

Secret Venezuela Files Warn About Maduro Confidant

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He is one of the most powerful leaders of the Venezuelan government, a hard-liner who has put down protests, confronted rebels and been a constant presence at the side of Nicolás Maduro, the country's authoritarian president.

But for years, Tareck El Aissami, one of Maduro's closest confidants, has also been the target of wide-ranging investigations by his own country's intelligence agency into his ties to the criminal underworld.

According to a secret dossier compiled by Venezuelan agents, El Aissami and his family have helped sneak Hezbollah militants into the country, gone into business with a drug lord and shielded 140 tons of chemicals believed to be used for cocaine production — helping make him a rich man as his country has spiraled into disarray.

With its economy in tatters and its people hungry, Venezuela is in the throes of a desperate fight for control of the country. Opposition leaders are calling for an uprising, while the country's military and civilian authorities are refusing to surrender power, presenting a largely united show of force against the protests in the streets.

But the intelligence documents offer an unusual window into how fractured and nervous the nation's security services have become, particularly over corruption at the highest levels of government.

El Aissami, a former vice president who is now Maduro's industry minister, has long been in the cross hairs of U.S. investigators. He was indicted in March in a New York City federal court and sanctioned two years ago by the Treasury Department, accused of working with drug lords.

He and Maduro have brushed away the charges as part of a propaganda war engineered by the Trump administration to topple Venezuela's leftist government.

But Venezuela's own intelligence agency — which El Aissami once controlled — raised even more alarms about him and his family for more than a decade, putting its concerns in a dossier of documents, investigative findings and transcripts of interviews with drug traffickers.

The dossier, provided to The New York Times by a former top Venezuelan intelligence official and confirmed independently by a second one, recounts testimony from informants accusing El Aissami and his father of recruiting Hezbollah members to help expand spying and drug trafficking networks in the region.

Hezbollah is considered a terrorist organization by the United States and U.S. officials say the group has long had a presence in South America where it has helped launder drug money. In 2008, the Treasury Department sanctioned a

different Venezuelan diplomat, accusing him of raising money for Hezbollah and helping its members travel to the country.

But El Aissami and his father, Carlos Zaidan El Aissami, a Syrian immigrant who had worked with Hezbollah on return visits to his country, also pushed to bring Hezbollah into Venezuela, according to the dossier.

Informants told intelligence agents that El Aissami's father was involved in a plan to train Hezbollah members in Venezuela, "with the aim of expanding intelligence networks throughout Latin America and at the same time working in drug trafficking," the documents say.

El Aissami helped the plan along, the dossier adds, by using his authority over residency permits to issue official documents to Hezbollah militants, enabling them to stay in the country.

Whether Hezbollah ever set up its intelligence network or drug routes in Venezuela is not addressed in the dossier. But it does assert that Hezbollah militants established themselves in the country with El Aissami's help.

El Aissami acted as a facilitator to the underworld in other ways as well. The documents say that his brother, Feraz, went into business with Venezuela's most notorious drug lord, Walid Makled, and held nearly \$45 million in Swiss bank accounts.

El Aissami had links to the drug lord, too, the documents say, noting that he issued large government contracts to a company tied to Makled.

And as the country headed toward economic collapse, forcing millions to flee Venezuela and its dangerous shortages of food and medicine, El Aissami became a wealthy man, the dossier says.

Using a frontman currently under sanctions by the United States, El Aissami bought an American bank, parts of a construction company, a stake in a Panamanian mall, land for a high-end resort and numerous Venezuelan real estate projects, including a "millionaire's mansion" for his parents, according to the documents.

El Aissami did not respond to a written request for an interview and no charges have been filed in Venezuela against him for drug trafficking or corruption.

But on March 8, the United States unsealed its indictment against El Aissami, making him the second member of Maduro's Cabinet known to be indicted on drug trafficking charges.

Néstor Reverol, the nation's current interior minister, has also been indicted. And in 2017, two nephews of Maduro's wife, Cilia Flores, were sentenced to 18 years in an American prison after trying to traffic 800 kilograms of cocaine.

The U.S. government said El Aissami was deeply involved in the narcotics trade when it sanctioned him in 2017, freezing his assets along with those of Samark López, who was accused of being his frontman. It said El Aissami oversaw or partly owned narcotics shipments weighing more than a ton, managed an international network of businesses to help launder profits and forged an alliance with Makled, the drug trafficker.

But U.S. prosecutors never revealed the evidence in their case.

The Venezuelan intelligence memos examined by The Times offer some of the most concrete details yet on how one of the country's most powerful families built its empire, sketching out a family saga that stretched from Syria to Venezuela, from the narcotics trade to the president's inner circle.

One of the trails led to a lonely road near Venezuela's border with Brazil.

A national guard officer interviewed about a 2004 raid told prosecutors about a set of "warehouses that were in a state of decay, looking abandoned."

But the site was not empty. It was being used to store chemicals, including 140 metric tons of urea, a precursor substance used to make cocaine, according to the Venezuelan intelligence documents.

Urea was a controlled substance in Venezuela and the owners could not initially provide licenses for the suspicious chemicals, the documents said. A police investigator told prosecutors that while the urea supposedly was meant to be sold as fertilizer, the explanation was suspicious because there was no agriculture in the region.

And then there was the owner of the chemicals: Makled, the drug trafficker.

The bust was the beginning of the end for the Venezuelan drug lord, who is wanted for extradition by the United States. The Drug Enforcement Administration began building cases against him for running drugs with the aid of top officials. Makled was captured six years later and sentenced in 2015 to a 14-year sentence in Venezuela for drug trafficking and money laundering.

But seemingly overlooked was the other man at the center of the case: Haisam Alaisami, another relative of El Aissami, who told prosecutors he was the legal representative for Makled Investments, Makled's company. Two people familiar with the family identified him as El Aissami's first cousin.

He could offer no information on who the potential buyers of the urea were, and investigators eventually referred the case to the narcotics division of Venezuela's criminal and forensics agency on "suspicion of contraband," according to police documents included in the intelligence dossier.

Neither Makled nor Alaisami responded to written requests for comment.

Alaisami had a powerful family member in El Aissami, who was raised with him in Venezuela with other members of the clan who had arrived from Syria.

As the investigation worked its way through state agencies, El Aissami's star rose in leftist political circles. He went from being a confidant of President Hugo Chavez's brother, to a legislator for the governing Socialist Party, to interior minister in 2008.

It was that year that a company owned by the state oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela, intervened: It wrote a letter saying it could account for the chemicals.

No charges were filed against Makled or Alaisami in the case. Prosecutors' documents appear to show the shipment of urea was even returned to Makled, who ramped up his drug trafficking business in Venezuela and Colombia.

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Other branches of the El Aissami family were also looking to do business with Makled.

Sometime before 2010, Makled was approached by El Aissami's brother, Feraz, to provide a large sum of money to a Panama-based import company, according to an intelligence briefing in the dossier. The drug lord's money was intended for the purchase of an oil tanker to be used in a contract with the state oil company.

Both El Aissami brothers seem to have been deeply involved in the business, according to the document. Feraz and a business partner were the public faces of the company, while Tareck, from his post as the nation's interior minister, signed lucrative government deals with them, including a no-bid contract to provide supplies to Venezuela's prison system, according to the intelligence report.

A third figure tied to the business cast additional suspicion on the import company: López, the man U.S. officials said aided El Aissami's drug trafficking network and served as his frontman.

The intelligence report also includes HSBC bank statements of accounts tied to El Aissami's brother, Feraz, that totaled nearly \$45 million — money it says was linked to Makled, the drug trafficker.

HSBC closed the Feraz accounts after Makled was arrested on drug trafficking charges, according to the intelligence documents.

The dossier concludes with informant testimony on the family's ties to Hezbollah, outlining the effort to recruit militants who could establish a drug and information network across Latin America.

One of the sources of the information was the drug lord, Makled, who described El Aissami's involvement in the scheme, according to the intelligence memo.

It was not the only time El Aissami had been accused of aiding Hezbollah and Makled. U.S. — and some Venezuelan — officials have made similar allegations, though El Aissami has denied involvement with militant groups in the past, even after news media reports.

But Venezuelan intelligence officials believed they had evidence to the contrary. The dossier ends with references to photographs of people who “belong with the aforementioned terrorist group.”