

'There was no regime change' -Venezuela's ex-FM on US kidnapping raid

In an exclusive interview with The Grayzone's Max Blumenthal, Venezuela's former Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza discusses the January 3 US military raid on Caracas that resulted in the kidnapping of President Nicolás Maduro and First Lady Cilia Flores and the killing of as many as 100 people. Arreaza argues the operation violated international law, the US Constitution, and head-of-state immunity, calling it "barbaric." He insists Maduro and Flores were in a secure location and were defended by guards who "gave their lives," but that US technological superiority made resistance ineffective. He rejects claims that Maduro was betrayed internally, dismissing them as psychological warfare designed to sow division, and insists the military and Chavista leadership remain unified. According to Arreaza, "there was no regime change," as Vice President Delcy Rodríguez assumed the presidency, and the government continues to function normally, with schools reopening, oil production continuing, and public order intact. He points to the stability as a demonstration of the strength of Chavismo and the resolve of its popular base. Without this movement in place, he argues that Venezuela would face civil war or collapse similar to Libya. Arreaza portrays Acting President Rodríguez as a deeply loyal and courageous Chavista leader. He says the government's top priority is securing the release and return of Maduro and Flores through legal challenges in U.S. courts, blasting the charges against them as bogus and arguing that Maduro's immunity should compel his release. While condemning Trump's threats and demands—such as severing ties with China, Russia, Cuba, and Iran—Arreaza maintains that Venezuela remains open to negotiations with the United States, but only on the basis of sovereignty, international law, and mutual respect. He frames the broader conflict as part of a historic struggle between the "Donroe Doctrine" of US dominance and Latin American independence rooted in the Bolivarian ideology. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism: <https://thegrayzone.com/support/> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonews> #TheGrayzone

#Max

Welcome to The Grayzone, it's Max Blumenthal. Under orders from President Donald Trump, the United States military kidnapped Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, in a violent January 3rd raid that left at least 80 people dead, including 32 Cuban military officers, without any apparent casualties on the American side. How was this operation possible? And where does Venezuela go now that Trump continues to issue threats amid his claim to own the country, its economy, and its vast resource wealth? To get the perspective of Venezuela's government and the Chavista movement behind it, I spoke to Jorge Arreaza. Arreaza is a veteran diplomat who served as foreign minister of Venezuela under Maduro and is a confidant of his country's acting president,

Delcy Rodríguez. He is also the son-in-law of the original architect of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution, former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. Jorge Arreaza, welcome to The Grayzone.

#Guest

Thank you.

#Max

It's great to see you. As everyone watching knows, there was a massive U.S. military raid on Caracas on January 3rd involving 150 aircraft, Delta Force units, and a helicopter division. It resulted in the kidnapping of your head of state, President Nicolás Maduro, and First Lady Cilia Flores. I think everyone wants to know how this was possible and how the U.S. managed to do it without apparently losing any men or equipment. From your point of view, what happened there?

#Guest

Thank you, Max. Yes, it was quite an event. It's the first time in the republican history of Venezuela, in our history as a republic, that we've been attacked by a foreign power with such an overwhelming use of war technology. This had been prepared for weeks—we all know that all those carriers and warships were deployed in the Caribbean Sea, close to Venezuelan territorial waters, for months. They used the excuse, the false excuse, of fighting drug dealers, narcotrafficking, and cartels—all of that. I can't say the word because it's not appropriate, but all those lies they made up against our country, against President Maduro and his team.

So we were expecting from the first moment some kind of attack. We were preparing our people for even an invasion, with our militias and our armed forces. But what happened on January 3rd was that they used the most advanced war technology. They were able to silence, to neutralize our radars, our air artillery, our air defenses. We understand it was more than 100 aircraft, from drones to bombers, that were used in this operation. And the facts are the facts. We have maybe 100 people who are dead now. They are our heroes, our martyrs, and we are really sad because of that—civilians, not only military, civilians.

The bombs also landed in places where ordinary people live, and they killed young people who had nothing to do with politics or the government—military too, of course, young personnel who were just doing their job. It was an operation well designed, with very advanced technology. What really happened is that they kidnapped—well, they hijacked—our president and his wife, who is also a member of the National Assembly of Venezuela. She's a leader of Venezuelan women as well. And that case is absolutely illegal within the framework of international law. I'm even certain it's also illegal under your own law—the Constitution of the United States and the laws of the United States.

It's absolutely unacceptable. It's barbaric. We are asking the government of the United States to release President Maduro and his wife, to bring them back to Venezuela, because it's absolutely illegal what you have done—not you personally, but your government. And in terms of maintaining international order based on law, based on norms, I believe this should be resolved, because he is a head of state. He has immunity—diplomatic immunity. And this is just unacceptable for any human being who believes in peace, who believes in international law, who believes that we can all understand each other through dialogue.

So that's what happened, and we were still really in shock. But something else happened, Max. The government of Venezuela is the same government. Delcy Rodríguez is the president at the moment—the Constitution establishes that. And the plan that President Maduro wrote with his own hand is the same plan that President Chávez left as his legacy when he died. There was no regime change. Someone else is in the presidency now, but there was no regime change. And Delcy is a loyal and brave woman who's going to do whatever she has to do to protect our sovereignty and to bring President Maduro and Cilia Flores back to Venezuela.

#Max

Well, I want to ask you more about that. But first, just a couple more questions about what took place on the traumatic night of January 3rd. Can you tell us anything more about what happened when Nicolás Maduro, your president, and Cilia Flores were kidnapped, and why they weren't in a more secure place?

#Guest

I believe they were in a secure place, and all the military personnel who were protecting them gave their lives to defend them. Most of them died defending the president and his wife. I think it was simply an overwhelming superiority in terms of technology, and that's what happened. Remember, we've always been prepared for a different kind of war—not conventional warfare, but something like Vietnam, which lasted over 20 years, or Afghanistan. It's different. As President Chávez said, we have lots of mountains, savannas, jungles, and islands, and we have brave men and women who would defend this country in man-to-man combat.

But of course, we can't deny the superiority of the U.S. in terms of the investment they've made. I mean, I believe that everything Venezuela has spent on the military over the last hundred years isn't enough compared to what the United States spent in just a two-hour operation—the cost of each missile launched, each flight by bombers, F-15s, F-22s, helicopters, drones, planes. The Gerald R. Ford carrier and all of that—it's billions of dollars that were spent on that operation. So, militarily, we're prepared for non-conventional warfare, not for this kind of conventional war.

#Max

Thirty-two Cuban officers were killed in the U.S. assault on Venezuela. What can you tell us about what those Cubans were doing, and in what context they were killed?

#Guest

You know that since President Chávez, the presidents of Venezuela—Chávez and Maduro—have always counted on the help and support of Cuban security experts. Remember that Fidel Castro faced more than 600 assassination attempts, so they really know how to protect a head of state. There were about 100 people in the group protecting the president, and maybe 30% of them were Cubans. They also gave their lives for the revolution and to protect President Maduro.

#Max

Were they in combat? Were they actually killed in combat?

#Guest

Yes. All of them. Every one of them.

#Max

What do you say to those, particularly in Washington, who claim that the stunning success of this U. S. raid shows the Iraq War syndrome is over—because civil war and destabilization haven't erupted inside Venezuela yet?

#Guest

The only reason that didn't happen is because Chavismo is in power—because the revolution is in power. We have really large structures of communication with our people: we have communes, communal councils. Our people are organized, so we have direct communication with them. They know what's happening. They know what happened that night. They know about Delcy and her commitment to President Maduro, to the Constitution, and to our sovereignty. So Venezuela, at the moment, is at peace. The shops are opening, the malls have opened, and next Sunday we're going back to schools and universities.

We are producing oil. We're producing gas—everything we need, food in Venezuela. But that's only possible because there wasn't a regime change, because Delcy Rodríguez is the vice president and now the president in charge of Venezuela. And that's the only reason. Without Chavismo, this would be chaotic. Without Chavismo, we'd be in a situation that wouldn't be under control for decades. So that's something they have to consider. And it's not because of the Iraq War or whatever—it's because it's the Venezuelan people who rule in the Venezuelan government.

#Max

Without Chavismo, there would be a civil war.

#Guest

Yes, a civil war, or something like what happened in Libya. Without Chavismo, there would be no peace in Venezuela.

#Max

Is the Chavista movement, which is in power through the Bolivarian Revolution, united?

#Guest

Monolithically united. Absolutely. More than ever, I would say. I believe that with this attack, Chavismo is expanding to new sectors—the youth, the youngest—who are just beginning to understand what the world is about: geopolitics, who wants to dominate, who wants to abuse. And they understand the importance of being independent. They are really... how do we say... outraged by what this means—bombs falling on your country, on your territory, killing your people—and they are extending their hands. They want to come to the Bolivarian Revolution. They want to be our friends. They want to become part of the revolution.

I can say that the popularity of President Maduro and the Venezuelan government is much greater today than it was, I don't know, on the 31st of December. So that's something—we're coming together. We're uniting even more than I thought would happen. I have family members who never supported the government or the revolution, and they've called me saying, "Jorge, what do I have to do? Where's my weapon? How do I defend my people? Where do I go to a demonstration to support President Maduro?" Even they say they miss President Maduro. They didn't like him before, but now they miss him.

#Max

Well, in a past interview with The Grayzone, you described how U.S. intelligence actually attempted to recruit you, and how you repudiated them. You obviously remained loyal. I met an official in Caracas who told me that, during the U.S. attempt to recruit him, his family inside the U.S. was threatened. It sounded very intimidating, what took place. He remained loyal. But now, in the face of what happened with this raid—in which the head of state, Nicolás Maduro, was kidnapped so quickly—there are a lot of theories on the Internet about Maduro potentially having been betrayed. They're starting to spread into mainstream media, saying he was betrayed by Venezuelan leadership, or that Venezuelan military officials had been recruited in advance by U.S. intelligence and were essentially asked to order some kind of stand-down. I want to get your response to these theories,

which are gaining so much traction right now. It's obviously just speculation, but I'll give you the floor to set the record straight.

#Guest

It's a psychological intrigue campaign. It's all speculation. I have no idea—no sign of treason in any sector of the state or any sector of Chavismo, not the military, not the politicians. Everyone is united. I believe what the government, the administration of the United States, has done is also to try to—it's another kind of warfare, psychological warfare. And the only way we could be in trouble in Venezuela at the moment is if there were a division in Chavismo. I see no chance of that happening.

I've spoken to all the military—the generals, the major generals—and they're all very clear that we're on the right side of history, that we're going to defend our homeland and our sovereignty no matter what happens. I think it's important to let the world know that there is unity in Venezuela. Not only, I insist, within Chavismo—the Venezuelan people right now are united and believe we were attacked by a foreign power, that this was absolutely illegal, that the president of Venezuela is Nicolás Maduro Moros, and that he must return. All these conspiracy theories, all these so-called conspiranoic ideas, are pure speculation and lies. They're completely out of place at this moment.

#Max

You've been on the front lines of the Chavista movement even before you were foreign minister, and you now know every important leader in Venezuela on a very close basis—better than the U.S. media knows them. The U.S. media is now focused on Delcy Rodríguez, and she's been portrayed in the New York Times, for example, as a kind of moderate, someone who's more amenable to deal-making than Nicolás Maduro. Donald Trump has said, "She will do whatever we want." I don't know what he meant by that exactly, but I want to get your perspective. How would you describe the political outlook of Delcy Rodríguez? Where does she fit within the pantheon of Chavista leadership? Who is Delcy Rodríguez?

#Guest

I must say she's the most important woman leader of the Venezuelan revolution. She's deeply patriotic. You know the story of her father—he was killed by the CIA in a Venezuelan prison. He was a leftist leader from the working class in the 1970s. So she's absolutely loyal to her father, to her history, to the Venezuelan revolution, to Venezuela's history. And I believe she's one of the most courageous women I've ever met. When she was Minister of Foreign Affairs, she had nine deputy ministers—nine vice ministers—and all of them were men.

They were all gentlemen—and one woman. When I came into a meeting and saw one woman among nine deputy ministers, I said, "They still can't figure out who else to put, because she's worth at least ten men." She's really a very brave woman, and I believe she's going to be absolutely loyal

to President Chávez, to President Maduro, to the Venezuelan people. But we have to understand the circumstances: our president and his wife are kidnapped. They're not imprisoned—they've been kidnapped illegally. They could be assassinated. Anything can happen.

President Trump, as it was natural for him to say, said, "We could do a second attack, and it would be a major attack. We will kill, and we will destroy the country." These are our circumstances. There was a Spanish writer and philosopher, Ortega y Gasset, who said, "Man is himself and his circumstances." So Delcy is herself and her circumstances. And we understand her circumstances. The people of Venezuela know what she's facing, and we know she's going to do her best to defend our sovereignty and to bring back President Maduro and Cilia Flores.

#Max

Well, I want to get to Trump's threats in a moment, but interim president Delcy Rodríguez—if I can call her that—has set up several commissions to return Nicolás Maduro and his kidnapped first lady, Cilia Flores, to Venezuela. There have been mass protests calling for their return. Rodríguez has vowed to bring Maduro and Flores back. What is the plan there? What is the plan to bring Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores back to Venezuela?

#Guest

Well, that's the main objective of Delcy, who is the acting president at the moment. We are absolutely convinced that all these accusations and the indictment against President Maduro and his wife are made up. There's a legal team that Delcy and our government have chosen, and we're in contact with them. They're going to defend President Maduro, even though it's an illegal trial—they're going to defend him within the legal system of the United States. Everything is being discussed and agreed with us. It's a major issue, because if there is any fairness in the U.S. legal system, President Maduro should be released at the next hearing. He has immunity—he's the head of state. The so-called "Cartel of the Sons" doesn't exist; it's all false, it's lies. But let's see what happens. The main objective of the Chavista government right now is not only to run the country, as we're doing, but also to bring President Maduro and his wife back to Venezuela.

#Max

Have you or anyone in the government had contact with the president or the first lady? And if so, can you tell us anything about their mental state or physical condition, since it's been reported that Cilia Flores was injured and bruised during the violent raid that led to her kidnapping?

#Guest

I'm not sure that... I believe there haven't been direct conversations with them, but there has been contact through the legal defense team, through the lawyers. You saw President Maduro when he

was saying good night and happy new year—even in the hearing he was very emphatic, and he showed his strength and his personality there. So he's in very good shape, mentally and physically. He knows he's facing an unjust situation, an unjust trial. As he said, he's a prisoner of war, and he's going to make his case. I'm sure, Max, just as it happened with Alex Saab, President Maduro and his wife will come back to Venezuela. We'll see them as soon as possible back home.

#Max

Trump has announced Stephen Miller as one of the kind of viceroys he intends to use to control Venezuela's economy or administer the remote occupation. Trump has also issued several public demands that Venezuela cut ties with Russia, China, Cuba, and Iran—kick them out of the country—and allow the U.S. to control Venezuela's oil industry. What's the response from the Venezuelan government to these obviously very onerous demands?

#Guest

Yeah, I believe that President Trump is really afraid of the multipolar world that has been born and that already exists—it's in place. President Chávez, Comandante Chávez, and President Maduro have been leaders of this new world that has emerged. And we will always have good relations with these major powers, with China and with Russia. But right now, we have circumstances we have to evaluate. Our oil has been seized, the oil tankers have been seized illegally. It's all barbaric.

It's something that... I believe even my son, who is seven years old—when I tell him what's happening, when he saw that a bomb fell close to where we were last Saturday—and when I explained it to him, he said, "How can that happen? How can they kidnap a president? How can they throw bombs and kill people when we've done nothing against that country?" So, in this situation, we have to evaluate every step we take, and every step the revolution and the government take, in order to preserve good relations with all the countries in the world, but also to have a good relationship with the United States, always respecting Venezuelan sovereignty.

#Max

You were in the room for many negotiations with the United States just about a year ago. Trump's envoy, Rick Grenell, was in Caracas, I believe, negotiating directly with Nicolás Maduro over Chevron's drilling license. And now it looks like negotiations have collapsed—or maybe they were interrupted by this military raid. We also saw the U.S. end negotiations with Iran by supporting Israel's strike on that country, a completely unprovoked attack. How does this affect your vision, and the Venezuelan government's vision, of negotiating with the U.S.? Can they be negotiated with in good faith?

#Guest

I think we have a chance—not only Venezuela, but all of Latin America—to build a new kind, a new type of negotiation with the United States. I believe we can respect each other when we sit down at the table and discuss certain topics, not through barbaric methods or warfare against the peoples of our countries, but by sitting down pragmatically, yet with principles. Each of our countries has its own principles, and we should try to reach agreements and respect them. It's not easy to trust the United States—not only during Trump's administration. Historically, it's difficult because they never comply. But still, in spite of that, I believe these difficult circumstances give us a chance to try to civilize our relations with the United States.

And we need our circumstances to also lead us to sit down and try to convince the United States, as President Maduro has said a million times, that we would like to have a good relationship with the United States—that we would like to sell more oil to them, of course, paying more for the oil at market prices; that we would like the United States to invest in mining; that we would like them to invest in the Venezuelan economy, but while respecting our legal framework and international law. So I believe we have another chance, and we hope the United States understands this, in spite of what they've done. I think we have an opportunity—a window—to sit down and make agreements that we can both respect.

#Max

Presidents Chávez and Maduro gave several speeches focused on explaining to the Venezuelan people what the meaning of the Bolivarian Revolution was. I think of Chávez's 2012 "Strike at the Helm" speech as one of those calling for a renewal of socialism. What would you say the meaning of the Bolivarian Revolution is today, after the kidnapping of President Maduro? What is Venezuela fighting for?

#Guest

Well, we have a historical background of confrontation. Ours is a region that has been under dispute. We have the Monroe Doctrine from the United States, and we have the Bolivarian Doctrine from South America. We believe that the peoples and countries of Latin America and the Caribbean should be independent, that we should come together in an integration process, and that we can establish a civilized dialogue with other powers in the world, including the United States. But the Monroe Doctrine—and the new Trump corollary that was recently added to the U.S. security doctrine—assumes that we belong to the United States. They want to annex our economies, our military forces, our cultural system. But that won't happen. This dispute could be eternal. We are very Bolivarian.

We believe we have to be independent, and we hope the United States understands that it needs to establish a new kind of relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean. We can share, on the terms set by the global economy and system of trade, our wealth and natural resources—but not by

imposing governments, annexing countries, bombing countries, or controlling countries. That's not the way. That's not going to happen. That's not the right way to do things. We've been in this confrontation for 200 years now. It will probably last a few more decades, but at some point, this is going to be resolved. And I'm sure that Bolívar is going to prevail, and Monroe is not going to win this battle.

#Max

Donald Trump has threatened, as you said, to attack again if Venezuela's government doesn't meet his demands. What can Venezuela's military and people do to deter that possibility? And what is the strategic plan from your point of view?

#Guest

First of all, the most important consequence of this attack is that Venezuela is at peace. Everything is calm, and that's a challenge for us—to maintain not only control, but peace, the economy, production, the working classes, universities, jobs, everything functioning normally. That's what we're trying to keep. The response of the Venezuelan people has shown a very high level of awareness of what's happening right now. Second, we have to make it clear to our people first, and to the world, that we are in charge, that we are running the country.

We have a government that was elected. The president is not here right now—he will come back. For the moment, we're with President Delcy Rodríguez as acting president. We're continuing with our plans, with our ideology, and defending Venezuelan sovereignty. That's the second challenge. And the other challenge is that we have to bring back President Maduro, because he's the president. We'll do our best to meet each of these challenges and objectives we've set.

#Max

Jorge Arreaza, thank you so much for joining us at The Grayzone.

#Guest

Thank you, Max. I hope we can have another interview soon, and that things are better—not only in Venezuela, but in the whole world. And that the hegemonic pretension of the United States stops, pauses, and understands that a new world has emerged, and that you have to respect the world and the peoples when they make such a revolutionary change in the international system.

#Max

Absolutely. We'll see you again here soon. Thanks again—thank you very much.