. A vital question which must be asked, and which this essay will attempt to answer, is what accounts for Iran and Venezuela (which are so fundamentally different from each other) being so absolutely in unison in their stance against American imperialism and foreign policy? What drives these two countries to stand against a regime which no other country has challenged in such a manner since the Cold War? This essay will explain that the reason for this phenomenon of similarity, regardless of the vast differences between the two countries, is that they both have a history of receiving lashes at the hands of U.S. imperialistic agendas in their countries. Furthermore, it will be explained that the people of the two nations have an anti-American culture due to overwhelming U.S. support for brutal dictators, which oppressed, victimized, and butchered the masses, in order to maintain leaders in those country who were friendly to U.S. imperialistic ambitions and missions. Finally, this essay will explain that the oil wealth of Iran and Venezuela puts the two countries in

a unique position to be able to oppose exploitative American foreign policy given the current political climate.

### **Dissimilarity**

However, in order to truly understand the uniqueness of the Iran-Venezuela alliance against American imperialism and hegemony, one must first become aware of the vast amount of differences between Iran and Venezuela which make their unity unbelievable in theory and, if nothing else, a historical first. The most striking parity between Iran and Venezuela is their regime types. Iran is ruled by a strict theology with the Supreme Leader as the ultimate puppet-master of the state, while Venezuela is an elected democracy. Furthermore, Iran is a firm believer in religious law while Venezuela is quite secular. Adding to this point, Iran is dominated by a strict Muslim way of life and it is this which also defines its publicly seen and allowed cultural practices. Venezuela on the other hand, beyond being secular, also has a rich culture and most of its people are of the Roman Catholic faith. In addition, Iran has shown poor regard at best for the rights of women. While women seem to have some rights on paper, in practice even those few rights are overlooked more often than not. On the other hand, Venezuela has shown much more respect for gender equality and Venezuelan women are more empowered than their Iranian counterparts. Venezuela under Hugo Chavez has pushed very hard towards socialism while Iran cannot be said to have pushed nearly to the same extent. In fact, socialism is a corner stone of Venezuelan policy under Chavez and it is held in the highest level of importance.

These differences between the two leaders' nations compared to those of say Mussolini and Hitler, Clemenceau and Wilson, and Churchill and Roosevelt is vastly different yet their ties, goals, and foreign policy against U.S. imperialism and hegemony is profoundly close-knitted. There are a few factors which both Iran and Venezuela have shared in their history which accounts for this phenomenon.

### **U.S. Economic Exploitation**

Both Iran and Venezuela share an intense history of U.S. imperialism. This exploitation was, of course, due to both of the countries' vast amounts of oil. The best example of the U.S. directly impeding on Iran's oil sector and its ambitions can be seen during the reign of Mossadegh. Barry Rubin explains the situation in the following way:

“In the early 1950s, Mossadegh—a populist nationalist of great personal eccentricity — nationalized the British-controlled oil company in Iran and allied himself with the Tudeh (Communist) Party, among others, to compete with the shah for power. Subsequent British pressure on other countries not to buy oil produced by the nationalized company seriously harmed Iran's economy. Fearing for his regime, the shah and some of his loyalists—along with the British—requested U.S. help in 1952 to bring down Mossadegh” (Rubin, 2003: 2).

However, it must not be forgotten that the U.S. itself had high stakes in Iranian oil. This is a commonly known fact, but an important one nonetheless which mobilized the U.S. to support Mossadegh's overthrow as to make sure the U.S.'s own investment and interest in Iranian oil remained intact. Joe Stork further strengthens the point that the CIA interfered in Iranian oil affairs so as to keep Iranian oil in foreign, namely American and British hands, as opposed to Iranian hands:

Mossadegh's successful campaign to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company represented the cutting edge Third World economic nationalism. In the eyes of servants of the Seven Sisters like Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and C.I.A. Director Allen Dulles, this was essentially equivalent to “international communism” because of its effect of reducing the global resource based directly accessible to international capital. The demonstrated power of multinationals to neutralize and accommodate economic nationalism make such fears appear quaint today, but at the time, U.S. oil companies, like their British counterparts, feared the “demonstration effect” in the region and beyond if the Iranian takeover were allowed to stand. A British and American embargo of Iranian oil sales prior to the C.I.A. coup “softened up”- i.e., brought close to ruination- Iran's economy and encouraged defections from Mossadegh's National Front (Stork, 1993: 233).

Venezuela too shared a similar experience of imperialistic exploitation in its oil sector at the hands of the United States. Venezuela, according to Harold A. Trinkunas, is of special importance because “Access to large Venezuelan oil deposits across short, secure sea lines of communication undoubtedly provides a strategic asset for the United States” (Trinkunas, 2005: 40). Perhaps this explains why the U.S. was so fierce in making sure that, like Iran, leaders were in power in Venezuela who would support U.S. oil ambitions.

Thus, this speaks volumes about why the U.S. strongly supported the likes of Juan Vincente Gomez, a brutal dictator, who gave concessions to American oil companies during his reigns in 1922-1929 and 1931-35. The U.S., according to Trinkunas, was the biggest contributor to the Venezuelan oil infrastructure which began to be constructed in 1914 (Trinkunas, 2005: 41). But U.S. imperialism in Latin America preceded the oil era. At the turn of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a Uruguayan literature professor began to challenge the statuesque of American dominance in the region, As McPherson notes:

José Enrique Rodó's book *Ariel*, Arielism challenged positivist thinkers infatuated with Western notions of progress and order. It proposed that the United States was not an exemplar of these values, but rather an inferior other. Rodó personified Latin America and the United States as two characters from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*: Ariel and Caliban, respectively. The former—Latin America—was the quintessence of virtue and taste, heir to the highest European standards of dignity and spirituality. Caliban—the United States—was a reckless materialist: crude and self-absorbed, sumptuous and vacuous (McPherson, 2003: 13).

The reason for such strong resentment is seated in another imperialist American practice: support for brutality, be it directly through U.S. forces, or indirectly through secret operation funded by the U.S. in order to advance its own interest. This notion of U.S. action went beyond robbing the people of Venezuela and Iran simply of their nations' natural resources, but rather their livelihood and humanity. Surely suffering such lashes at the hands of the U.S. gives ample reason to oppose the U.S. to some degree.

### **U.S.: Support and Cause of Brutality**

In Iran the best example of U.S. support for brutality can be seen in the U.S.'s full support for the Shah and his secret police. The fact that the overthrow of Mossadegh was at the hands of the U.S. proves this point fully. The reason for this is that the overthrow of Mossadegh resulted in the Shah having a sudden large sum of unchecked power. Before 1953 the Shah was largely obliged to work with the Parliament; however, after the removal of Mossadegh there echoed the message that the Prime Minister no longer had the freedom to work freely, without fear of persecution and punishment. Rubin writes "Yet, because the 1953 events apparently changed the course of Iranian history—ending the leading role of the prime minister and the independent power of Iran's parliament and

setting the foundation for a government characterized by the Shah's direct rule—one can reasonably term the coup as an example of regime change” (Rubin, 2003: 4). Therefore, according to Rubin, it is safe and logical to believe that U.S. action was responsible for the Shah's dictatorship coming to be. This unilateral power which the Shah now had, thanks to the U.S. removal of a populist leader, allowed more easily for brutality through the Shah's secret police called “Savak”. Thus, it is understandable that the people of Iran would be anti-American. After all, it was this Shah who was supported and was in power because of the U.S. who was responsible for tens of thousands of deaths. This U.S. sponsored brutality went on beyond the Shah's last days in Iran. Richard Falk wrote profoundly during the revolution of 1979:

Although Sullivan said in mid-January that a ‘military’ coup wouldn't accomplish much, subsequent indications are that American policy is encouraging the generals to look favorably upon a military solution. How else can one interpret Carter's decision to ship 200,000 barrels of fuel for internal military use, as well as the reports of daily contacts among the Iranian generals, the American Gen. Robert Huyser and the White House? And how else to interpret press reports that high officials in Washington were pleased when the Army displayed resolve by opening fire on unarmed civilian demonstrators, inflicting heavy casualties, several times late in January? The Pentagon, in official releases, has declared that even a neutralist regime in Teheran would affect adversely American interests. Our conversations with a wide spectrum of opposition leaders revealed that these American moves are seen as a continuing intervention in the internal affairs of Iran and are deeply resented because they are believed to be driving the country back toward tyranny or to civil war (Falk, 1979: 135).

Falk, almost nostradamusly, also warned against the future consequences of U.S. action by saying “The United States Government should ponder the moral consequences of defying this popular will by encouraging the generals to provoke a civil war” (Falk, 1979: 137). The U.S did not merely engage in an isolated incident of brutality and injustice in Iran (that being the Coup), but rather continued its wrongdoings to the last days of the Shah (and by this I mean the military aid given to the Army to kill innocent and peaceful protestors.) Such continued help for the oppression brought about by the Shah has caused ill sentiments to linger in the hearts and minds of Iranians to this day

Venezuelans also suffered harshly at the hands of many dictators heavily backed by the U.S. who sought to promote its own imperialistic ambitions. As mentioned earlier, there

was Juan Vincente Gomez, a dictator. Later there was Perez Jimenez who was President from 1952-1958. It is a well known fact that he was a dictator as well, but to further expose his obvious backing by the U.S. one has to think about the fact that he proudly received the Legion of Merit from the United States which is a high ranking military medal given to those who the U.S. holds in exceptionally high regard (Trinkunas, 2005: 39-40).

But what is far more important than the ways the U.S. sponsored brutality in Venezuela and Iran is the long term effect it has had on the two countries. This effect was the same in both countries: people held the U.S. responsible for many of their woes. The logic here in both the minds of the Iranian people and Venezuelans is that since it was the U.S. who brought such brutal leaders to power then they must be responsible for the outcomes those leaders bring about. For example, since the U.S. interfered and did not allow the populist Mossadegh to maintain power and instead concretely established the dictatorial Shah, then by depriving the Iranian people of Mossadegh and imposing on them the Shah then the U.S. was responsible for the outcome of what happened in Iran. It was not the people who chose their fate, but rather the U.S. and this is fair grounds for displeasure and a strong enough argument to pin a large amount of the responsibility on the United States of America. The same principle stands for Venezuela who had the U.S. back brutal dictators. This, especially through the CIA, has been an international norm be it through coups, assination, or military and financial support. This reality which caused much harm to Iran and Venezuela is admitted to by the former Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council of the CIA, James R. Schlesinger:

The extent of U.S. global reach--the overseas military installations and complex base-rights agreements that often dominate our relations with small nations, the peripatetic military-command representatives who overshadow ambassadors, a broad variety of active military presences, a worldwide intelligence and strike capability--is well documented. The U.S. global 'footprint'--a revealing word regularly employed by the Pentagon without irony--is massive and backed by the world's most powerful military machine in history (Schlesinger, 1998: 3).

To conclude this point, it is natural and justified to hold one who imposes your fate on you responsible for the hardships which may exist in that imposed fate. However, while the U.S. temporarily tampered with the natural and popular course of these two countries, it is now paying the price of fierce anti-Americanism due to the lashes it left behind on its subjects in Iran and Venezuela.

#### Rise of Anti-Americanism: a Result of Imperialism and Abuse

Perhaps Barry Rubin put it most completely and best when he suggested that the Revolution of 1979 was the revenge for the 1953 overthrow of Mossadegh.

“The accepted narrative goes something like this: The United States intervened against a popular nationalist leader and helped install the Shah’s repressive regime. Supposedly resenting both the shah and the behavior of the U.S. government, the 1979 Iranian revolution naturally targeted the United States. To put it bluntly, 1953 made 1979 inevitable and 1979 was revenge for 1953.” (Rubin, 2003: 107)

Therefore, while the U.S might have believed that their actions would either be forgotten in the near future or that perhaps they would be so successful in their wrong doings that the people would have no choice but to comply blindly, history has now shown that neither of these plans were successful, and logically one can see why. If the Iranian people see that it was the U.S. which forced a dictator on them then it is only natural for the Iranians to be anti-American after suffering brutality and oppression at the hands of the American choice. This idea still partly accounts for anti-Americanism in Iran. Even those who prefer the Shah over the current theocrats still hang on to the Mossadegh case. Therefore, regardless of whether one is pro-theocracy or anti-theocracy one can certainly count on most Iranians to be anti-American because of the suspicions the U.S. has raised in its unilateral foreign policy, especially since the event of 9/11 which shows little to no regard for the well being of others. As Schlesinger puts it:

The unprecedented unilateral character of U.S. exercise of global power was of course a conscious choice, reflecting a strong desire to liberate Washington from wearying, nit-picking and encumbering consultations with other world players. It bespeaks a desire to simplify the decision-making process and to clear the decks for action. Ad hoc allies were to serve primarily as diplomatic window-dressing

and hopefully to pick up some of the bills. But the broader backlash to U.S. unilateralism and its resultant isolation and loneliness it has imposed on Washington were not entirely anticipated.”

Venezuela too, under Chavez, has grown weary of American unilateralism. This is exactly why Chavez began civilian militia groups throughout Venezuela; as to guard against an American attack. He blatantly stated that he had a fear of such an invasion taking place (Pitman, 2006: 2). Venezuela and Iran can be seen as the U.S.’s most sought out targets for the same reason that Afghanistan and Iraq were: if not fully, at least largely due to strategic oil reserves. Furthermore, Venezuela, like Iran, has become fiercely anti-American if not for the dictators which the U.S. installed to support its own imperialist agenda, but because of the economic hardships the people of Venezuela see the U.S. being responsible for. The era of supporting leaders in Venezuela to advance imperialist American interests shifted to installing economic policies within Venezuela to advance the same ambitions. This was seen in Carlos Andres Perez’s rule from 1989-1993 which accepted the Washington Consensus in 1989. But the people of Venezuela were familiar with the economic equality of the sort and thus lashed back quickly, dissolving the consensus. But the cost of this was over 3000 lives which were lost at the hands of Perez’s security forces that attacked civilian protesters. However, the introduction alone untreatably raised fears in the eyes and hearts of Venezuelans who saw that the U.S. was trying to exploit them. Like Iranians who grew anti-American and anti-imperialist after support for the Shah who brought upon oppression and misery, the Venezuelans also faced their own U.S. backed disaster. Therefore, logically like Iran, anti-Americanism grew even largest and less than a decade later gave birth to Hugo Chavez. This most extreme example of Latin American stance against U.S. imperialism is the result of many years of exploitations and pain, like the case of Iran. Jim Dorschner, Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army (Retired), illuminates this manifestation:

In every case, Venezuela, Bolivia, and potentially Ecuador and Peru, the movements are focused on legitimate domestic social and economic class issues resulting from decades of neglect and corruption by ruling elites who, we must not forget, were often closely allied with the United States. While U.S. short-term memory may relegate our former actions to ancient history, to most Latin Americans our heavy-handed influence peddling was responsible for inhibiting the region's progress toward greater social, economic, and political equity, with

the regional economic collapse of the late 1990s regularly cited as a recent example” (Dorschner, 2006: 6).

However, there are many countries which have been victims of American imperialism who have never stood against U.S. hegemony like Iran and Venezuela have. Thus, it is essential to this comparative examination to figure out what makes these two countries different.

### **Oil Leverage**

Iran and Venezuela are in a unique situation because of their great oil wealth. This black gold seems to have more power and value than yellow gold ever did due to almost universal dependence on it, and if nothing else, definite world power dependence on it. While the United States is undoubtedly the undisputed world power today, it still cannot be overlooked that the likes of China and Russia are in close second. While the United States has the power to make Iran and Venezuela the same flattened piles of rubble which are known as Iraq and Afghanistan today, it cannot do so due to competing interests. While China and Russia sat back as the U.S. forced its will on Iraq and Afghanistan, they are not likely to continue such a policy as the U.S.’s gain is more and more everyone else’s loss. Robert Dreyfuss explains this point in the following way: “To them, Iran’s vast reserves of oil and natural gas make it a natural ally. Both Russian and Chinese oil companies had enormous development and supply contracts with Baghdad under Saddam Hussein, deals that are worthless in an Iraq controlled by the United States” (Dreyfuss, 2006: 5).

Moreover, Iran and Venezuela have the power to speak their mind not only because many countries in the world must back them due to oil reliance, but also because at the moment the U.S. is exhausted from two very internationally condemned wars. Never in history has a war been more globally protested than that of Iraq. Particularly with news surfacing everyday about how blatant lies were told about the war and how it is a complete disaster, shadowing Vietnam, it gives America very little leeway to act unilaterally in this situation. The United States has, for the most part, lost international credibility in its moral fiber regarding foreign policy and thus the world is more likely now than ever to

stand against its policies due to at least the Iraq catastrophe. Such an occurrence makes the agendas of Ahmadinejad and Chavez much more appealing since for many countries they show an alternative to U.S. hegemony. Furthermore, Iran and Venezuela have much less to fear now because of this and can act and speak much more liberally. The U.S. will certainly not be able to rally the world, let alone the home team, behind its 3<sup>rd</sup> war in a little over five years, especially given the dishonest and manipulative nature of the Iraq war, thus, military action against Iran and Venezuela is ruled out. In fact, these recent American actions have resulted in a major shift in certain countries' opinions according to one poll:

A poll taken by the Pew Research Center in 2005 found that majorities in Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Turkey, Russia, Lebanon, Jordan, and Kuwait feared U.S. military action against their countries. As the poll put it, 'People abroad are more likely to believe that the U.S.-led war on terror has been about controlling Mideast oil and dominating the world than they are to take at face value America's stated objectives of self-defense and global democratization'" (Beinart, 2006: 6).

Iran and Venezuela are now being faced with perhaps the best opportunity to make a move for gains in world politics. With a military attack unfeasible and with world opinion quickly turning more and more against the U.S. it cannot get much better for Iran and Venezuela.

## **Conclusion**

However, it is fundamental that one understands why such stances even come to be, and not just accept the fact that these stances exist. As this essay has explained, the anti-American imperialism which exists so strongly in Iran and Venezuela manifested due to a selfish and brutal history of U.S. imperialism in both of the countries. Such a history gave birth to a reaction which today has evolved into firm anti-imperialism and strong nationalism. It would be short-sighted and irrational to think otherwise given the dynamic histories of these two nations.

What is ironic is that the same oil, which began the United States' imperialistic conquests in Iran and Venezuela, turned out to also play a phenomenal role in allowing Venezuela

and Iran to oppose American imperialism and domination. Hugo Chavez said it best when he said to a delegation of imperialistically abused African Nations: ““Africa is not a poor continent ... it has petrol, diamonds, coal, it has huge forest reserves, minerals ... *Petrol was used to colonize us, and we are going to use it to become free*””(Pitman, 2006: 1, emphasis mine).

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