

Top US commander warns of Iran influence in Latin America

By [Juan Castro Olivera](#)

Global Research, June 25, 2009

Agence France-Presse 25 June 2009

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

-Fraser is the first US Air Force officer to take the helm of the Southern Command. He replaces Admiral James Stavridis, who has been tapped to become the NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe.

MIAMI — Iran's growing influence in Latin America is a "potential risk" to the region, the newly-appointed head of the US Southern Command, General Douglas Fraser has warned.

Fraser, who on Thursday takes charge of US military operations in 31 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean, expressed "real concern" about the Islamic Republic's links with "extremist organizations" in the region.

"The real concern is not a nation-to-nation interaction, it is the connection that Iran has with extremist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah and the potential risk that that could bring to this region," Fraser told journalists ahead of taking up the post.

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has forged close ties with several leftist Latin American leaders in recent years, most notably Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Cuban leader Raul Castro.

Commenting on Iran's ties to extremist groups in the region, Fraser said: "it is a concern, and it is an issue we will continue to monitor for any increasing activity."

Fraser, who was Deputy Commander at US Pacific Command, said the illicit trade in arms drugs and people was worrying, and indicated it would be the focus of his work.

"The major concern is the illicit trafficking and the impact that that is having in the security and the stability especially through the northern part of South America through Central America and the Caribbean and through Mexico and the United States."

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Fraser played down talk of a conventional threat in the hemisphere, but said Venezuela's military stance was concerning.

"I'm concern with the military build-up in Venezuela because I don't understand the threat that they see," he said.

"I don't see a conventional military threat in the region. So I don't see why they see a need to build their military to the point that they are pursuing."

Fraser, who lived in Colombia for three years as a teenager, said Southern Command would continue to help that country combat leftist guerillas like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the FARC – and nacro-terrorist [sic] groups.

“The FARC is not defeated and we need to continued that effort. That’s been a focus for a very specific reason,” he said.

“But Southern Command has been engaged with all the militaries within the region, with the exception of Cuba,” he said.

“My intent is not to focus on one nation or the other because it is together that we build that capacity.”

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