

INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

IRAN'S EXPANSION IN LATIN AMERICA AND ITS SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILE AND ARGENTINA

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ARTICLE SUMMARY

IRAN'S EFFORTS TO PENETRATE LATIN AMERICA STEM FROM ITS DESIRE FOR INTERNATIONAL PROWESS. UNLIKE VENEZUELA AND THE ALBA COUNTRIES –AND NOW EVEN BRAZIL – CHILE AND ARGENTINA HAVE NOT BEEN RECEPTIVE TO IRANIAN OVERTURES. BOTH COUNTRIES HAVE HAD A BUMPY PAST WITH IRAN. THE ARGENTINEAN CASE IS THE MOST DRAMATIC WITH IRANIAN OFFICIALS IMPLICATED IN THE 1992 AND 1994 BOMBINGS AGAINST THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BUENOS AIRES. IT IS, INDEED, THE LARGE, PREEMINENT JEWISH COMMUNITY IN ARGENTINA AND THE LARGE PALESTINIAN DIASPORA IN CHILE THAT MAKE THESE COUNTRIES SO ATTRACTIVE TO IRAN. THE PRIOR IS A TARGET AND THE LATTER A SUPPORTER FOR ITS REGIONAL DEPLOYMENT. IN THIS ABRIDGED ARTICLE, IVAN WITKER EXPLAINS WHY BOTH COUNTRIES SHOULD VIEW IRAN'S PRESENCE IN THE REGION AS A SECURITY CONCERN.



IRAN'S PENETRATION IN LATIN AMERICA emanates from Tehran's political decision to prove its international prowess. In 2008, Tehran initiated a hemispheric offensive based on politico-diplomatic overtures, support for the Shia communities and shared anti-American discourse with its local interlocutors, Venezuela and other members of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América, or ALBA). For differing reasons, the ALBA countries such as Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua have proven receptive to Iran's advancements. The success of Iran's strategy is corroborated by Brazil's political openness. Chile and Argentina, however, are more of anomalies. They form part of Iran's interest in the region, but neither of the two demonstrate much willingness to engage Iran. Unlike Brazil and the ALBA countries, neither Chile nor Argentina look to influence or demonstrate international capacity through relations with Iran.

Iran's relationship with Argentina, once more promising, today is mired by Tehran's involvement in the AMIA case. This irreversible impasse and the preeminence of the Jewish community put security as a conditional issue in Iranian-Argentine relations. Chile has had a historically cautious relationship with Iran which included oil purchases and attempted arms sales in the 1980's. Between Santiago and Tehran, there's more of a unilateral relationship, and it's still unclear as to where Chile figures in Iran's hemispheric agenda.

Iran's expansion in Latin America has only one objective: to demonstrate international prowess. It is proving its capacity to spread its religious message and vision to the world, to create new alliances and influence, but –above all- to draw close those who consider the US their principal enemy. The receptiveness of Venezuela and its small ALBA allies, as well as that of Brazil more recently, responds to a political-tactical impulse. Immersed in their own world views, these big and small South American countries are showing receptivity to Tehran regardless of their size, history and real powers to influence global change. Perhaps ignorant of Iran's significance in the world today, their aim is to demonstrate through this exotic contact, that they can play on the international stage.

For Venezuela and its ALBA cohorts, being part of the Iranian expansion –one of the largest perturbing elements of the Post-Cold War era– feeds into their anti-American -or rather, "anti-Imperialist" discourse as used by Chávez and Morales. Rather than cozying up with the ayatollas regarding the sense of spirituality and transcendence of Islam, they prefer back slapping, joking around and media coverage together with Ahmedinejad, the emblematic representative of evil. That way, Venezuela and the small countries of ALBA feel an active part of world politics.

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Everything indicates that it is a penetration strategy filled with peculiarities. Not only owed to the peripheral nature of Latin America, but also because historical events didn't even provide any clues of Iran's current expansion in the region. Some may argue that this is a normal result of the globalized world that is increasingly multipolar and multi-cultural and that the contact between nations and ethnicities and tribes keeps growing. However, the real causes and motivations for Iran's penetration should be encountered in the political realm.

IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY LOOKS, THROUGH A SYSTEMATIZED PENETRATION OF LATIN AMERICA, TO ACTIVATE THE ANTI-AMERICAN FOCUS IN THE HEART OF THE HEMISPHERE.

Accordingly, one must decipher if Iran's penetration strategy includes all or just some of the Latin American countries. Keeping in mind political and tactical considerations, Iran's interest in Latin America appears selectively differentiated, revealing a conceptual design and congruent practices. Iranian foreign policy looks, through a systematized penetration of Latin America, to activate the anti-American focus in the heart of the hemisphere.

Seen from Tehran, the result of this expansion is, until now, optimal. Towards the end of 2009, the Persian interest began to coincide with the Brazilian interest to act internationally with increased autonomy – which led to a public invitation for President Ahmedinejad to visit Brasilia. After the trip, Tehran became a relevant extra-regional actor in the hemisphere. Later, a group of Latin American countries receptive to the Iranian strategy have converged in useful collaboration in multi-lateral organizations like the UN, IAEA, OPEC and the Non-Aligned Movement and others. Therefore, in an attempt to highlight the capacity of a State (any State) to project itself internationally, one sees that the Iranian expansion has repercussions in hemispheric security.

Following closely with the definition of current world conflicts (asymmetrical violence and hybrid threats, to be more precise), Israel made three important decisions in 2009 with respect to the Iranian expansion in Latin America: a) an alert to the OAS member countries through an official letter of the danger of Iran's work in the region, which it took to the OAS conference in Tegucigalpa; b) trips by Foreign Secretary Avigdor Lieberman and from Infrastructure Secretary Uzi Landau to various Latin American countries explaining the Iran-Hezbollah nexus; c) the tour made by President Shimon Peres to Brazil and Argentina expressing his worry regarding the Iranian presence which goes beyond the diplomatic and commercial.

Israelis and Americans have expressed that the central focus of their worries is Venezuela's behavior and its support as a base of operations for the deployment of Iran in the region. They have a reasonable worry about the supply of Uranium to Iran from South American countries, especially Bolivia and Venezuela, as well as dual-use technology from Brazil and Argentina.

The Iranian expansion acquired more precise and systematic definition in February 2007 with the International Conference about Latin America in Tehran titled "Development in Latin America: the Role of the Status of the Future International System" which included the participation of Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, Cuba, Brazil, Uruguay and Ecuador and Latin American specialists from Italy, Russia and China. It was a seminar that enjoyed the sponsorship of the Iranian Foreign Relations Ministry and served to reveal the conceptual design and practices of the Iranian initiative. It helped to conceptually insert the spreading of the revolutionary currents of the times, looking to associate figures like Mostafa Chamran and Che Guevara as symbols of a "revolutionary meeting" between Iran and Latin America.

Indeed, the Iranian government invited Che Guevara's son and daughter. A few months later, in Tehran and Isfahan, also with sponsorship from the government, they held the First Latin American Literature Conference. There, the foreign minister Mehdi Mostafavi referred to the Iranian deployment, explaining that the epicenter would be the (re-opening of embassies in Latin America (Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Uruguay). Until now, Persian legations were already present in Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina. Mostafavi also announced during the conference that bilateral economic start-ups and exchanges between universities and cultural centers in



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Latin American countries will be part of their deployment.

Chile and Argentina represent a bit of an anomaly in the Iranian deployment. Neither one wants to bolster its influence or international influence through relations with Tehran, the enthusiasm is one-sided on the part of the Iranians. Moreover, the two countries exhibit a history of difficult and complex connections with Iran, and Iran's presence is seen as unusual, in the case of Chile, and traumatic and destabilizing in the case of Argentina. If it came down to the wishes of the palaces of San Martín and Carrera –for different reasons –they would feel relief if magically Iran didn't exist.

Therefore, Iran has tried different means to draw these countries closer.

In the case of Argentina, no demographic migratory, economic, or military factors really exist to explain Iran's interest –though there were rumors that Iran was interested in Argentina's nuclear program in the 1990s. Regardless, none of these issues could be considered a crucial factor to explain Iran's interest in Argentina. Argentina's large Jewish community estimated at 250,000, however, could be an explanatory factor as potential targets for its global deployment. There are some coherent elements in the anti-Jewish stance which has framed Iranian diplomacy since the end of the 1980s. History and dramatic events (the bombings of the Israeli embassy and the Jewish community center in the early 1990s) show a clear conceptual design and specific follow-through.

In the case of Chile, the penetration strategy is based on different motives than for Argentina. There are no relevant historical, demographic, economic or military reasons for Iran's interest in Chile. The only explanatory reason is the relative tranquility of the Chilean society, the predictability of its institutions and its increasing political and economic relations with the region, the United States and the Asian Pacific countries. These qualities make Chile a nice perch in which to observe hemispheric movements that Tehran deems in its interest. Secondly, they could consider the potential area of cooperation with the large community of Palestinian decedents that reside in Chile. Even though its majority isn't Muslim, that doesn't take away its profound sympathy for the Palestinian cause. And this is not a group that makes much distinction between the PLO and the pro-Iranian Hamas. One hypothesis for Iran's interest in Chile is to use it as an observation point and as lateral support for its deployment elsewhere in the region.

The continuous Iranian expansion in the hemisphere (and its connections to Hezbollah and similar groups) represents a similar –though differentiated problem –for both Chile and Argentina.

For Chile, it requires attention to eventual security challenges whether they be the direct or indirect use of Chile's territory for new hemispheric operations against Jewish, British, American or other targets. The transparency that defines the Chilean economy, could bring with it the possibility that its banks, its exchange houses, and its financial infrastructure –or even its Shia communities be used by terrorists groups like Hezbollah. One should not throw out the idea that Hamas (with its strong affinity to Hezbollah), tries to achieve recognition –even partial – amongst the large Palestinian community in Chile and ends up triangulating activities with Iran, something which is not infrequent.

In the political-diplomatic realm, the increasing Brazilian tendency to obtain margins of autonomy by establishing connections with the Iranian regime could have negative consequences (or at least uncomfortable consequences) for diplomacy in the region, including Chilean diplomacy, especially if Washington believes that they are surpassing reasonable boundaries. Therefore, a priority in the area of Chilean security in the years to come will be the continuous monitoring of American, Brazilian and Venezuelan visions with respect to new steps by the Iranians in the hemisphere. The focus will be on anti-terrorism as well as nuclear non-proliferation.

For Argentina, the importance of the Jewish community, in the international context that is forecasts for the post-Kirchner years, means that any reestablishment of diplomatic trust between Buenos Aires and Tehran will happen once some clarification is reached with regards to the Persian connection with Hezbollah as it relates to the Buenos

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Aires bombings in the 1990s. In the security realm, the surveillance of the Triple Frontier and other porous borders (especially if a Bolivia-Iran and Paraguay-Iran connections takes place) will be priorities. At the same time, the monitoring of Brazil's foreign policy with respect to Iran will become very relevant for Argentina. The measures imposed by the IAEA toward the exportation of dual use technologies will also be a significant challenge for Argentina as the deadline nears.

For the Romans, power rested on the nature of things –in rerum natura-, and today this hasn't changed substantially. As a consequence, the Iranian game of getting involved in the US spheres of influence like Venezuela and Brazil (for different and diverse reasons) and for these to accept a seal of approval from Iran, an actor that defies the world system, encounters its epitome in the Mefisto temptations. Temptations that even Doctor Fausto knew had a price. ■