Cuba in the Middle East: A Brief Chronology

Domingo Amuchástegui

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CUBA IN THE MIDDLE EAST
A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY
DOMINGO AMUCHASTEGUI

Foreword By
Haim Shaked, Director
Middle East Studies Institute
July, 1999
Cuba in the Middle East: A Brief Chronology

Domingo Amuchástegui

with a foreword by Haim Shaked
FOREWORD

“Cuba in the Middle East” is an important publication for several reasons. First it chronicles Fidel Castro’s intimate and long standing involvement with revolutionary and terrorist groups and “rogue” states in the Middle East. It is the first time, to my knowledge, that a high-ranking, former Cuban official publicly discusses in writing and in such detail Castro’s ongoing connection with and support for anti-American and anti-Israel groups in this important, albeit volatile, region of the world. The author, Mr. Domingo Amuchastegui, is highly qualified to document and explain these events, having been a key participant in the making of Castro’s Middle East policies and activities.

Secondly, this chronology shows Cuba’s actions both as an arm of the Soviet Union’s strategy in the Middle East and as Castro’s own independent policies and initiatives, many times to the chagrin of the Soviets. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Castro has maintained close working relations with these groups in the region, continuing to train high-ranking PLO military leaders and sharing intelligence and information with PLO officials.

Cuba’s connections with terrorist groups and states have major implications for the security of Israel, as well as the United States. Castro is an ally of the most extremist anti-Israeli states in the region. Syria, Libya, Iran and Iraq are Castro’s closest friends and supporters. Would some of these countries attempt to use Cuba as a springboard for anti-U.S. terrorist actions? The proximity of the island to the U.S., coupled with Castro’s documented involvement in the Middle East should be of serious concern to U.S. policymakers and security officials.
While Cuba, since the collapse of the Soviet Union represents less of a conventional military threat to the U.S., Castro's continuous connections with terrorist groups and rogue states creates a new dynamic that requires vigilance and alertness.

American and Israeli policymakers alike should pay careful attention to the intricate web of relationships which emerges so clearly from this chronology and should not overlook a potential threat which is not well studied or fully understood.

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June 1999
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Introduction

After a close relationship with Middle Eastern groups and countries for forty years, Cuba enjoys today an exceptional position in the region with embassies in almost all countries, and with a wide variety of political connections within the ruling elites. Castro is engaged in a growing process of enlarging bilateral trade, financial

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assistance, involvement in joint ventures, and cooperation projects, as well as in
diplomatic cooperation in the international system.

The context has changed over the years. While the priorities are not to channel
weapons to groups within the region, there are still some specialized military
assistance, training and cooperation, especially with the PLO. Yet Cuba's priorities now
are to obtain investments, economic cooperation, and trade opportunities from Iran,
Algeria, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, and others.

For U.S. interests the closeness of the relationship with Iraq and some of the
more militant terrorist groups in the Middle East is troublesome. Can Cuba be used to
carry out terrorist acts against U.S. targets? Is there any cooperation between Sadam
Hussein and Castro in the development of chemical and bacteriological weapons? What
remains from the close cooperation between Castro and the more militant terrorist
groups in the region? These and other questions are of critical importance to the
security of the United States. Cuba's proximity to the U.S., the continuous flow of
immigrants from the island and the increased travel from and to Cuba should make

the developments described herein until 1993.
Castro's relationships are a troublesome and worrisome issue to U.S. policymakers.

The Middle East and North Africa have been extremely important to Castro's foreign policy since 1959. It remains today as a region of special priority in Castro's redesign of his foreign policy after the collapse of Cuba's alliance with the former Soviet Union. Actually, there is not one single aspect of Castro's foreign policy in which the Middle East does not become important as:

1) A region connected to Cuba's non-aligned interests and policies.

2) An area where Cuba laid the foundations for the deployment of regular military forces and the establishment of military cooperation for the last 40 years.

3) A region to gain knowledge/connections/influence with "liberation movements" throughout Africa and the Middle East.

4) A base for triangular operations in connection with Intelligence/subversive activities in Latin America.

5) A source of influence with Arab communities in Latin America and the Caribbean.

6) A region in which trade, loans, cooperation, and diplomatic support has become very important, especially in the 1990's.

7) After Vietnam, a virtual laboratory, in the military field, in particular since
the Six Day War (1967), for updating and upgrading Cuba's military capabilities, including technological and operational capacities.

8) A region where the Arab-Islamic states are extremely important due to their voting power within the UN system for Cuba's multilateral diplomacy.

It is within such a context that the relevance of the Middle East for Cuba's foreign policy should be understood. The following chronology is only meant to be illustrative of the depth and closeness of Cuba's long-standing relationships with States, leaders, and groups in this troubled region.

1959-1963

* Relations developed with Gamal Abdel Nasser; Cuba joined the Non-Aligned Movement, sponsored by India, Yugoslavia, and Egypt. Efforts to buy weapons from Egypt failed.

* The Cuban government sent Captain José Ramón Fernández (currently vicepresident of the Cuban government) to Israel in the summer of 1959 to negotiate the purchase of light weaponry and artillery, but no agreement was reached. Instead, significant civilian assistance was granted by Israel to Cuba for more than 10 years in the field of citrus cultivation and diplomatic relations
were normal until 1973.

* Raúl Castro and Che Guevara visited Cairo and established contacts with African liberation movements stationed in, and supported by, Cairo. Both Cuban leaders visited Gaza and expressed support for the Palestinian cause.

* Initial relations established with Baghdad under Karim Kassem. The Cuban government sent Commander William Galvez to purchase light weaponry, tanks, and artillery. No agreement was reached.

* Castro established relations with the Algerian FLN through Paris and Rabat; official and public support extended, shipping large quantities of weapons to the FLN through Morocco (1960-1961); provided shelter, medical and educational services in Cuba for wounded Algerians; political and military cooperation in the fields of Counter-Intelligence and Intelligence were initiated. First Cuban deployment of regular military forces in support of the Algerian government against the Moroccan aggression of 1963. These forces will then train the Algerian army for more than a year.

1964-1967

* With considerable hesitation and reluctance, Nasser cooperated with Che
Guevara during his guerrilla operation in Congo-Kinshasa (former Zaire) in 1965.

* Cuba welcomed the founding of the PLO. First contacts with Palestinian FATEH between 1965 (Algiers) and 1966-67 (Damascus).

* The Tricontinental Conference was held in Havana in January, 1966 to adopt a common political strategy against colonialism, neocolonialism, and imperialism.

* Cuba supported, via Cairo, with weapons, the NLF in Southern Yemen. Cuban agents were sent on fact-finding missions to north and south Yemen (1967-1968);

* Fidel Castro and other Cuban officials privately criticized in very harsh terms the shameful performance of the Egyptian leadership during the Six Day War in 1967. The war as such was thoroughly studied by the Cuban Armed Forces;

* Cuba and Syria developed a close alliance and supported FATEH and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).

1968-1975

* Cuba continued its military and political support for FATEH after the Syrians
broke with the latter, and, later on, Cuban support was granted to other Palestinian organizations (Popular and Democratic fronts).

* Cuba sent military instructors and advisors into Palestinian bases in Jordan to train Palestinian fedayeen (1968); first high-level delegation from FATEH-PLO visited Cuba (1970).

* Several missions sent to Southern Yemen to support NFL / Fatah Ismail internally and externally, both politically and militarily.

* The Soviet Union and Cuba increased military and civilian cooperation with Southern Yemen (PDRY).

* Cuba commenced political and military cooperation with Somalia's Siad Barre (1969).


* Closer connections with FATEH-PLO and other Palestinian organizations were reinforced, including training of Latin American guerrillas in Lebanon; military support included Counter-Intelligence and Intelligence training.


* Arab and Non-Aligned countries pressured Cuba to break relations with
Israel in 1973 and sponsor U.N. Resolution on Zionism "as a form of racial
discrimination."

* Cuba provided military support and personnel to Syria during the Yom Kippur

* Cuba joined with Algeria and Libya on a diplomatic/political offensive in
support of Frente POLISARIO (People's Front for the Liberation of Western
Sahara and Río del Oro); later on provided military cooperation, medical
services, and other forms of assistance.

1976-1982

* Cuba avoided any public condemnation of Syria's military intervention in
Lebanon, although privately they did so in strong terms.

* Cuba supported the so-called "Steadfastness Front" against the U.S. backed
Camp David accord.

* Additional military and political support provided to the Palestinian
cause; Arafat attended the 6th Non-Aligned Conference in Havana (1979).

* At this stage, significant hard currency loans (tens of million) had been
facilitated by Arafat-PLO to the Cuban government under very soft terms; Cuba
granted diplomatic and political support to Arafat during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. In the 1980s, Cuban universities were graduating hundreds of Palestinian students in various fields, especially from Medical school.

* The Aden (Southern Yemen) regime decided to support the Ethiopian radical officers commanded by Mengistu Haile Mariam, sending Yemeni military units in support of the latter against Somali aggression, and asking the Cubans to do the same. Cuba joined in, first with a group of officers headed by General Arnaldo Ochoa, a move that was followed later on by the deployment of large Cuban forces against the Somali invasion. Also as part of the alliance with the Aden regime, Cuba granted some small-scale support to the Dhofaris in their armed struggle against the monarchy in Oman until the late 1970s.

* As part of Cuba's alliance with Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime in Ethiopia, the Cuban leadership decided to engage in active political and military support for more than 10 years to the Liberation Movement of Southern Sudan headed by John Garang against the Arab-Muslim regime in Khartoum (until today there are no diplomatic relations between Khartoum and Havana).

* Cuba developed closer ties with Iraq in various areas (medical services,
construction projects, grants and loans).

* Cuban military advisory to Iraq in different fields began in the mid 1970s (it was cancelled after the Iraqi invasion of Iran in late 1980).

* Cuba cooperated with Libya in the political founding of the World MATHABA in Tripoli, to provide political support and coordinate revolutionary movements throughout the world. Cuba supported also Libya's stand on Chad and in its support to the FPOLISARIO.

* Despite its close links with Baghdad, Cuba recognized and praised the Iranian Revolution, although with no significant increase in bilateral ties. Once Iraq attacked Iran, Cuba withdrew its military advisers from Baghdad and adopted a position of official impartiality, though more sympathetic to Baghdad due to its past relations.

* Castro granted political recognition to the revolution in Afghanistan in 1978, but internecine conflict and civil war prevented any strengthening of bilateral relations. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 disrupted Cuba's Non-Aligned policies at a time when Castro was chairman of the NL Movement. While publicly supporting Moscow, Fidel Castro was very critical of the Soviet invasion, something that was bitterly discussed with Soviet officials.
1983-1991

* Declining economic cooperation between Cuba and Libya.

* New ties of alliance between Algeria and Libya with Morocco cut-off any further direct support from Cuba to FPOLISARIO.

* Libyan support to Latin American revolutionary movements, especially in Central America, and the whole of the World MATHABA project, declined rapidly after the U.S. bombing of Tripoli in 1986; Cubans increasingly distant until MATHABA's last meeting in 1990 in Tripoli, where the termination of the Libyan project was pretty obvious for all the participants, including the Cuban delegation.

* The Palestinian Intifada increases Cuba's support for Arafat and the PLO, both diplomatic and military.

* Cuba starts exploring other possibilities for increased diplomatic recognition and economic ties in the region, including Saudi Arabia (two Cuban ambassadors were sent for that purpose, but with no significant success); the Gulf States, Jordan, Turkey (with much better results: embassies were finally established in Kuwait, Turkey, Qatar, and Jordan); and even Israel (with no
official success, but with promising inroads within the private sector and some political/religious forces).

* After the violent collapse of the Aden regime, the death of Fatah Ismail, and the reunification with North Yemen, Cuban authorities negotiated with the government of Sanaa by which bilateral relations continued to develop, including areas of economic and political cooperation.

* After the negotiations leading to the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, the Cuban-Palestinian military cooperation was enhanced, including the areas of Counter-Intelligence and Intelligence.

* Cuba condemned Iraq for its invasion and annexation of Kuwait, supporting the latter's sovereignty; it condemned also the U.S. military operations in the Gulf, and abstained from supporting the bulk of the sanctions imposed on Baghdad. A Cuban military delegation was sent to Iraq to learn and share what was considered vital information and experiences from U.S. combat operations in Kuwait and Iraq.

1992-1999

* Embassies were opened in Qatar, Turkey, Tunisia, and Jordan; trade and
joint ventures were developed. Diplomatic ties and trade relationships have increased discreetly with Egypt and Libya; Qatar supported Cuba in the 1999 sessions on Human Rights at Geneva.

* A high-level PLO military delegation paid a non-public visit to Cuba, including the new head of Intelligence.

* Israeli firms provided capital, technology, and markets to Cuba in the field of citrus cultivation and exports; religious and political delegations visited both countries.

* Lebanon's normalization in the 1990's allowed Cuba to reach important financial and trade agreements, including Lebanese participation in joint ventures and in establishing a branch of the Fransabank in Havana. Nabih Berri, the chairman of the Lebanese parliament paid a long, and successful, visit to Cuba during the 1998 Ramadan, and more recently Adnan Kassar, president of the Fransabank and the International Chamber of Commerce paid an official visit to Havana.

* Iranian-Cuban relations have increased after several high-ranking delegations from Iran visited Cuba: the Vice-President, the Minister of Foreign Relations, the Minister of Public Health, and the Minister of Social Assistance. The Cuban Minister of Public Health visited Iran in 1998. In the last two years the number
of Cuban doctors, paramedics, and of medical services hired by Teheran have increased, together with additional purchases of Cuban pharmaceuticals and biotechnology products. A recent agreement (1999) was signed, establishing Cuba's assistance in setting up social security/social assistance networks in Iran.

The recent election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika (April 1999) as President of Algeria, opens new opportunities for Cuba given Bouteflika's close relationship with the Cuban government for more than 40 years.

* PLO leaders continue to have close relations with the Cuban leadership, having access to specialized military and Intelligence training, either in Cuba or Palestinian territory, and in the sharing of Intelligence.

* Cuba continues to actively undermine U.S. policies in the Middle East and North Africa in primarily three ways: a) Portraying U.S. actions and diplomacy in the region as those of an aggressor, seeking to impose hegemony by force such as the recurrent attacks on Iraq, violation of sovereign rights (no-fly zones), the perpetuation of unjustified economic sanctions to countries in the region (Iraq, Iran, Syria), open political intervention and the use of brutal force as acts of retaliation (the Bin Laden case/Yugoslavia); b) Portraying the U.S. as the main obstacle to a peaceful settlement of the Israel/Palestine and the Gulf
conflicts, and c) Discrediting U.S. policies, especially by gaining support for Cuba's agenda at the U.N. These Anti-American views and policies are conveyed as a systematic message through a network of Cuban embassies in most countries of the region, at U.N. and its multilateral system plus Cuban embassies and missions throughout the Western Hemisphere and other significant non-governmental political and cultural channels.

GLOSSARY

1. FLN. Front de Libération National, the political and military organization that led the war of national liberation against French colonial rule between 1954 and 1962. Ruling political party until the 1980s in Algeria.

2. PLO. Palestine Liberation Organization, founded in Cairo, in 1964, under the auspices of Egypt (then known as United Arab Republic) to serve Nasser's manipulations of the Palestinian cause, composed mostly of conservative Palestinian intellectuals and bureaucrats serving Arab governments. An instrument of Nasser's foreign policy until the June War of 1967, when the old PLO leadership collapsed to be replaced by FATEH's leadership headed by Arafat.

3. FATEH. Acronym for Palestine National Liberation Movement, founded in 1959
by younger generations of Palestinians that had experienced the defeats of 1948 and 1956, strongly committed to a radical nationalist platform to fight for Palestine and against Arab intervention and manipulations of the Palestinian problem. Mostly an underground and not legally recognized organization until the June War in 1967; it transformed itself into the most powerful and influential party inside Palestinian and Arab politics, controlling the PLO effectively since 1969, when Arafat becomes its chairman.

4. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The most important branch of the Arab Nationalist Movement (known as the ANM, created in the 1950s as radical followers of Nasser). After the June War of 1967 splitting away from Nasser and focusing on building a more radical alternative within the Palestinians under the name of Popular Front, led by George Habash; a later off-spring, in 1969, was the Democratic Front led by Nayef Hawatmeh. Strongly based in Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen, and the Gulf, until 1970 heavily engaged in terrorist methods. After 1970 dropped such tactics, became more active and open across the occupied territories and southern Lebanon, adopting Marxist-Leninist ideology.

5. Frente POLISARIO. Frente Popular de Liberación del Sagia el Hamra y Río del Oro, inspired by the ANM tradition and the Algerian FLN, created to fight against the
Spanish-Moroccan-Mauritanian arrangements to split the former colony of Saguia el Hamra/Rio del Oro (known as Western Sahara) between the two African states. Enjoyed active support from Algeria and Libya together with a considerable number of African states until the 1980s.

6. NFL. National Front for the Liberation of Southern Yemen, another important, and successful, branch of the Arab Nationalist Movement. Created in 1962 in the course of the revolution in Northern Yemen, against the monarchy and supported by Nasser. Expanded to the south of Yemen and began armed struggle against British colonial occupation and local feudal lords (sultans and sheikhs). Broke with Nasser in 1966-1967 and finally forced the British to negotiate and evacuate Aden, followed by the defeat of the local feudal lords. Since 1965 it has had very close relations with Cuba. Main leader was Abdel Fatah Ismail. Internecine conflicts since the late 1970s eventually led to open civil war in 1990 and the collapse of the regime, the death of Fatah Ismail, and integration with the north under the control of the government in Sanaa.

7. World MATHABA. A Libyan project from the late 1970s to promote political, financial, and military support for revolutionary movements throughout the world. Ghaddafi called on other "revolutionary governments" to support this project, which
Cuba did although with extreme caution and distrust. Cuba could not refuse to join due to the fact that its major allies in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and even the Soviet Union had accepted to participate and that many of them were benefitting from Libya's abundant financial support. Although governments -like the case of Cuba- took part at the level of political deliberations and to coordinate common actions in the diplomatic and political fields, MATHABA was something else: essentially a tool in the hands of the Libyans to project their individual goals and agenda (Ghaddafi's Green Book, to reward his supporters, and to undermine his enemies). Financial and military assistance was never a collective decision, but responded for the most part to bilateral arrangements between Ghaddafi's regime and individual organizations, some of which resorted, at different stages, to terrorist methods like the IRA and ETA. Insurgencies in Central America, like the Sandinistas and others, were privileged beneficiaries along with the African National Congress, FPOLISARIO, and others. Cuban leaders were always anxious to counterbalance Libyan attempts for unilateral actions, to influence Cuban allies or about Ghaddafi's hostility toward well-known Cuban allies such as Arafat. The dominant perception among Cuban leaders was that Ghaddafi posed too many unnecessary security risks vis-à-vis the U.S. and too many complications within Cuban alliances.
8. People's Liberation Movement of Southern Sudan. The final outcome of different secessionist movements in southern Sudan during the 1960s and early 1970s (like the Anya-Nyas) fighting against Arab-Islamic control of the central government, allocation of resources, and religious, political, and ethnic intolerance.

9. Eritrean Liberation Front. The most influential Eritrean organization fighting for secession from Ethiopia in the 1960s, actively supported by the Syrian regime since 1965. Various internal divisions developed later on until the late 1970s, when a new front was built based on very different domestic and external alliances and, eventually led the Eritreans to victory. Cuba's support to Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime in 1978 meant the cessation or previous Cuban backing to the Eritrean cause.

10. PDRY. People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, official name adopted by the Southern Yemeni independent republic.

11. Gamal Abdel Nasser. A colonel in the Egyptian army, member of the Free Officers Movement formed after the defeat in 1948 at the hands of the newly-born state of Israel. Led the revolution that overthrew the monarchy in 1952. Undertook significant economic, social, and political transformations, setting much of the basic tenets and role-model of Arab nationalism after WWII. Co-founder of the Neutralist countries in 1956 and of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961. Defeated by Israel in 1948, 1956,
and 1967.

12. Karim Kassem. A colonel in the Iraqi army and, at the beginning, a follower of Nasser. Led the revolution against the monarchy in 1958. A rival of Nasser later on, a bloody military coup inspired and mostly led by the Arab BAATH party, a strong and influential inter-Arab nationalist movement in the Middle East, overthrew him in 1963.

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UM REPORT EXAMINES CUBA'S INTRicate ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

CORAL GABLES, FL – The University of Miami Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies (ICCAS) today released a report on "Cuba in the Middle East: A Brief Chronology." The study examines Cuba's involvement with terrorist groups and states in the Middle East and the implications of this close relationship for the United States and Israel.

The study is the first to publicly address in detail such a relationship and was written by Domingo Amuchastegui, a former high-ranking Cuban intelligence official. Amuchastegui offers first-hand accounts of the developments between Cuba and Middle Eastern revolutionary and terrorist groups during the past several decades as well as the ongoing relationship between Castro, the PLO and other groups. The author also addresses the threat that such involvement poses for the security of Israel and particularly the U.S. due to Cuba's proximity.

The study chronicles Fidel Castro's intimate and long-standing involvement with anti-American and anti-Israel groups, Cuba's Middle East policies and activities, and Castro's current and historical relationships with these groups.

Amuchastegui is a research associate at ICCAS and a doctoral candidate at the UM School of International Studies. He was a professor at the Higher Institute of International Relations in Havana and former guest professor at the -more-
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Cuban National Defense College. Previously, he also served as senior researcher at Cuba’s Center for Studies of Africa and the Middle East and as intelligence analyst and head of the Organization Department at the Tricontinental Organization, the subversive arm of the Cuban government in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.

Amuchastegui has authored several books published in Cuba, including *Palestine: Crisis and Revolution*, *Palestine: Dimensions of a Conflict*, *Sociology and Politics in Israel* and most recently, *Contemporary History of Asia and Africa*.

The UM Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the School of International Studies provides research and information about Cuba, U.S.-Cuba relations and Cuban-Americans. In addition to working towards and preparing for a future change of regime on the island, the institute aims at increasing awareness and appreciation of Cuba and Cuba-related issues within the South Florida community as well as from a national and international perspective. The institute also coordinates all Cuba-related academic and outreach programs at the university.

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**Editor’s Note:** To interview Domingo Amuchastegui about the topic or to receive a copy of the report, please call ICCAS at (305) 284-CUBA (2822).