



**CHARLES UNIVERSITY**

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Political Studies

# **Iran in Latin America: A Regional Perspective**

Master Thesis

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## **Abstract**

Iran's growing influence in Latin America has come as a surprise for many. Iran's diplomatic, commercial, and even cultural presence expanded steadily in the past two decades. While the subject is often discussed from a US-centric perspective, the political elements of the regional countries engaging with Iran are frequently overlooked. Additionally, a widespread belief suggests that Iran's success in Latin America is inherently linked to radical left-leaning governments. Hence, this work aims to analyze Iran's activity from a Latin American perspective and tries to elucidate if Iran's success can be sustained in times of political changes. Moreover, Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela had distinctive political, financial, and historical reasons to increase –or decrease– their interaction with Tehran, which goes beyond the political leaning of a respective government. However, each chose a different approach when dealing with Iran.

## **Keywords**

Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Iran Foreign Policy, Hezbollah, AMIA, Lula da Silva, Kirchner, Chavez

## **Abstrakt**

Rostoucí vliv Íránu v Latinské Americe pro mnohé překvapil. Íránská diplomatická, obchodní a dokonce i kulturní přítomnost v posledních dvou desetiletích neustále rostla. I když je toto téma často diskutováno z pohledu zaměřeného na USA, politické prvky regionálních zemí, které se zabývají Íránem, jsou často přehlíženy. Široká víra navíc naznačuje, že úspěch Íránu v Latinské Americe je neodmyslitelně spojen s radikálně levicovými vládami. Cílem této práce je proto analyzovat íránskou činnost z latinskoamerického hlediska a pokusit se objasnit, zda může být íránský úspěch v dobách politických změn udržen. Navíc Brazílie, Argentina a Venezuela měly výrazné politické, finanční a historické důvody ke zvýšení - nebo snížení - jejich interakce s Teheránem, což přesahuje politické sklony příslušné vlády. Při jednání s Íránem si však každý zvolil odlišný přístup.

## **Klíčová slova**

Brazílie, Argentina, Venezuela, íránská zahraniční politika, Hizballáh, AMIA, Lula da Silva, Kirchner, Chavez

## **Declaration of Authorship**

- 1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.**
- 2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.**
- 3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.**

**In Prague on \_\_\_\_\_ Alonso Leon \_\_\_\_\_**



# Master Thesis Proposal

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**Proposed Topic: Iran's Growing Influence in South America and the Effects of Internal Changes.**

## Topic Characteristics:

In the last few years, Iran's involvement in Latin America has increased substantially. The Iranian regime's presence in the region has intensified mostly backed by the wave of left-leaning governments that flourished throughout the region since the early 2000s. Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela, among others, have seen their partnership with Tehran strengthen while left-wing governments were in power. Economic cooperation has expanded steadily, as Iran sought to diversify its economy to overcome the economic sanctions imposed by the US, while illegal trade –mostly through Hezbollah– is becoming a more significant issue, as it has been pointed out by US authorities. Iran has also solidified its diplomatic presence in the region, with several tours being made by highly ranked Irani officials in South America. Last but not least, Iran has developed a network of cultural centers, mosques, and schools, showing a genuine interest in promoting its ideology in the region.

This thesis will mainly focus on the relation between Iran and three Latin American countries: Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela. It will describe the reasons for Iran's interest in these countries, emphasizing on how the effectiveness of Iran's agenda differs when there are governmental changes -such as Brazil and Argentina- or internal political crises -in the case of Venezuela-.

## Hypotheses

- 1) As Iran seeks to be involved with anti-American governments, left-wing governments are highly responsible for Iran's success. Therefore Iran's effectiveness will diminish considerably when internal changes or a major political crisis occur.
  
- 2) Iran's agenda can be successful regardless of internal changes or turmoil. It has already built structures that allow it to work steadily, and it can only strengthen its alliances in the region.

### **Methodology:**

A qualitative academic literature analysis will be used to identify different scholars' views and explain the role of Iran in Latin America. Among other sources, statements from governmental institutions, books, publications in newspapers and magazines will be used. Interviews with experts will be conducted in order to get a deeper understanding of the subject. Besides, a comparative analysis will be done to identify any trends or changes in the cooperation between Iran and South American states when internal changes occur.

### **Outline:**

1. Introduction.
2. Overview of Iran's role in Latin America:
  - 2.1. Economic.
  - 2.2. Diplomatic.
  - 2.3. Militarily.
  - 2.4. Cultural.
3. Hezbollah and illicit trade.
4. Effectiveness and internal change:
  - 4.1. Argentina-Iran relation.
  - 4.2. Brazil-Iran relation.
  - 4.3. Venezuela-Iran relation.
5. Possible trends due to internal changes.
6. Conclusion.
7. References / Bibliography

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4. Ilan Berman (2012). "Iran Courts Latin America". Middle East Quarterly, Vo. 19 Issue
5. Ely Karmon (2010), "Iran Challenges the United States in Its Backyard, in Latin America", American Foreign Policy Interests, 32: 276-296.

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## Introduction

In the last few years, the Islamic Republic of Iran's involvement in Latin America has increased substantially. Iran's actions have been part of a methodical strategy that aims to expand its influence and capacity in the Western Hemisphere. Iran's relationship with Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil exemplifies, in different spheres, its advancement in the region. With its actions, Iran seeks to project an image of global power, counter political and economic isolation, gather diplomatic support for its nuclear program, and strike back at the United States in what is considered its backyard.<sup>1</sup>

Although Iran's cooperation with Latin American states can be regarded as a consequence of the current multipolarity in the world order, it can also be argued that Iran's relation with left-wing, populist governments go beyond the dynamic of interstate relations in today's globalized world. Nevertheless, Tehran's actions throughout the Western Hemisphere have created tension and security concerns, especially among US security experts.

Politically and ideologically, the Iranian regime intensified its presence in the region primarily endorsed by the proliferation of left-wing governments that flourished throughout Latin America since Hugo Chavez became Venezuela's president in 1998. Chavez's "twenty-first century Socialism" was highly ideologically-driven and had revolutionary ambitions. Moreover, Chavez sought international acceptance and support by championing an anti-American, anti-imperialist stance, and Iran, especially during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013), found in Caracas a valuable partner willing to disrupt the regional and international order.

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<sup>1</sup> Leah Soibel, "Iran in Our Own Backyard: Hezbollah Operatives Are Rampant in Remote Areas of Latin America." *New York Daily News*, December 22, 2011.  
<http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/iran-backyard-hezbollah-operatives-rampant-remote-areas-latin-america-article-1.995069>

In Argentina's case, the relationship was initially based on nuclear collaboration during the late 1980s –disregarding Washington's protestation– and trade. However, Argentina's disposition towards Iran radically changed when the Islamic Republic presumably assisted Hezbollah in the perpetration of two terrorist attacks on Jewish targets in Buenos Aires in the 1990s. The relationship worsened when former Argentine President Néstor Kirchner decided to openly accuse Iran's lack of cooperation with the bombing investigations at international forums, further damaging Iran's reputation.<sup>2</sup> However, during Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's second tenure, the bond gradually improved, and diplomatic and economic activity resumed.

Meanwhile, Brazil has reinforced its relationship with the Persian nation based on economic interdependence. Moreover, since President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) ascended to power in 2003, the partnership entered a new stage politically and diplomatically. For instance, Lula publicly supported Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and even conducted nuclear negotiations with Iran and Turkey.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, former President Dilma Rousseff took a more conservative approach. Iran's human rights abuses and defiance of international norms forced Rousseff to step back and rethink the relation between Brasilia and Tehran. Afterward, as the political scene changed in Brazil, political cooperation decreased. However, economic exchanges remained healthy.

Another critical element of Iran's expansion in the subcontinent relates to Tehran's participation in illegal activities –mostly performed through Hezbollah, Iran's long-time proxy–. From the well-established lucrative operations in the Triple Border, a semi-lawless region where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay converge, to drug trafficking in Colombia and Venezuela, to the illegal acquisition of Venezuelan passports, Iran has

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<sup>2</sup> Gustavo D. Perednik, "Iranian Terror and Argentinian Justice: The Case of Alberto Nisman, the Prosecutor Who Knew Too Much." *Jewish Political Studies Review* 27, no. 3/4 (2016): 34-45. Accessed July 20, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/44510569](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44510569).

<sup>3</sup> Marcos Guedes, "Brazil, the United States and the Tehran Declaration." *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 61(1), (November 2018), DOI: 10.1590/0034-7329201800109

successfully developed illicit networks all over the region. As a result, Hezbollah and Iran collect large amounts of money. Moreover, the establishment of friendly relationships with other non-state actors and criminal organizations can pose a severe security threat to the region.<sup>4</sup>

The central idea behind this work is to analyze Iran's involvement in the region from a Latin American viewpoint. Since most of the research on Iran's operations in Latin America is produced from a US-centric perspective, the topic, in many instances, revolves only around US security implications. This perspective often perceives Iranian interaction as a critical threat to the region, though little attention is given to the internal political elements that drive some of these countries to tighten –or loosen– their partnerships with the Asian country. The US-centric position usually suggests that Iran's success in the region is predominantly due to radical, left-wing governments. However, it ignores and minimizes other factors, such as economic elements, internal political crises, or the "Global South" movement that aimed to enhance cooperation between Iran and Brazil.

## **1.1 Research Aim**

This thesis overviews Iran's growing influence in Latin America. It analyzes the extent, depth, and implications of Iran's actions from a Latin American perspective. Moreover, as Iranian engagement in the region is often linked to left-wing governments, this work tries to analyze other elements affecting the relationship in order to understand Iran's advancement better. The research question that this thesis is committed to answering is: can Iran's expansion in the region be sustained when internal political changes occur?

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<sup>4</sup> William Costanza, "Hizballah and Its Mission in Latin America," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35:3 (2012): 193-210, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2012.648155

As aforementioned, US reports concerning Iranian operations are frequently quite alarming. Hence, developing a greater understanding of how internal politics shape the relation between Latin American states and Iran may contribute to answering a subquestion: has Iran built the kind of structures that can make it a threat to the region's security?

The answers to these questions might contribute towards the promotion of policy decisions made by countries, individually or as a bloc, to counter any potential security threats or destabilizing forces, or, on the contrary, bolster the beneficial aspects of the relationship. Additionally, it aims to elucidate if the characterization of the issue made by US circles holds ground.

The countries chosen for in-depth analysis are –in the author's opinion– diverse, with each of them having different characteristics regarding their relation with Iran. This thesis explores Iran's interaction with Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina. Venezuela, because of its current importance as the most prominent member of the radical left in the region, Brazil as Iran's largest trading partner, and Argentina because of their intense and troubled relationship, among other reasons.

It is important to note that this work covers Iran's advancement in the region from the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) until Hassan Rouhani (2013–present). However, to contextualize Iran's presence in Latin America, it is sometimes necessary to analyze Iran's foreign activity after the 1979 revolution. Similarly, the Argentine section covers a more extended period due to historical events that affect their relationship to these days.

## **1.2 Hypotheses**

1. Iran's effectiveness is highly dependent on certain political circumstances. Therefore, as the political landscape changes and left-wing governments vanish, it becomes harder for Tehran to sustain its presence in the region. Hence, the Iran threat is reduced to Hezbollah's operations or alliances with dictatorships such as Venezuela.
2. The structures and alliances created under left-wing governments can sustain Iran's actions in the region. Furthermore, Tehran can strengthen these alliances based on economic interdependence and political alliances with Non-Aligned states.

### **1.3 Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative approach focusing on documented historical data to describe and explain Iran's engagement in the region and how internal political elements affected Iranian activity. Analyzing documents allows the establishment of a chronology of events to infer how Iran's presence in Latin America has changed over time, and how internal changes have affected their goals and objectives. Hence, this study examined qualitative documents that have been published in scholarly journals, scholarly books, major media outlets, non-governmental organization reports, inter-governmental organization reports, think tanks, and US government reports. To analyze economic data and determine variations in trade, it used information from the United Nations Comtrade site, The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Atlas of Economic Complexity of Harvard University.

### **1.4 Theoretical Framework**



Iran's strategy in Latin America is highly dependent on the US's attitude towards the Islamic regime. As long as Washington threatens the regime's national security and survival, Iran will continue to find ways to counter the US in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>5</sup> The proximity to the US, the need for diplomatic legitimacy, economic self-interest in times of sanctions, and the acquisition of nuclear materials are among the reasons for Iran to pursue an active and, sometimes, pragmatic foreign policy in the region. Moreover, any government facing threats of foreign aggression and susceptible to constant outside pressure will naturally attempt to look for friends and allies wherever possible, with the primary goal of improving its deterrence and defense capabilities.

With this background in mind, two theories can help explain the causes of the establishment of a more substantial relation between Tehran and Latin American governments, as well as to elucidate if Iran's actions can be sustained in the long-term.

One theory suggests that Iran can sustain its presence in the region based on ideological pragmatism. The increment of international sanctions on Iran forced Tehran to seek alternative measures to counter US pressure. By associating itself with states such as Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, and other Latin American states, Iran aims to extend trade, form political and diplomatic alliances to counter its isolation and preserve its nuclear program.<sup>6</sup> Iran's ideological pragmatism suggests that the regime has tried to accommodate itself in a region of particular interest. Therefore, it can be argued that Iran's policy towards the region is of strategic interest rather than ideological, which would facilitate Tehran's goal of maintaining a robust presence in the region even when adverse political changes occur.

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<sup>5</sup> Saideh Lotfian, "The New Role of Latin America in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 1, no. 3 (Fall 2011)

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Johnson. "Iran's Influence in the Americas, Full Report," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)* (March 2012): 7-8. Accessed July 20, 2020. [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/120312\\_Johnson\\_Iran%27sInfluence\\_web.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120312_Johnson_Iran%27sInfluence_web.pdf)

The establishment of some sort of economic interdependence with Brazil and Argentina –two countries with large agricultural industries looking to increase trade abroad– is the central pillar sustaining this argument.<sup>7</sup> Iran seeks to secure essential goods and avoid isolation in times of economic sanctions, and Argentina and Brazil aim to increase their exports to the Persian nation –regardless of the political leanings of their respective governments in office–. This would mean that internal political changes from left-wing to right-wing governments in Latin America would not make a significant difference in Iran's goal of maintaining trade and avoiding isolation. Nevertheless, according to this line of thought, Iran is pushed to act more transparently, as Brazil and Argentina's institutional framework would force Tehran to do so.<sup>8</sup>

The second theory postulates that a shared ideology based on an anti-imperialist sentiment brought these countries together.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Iran's success would be highly related to governments with similar ideological postures. One of the Islamic Republic's fundamental pillars relies on supporting the oppressed peoples, often peripheral states that have been subject to US interventionism. Furthermore, Iran's emergence as a modern state comes with empathy towards developing nations with colonial past and discontent regarding major powers. As Ayatollah Khomeini noted, Iran should stand with the oppressed peoples of the world, regardless of religious affiliation.<sup>10</sup> Therein lies the attraction for engaging countries in the Western Hemisphere that are not aligned with Washington's policies. Moreover, although Iran has little in common culturally, religiously, and historically with these countries, a deep mutual distrust of Washington's foreign policy has brought them closer together.

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Farah, "Iran in Latin America: An Overview," in *Iran in Latin America: Threat or 'Axis of Annoyance'?*, ed. Cynthia Arnson, Haleh Esfandiari, and Adam Stubits (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars): 13-18. Accessed July 10, 2020, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/Iran\\_in\\_LA.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/Iran_in_LA.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Elodie Brun, "Irán y Venezuela, Hacia un Acercamiento Completo," *Revista Politeia*, N° 40, vol. 31. Instituto de Estudios Políticos, UCV, (2008): 19-40.

<sup>10</sup> "Khomeini: "We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology"." *MERIP Reports*, no. 88 (1980): 22-25. Accessed July 27, 2020. DOI:10.2307/3011306.

For instance, Iran's initial contact with Cuba and Nicaragua right after the 1979 revolution and its participation in the Non-Aligned Movement reveal Tehran's predisposition towards left-leaning, anti-imperial movements.<sup>11</sup> Several years after, as Hugo Chavez's leadership grew throughout the region, a bloc of left-leaning governments –also described as the "Pink Tide"– sought to shift away from neoliberalism and Western institutions, and Iran –a state that has been repeatedly coerced economically by the West– found commonalities in this regard. Despite some ideological differences among the "Pink Tide" nations, most newly-elected leaders mobilize large sectors of their population by promoting a nationalist discourse. Most leaders emphasized the need for economic reforms and redistributive policies to tackle the spread of social and economic inequality. Latin America's left shared a joint opposition to the "Washington Consensus" –a set of free-market economic policies supported by prominent financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the US Treasury–, while defying US policies in areas such as free trade, foreign policy, neoliberal policies of privatization, and cuts in social spending. Animosities against American interventionism, imperialism, and the fight for social justice are the core tenets of this ideological alliance. Iran and Venezuela –as well as Lula da Silva's Brazil to some degree– sought to reinforce continental and transcontinental solidarity, favoring peripheral states to fortify their sovereignty.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Argentina, under Nestor and Cristina Kirchner, also aimed to enforce South-South cooperation. However, Argentina's relationship with Iran was deeply restrained by the two terrorist attacks on Argentine soil in the 1990s.

It can be argued that this line of thought is the Ayatollah's favorite; an ideology-driven foreign policy in which Iranian influence thrives when left-leaning, anti-Western governments are in power. This argument also supports the notion and importance of

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<sup>11</sup> "The Havana Summit." *Third World Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1980): 328-38. Accessed July 20, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/3991453](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3991453).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Marthoz, "Venezuela's Foreign Policy: a Mirage Based on a Curse," *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*. (November 2014). Accessed July 15, 2020. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/186054/5ac5220191adf69475fb57f9e303479c.pdf>

the Global South and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), both aiming to decrease Western influence in their countries by increasing cooperation among developing countries remains vital for.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, this theory can be used to analyze the bond created by Iran and Venezuela, and, to some extent, Iran and Lula's Brazil. However, the problem with strong ideological-driven alliances is that they tend to die off as political changes occur. This was the case when Lula's and, to a lesser extent, Dilma Rousseff's presidency ended in Brazil.

Another element to consider is the tremendous influence the US still exercises in most Latin American states. Although we live in a multipolar era, left-leaning governments in Latin America are still wary of US retaliation, therefore cooperating with a rebel state such as Iran remains risky.

## **Chapter One: Literature Review**

With the ascension to power of several left-wing leaders in the early 2000s in Latin America, the Islamic Republic of Iran saw an opportunity to expand its influence throughout the region. Scholars and security experts often perceive the election and popularity of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela as a turning point for Iran's penetration in the Hemisphere.<sup>14</sup> Chavez's revolutionary ambitions swiftly found adepts in Tehran. On the one hand, the anti-imperialist, anti-US bloc led by Chavez –a fervent defendant of Cuba's revolution– found similarities with Iran's anti-Western discourse. Consequently, soon after Chavez took power, Venezuela became a pivotal advocate of Iran. On the

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<sup>13</sup> Michal Onderco, "The Global South, Nuclear Politics, and Iran." in *Iran's Nuclear Program and the Global South: The Foreign Policy of India, Brazil, and South Africa*. (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), 13-16.

<sup>14</sup> Ilan Berman, "What Iran Wants in the Americas," in *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, ed. Ilan Berman, Joseph Humire (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 2-4.; Elodie Brun, "Irán y Venezuela, Hacia un Acercamiento Completo," *Revista Politeia*, N° 40, vol. 31. Instituto de Estudios Políticos, UCV, (2008): 19-40.

other hand, even though Brazil's President, Lula da Silva, was not as radical and vehement as Chavez, he also intended to reach new levels of independence internationally, claims Vigevani.<sup>15</sup> He successfully formed new blocs and alliances among the Global South, which favored Iran's goal of becoming a more prominent player in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>16</sup>

Although some scholars trace back the Iran-Latin America relation to the late 1990s, the early 2000s, diplomatic contact between the then newly-formed Islamic Republic and leftist Latin American states began promptly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The formation of the Islamic Republic pushed Iran into the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), tightening ties at governmental level with socialist, leftist, anti-US members, most notably Cuba and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.<sup>17</sup> Humire adds that during the 1980s, Iranian clandestine networks operated in Latin America under the pretense of cultural and commercial exchanges.<sup>18</sup>

Lotfian describes US sanctions, the constant military presence of Western troops in the Middle East, and the US support for states antagonizing Iran's quest for regional hegemony as some of the reasons for Iran's actions in Latin America.<sup>19</sup> According to Heydemann, Iran's objective to find "alternative allies" reflects deep pragmatism; Tehran has developed bonds with governments that share an anti-Western or non-aligned perspective, regardless of their political or ideological orientation. Moreover, the regime has tried to establish formal commercial agreements and multiple bilateral arrangements to "institutionalize alternative networks of power in the international

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<sup>15</sup> Tullo Vigevani and Gabriel Cepaluni, "Lula's Foreign Policy and the Quest for Autonomy through Diversification," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 7 (2007): 1309-326. Accessed July 20, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/20455000](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20455000).

<sup>16</sup> Michal Onderco, "Brazil" in *Iran's Nuclear Program and the Global South: The Foreign Policy of India, Brazil, and South Africa*. (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), 43-57.

<sup>17</sup> Saideh Lotfian, "The New Role of Latin America in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 1, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 34-35.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Humire, "Preface, Iran's Intrusion: an Overview," in *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, ed. Ilan Berman, Joseph Humire (London: Lexington Books, 2014)

<sup>19</sup> Lotfian, "Iran's Foreign Policy," 36-37.

system."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Farah claims that Tehran is undoubtedly trying to build alternative power structures, free of US dominance.<sup>21</sup>

According to Johnson, the Islamic Republic's involvement in the region is due to its necessity to portray an image of global power, extend trade, interweave its finances into the international banking system, and form political alliances. By most measures, Iran has had partial success; its influence remains small and only within a handful of governments.<sup>22</sup> Iran might not represent an existential threat to the US, but it could eventually become a more severe danger if the regime's support for terrorist organizations deepens. Additionally, having Iranian assets near US soil can ultimately make matters worse if Iran successfully develops its nuclear program. The lack of transparency prevailing in the Iran-Venezuela relationship, where personalized relationships have largely substituted institutionalized, formal policies, is a matter of concern for many security experts.<sup>23</sup>

Once Chavez took office, establishing an international coalition with anti-imperialist states seemed like a logical step to pursue. Karmon claims that Chavez's firm support and the creation of ALBA,<sup>24</sup> helped Iran deepen its connection with the region. The rise of Chavez and his "Bolivarian revolution" stimulated a dramatic expansion of Iran's diplomatic and political presence throughout the region.<sup>25</sup> Most experts agree that Tehran's relations with governments in Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, and Nicaragua entered

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<sup>20</sup> Steven Heydemann, "Iran's Alternative Allies," in Robin Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics and US Policy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 193-199.

<sup>21</sup> Farah, "An Overview," 15.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, "Full Report," vii.

<sup>23</sup> Adam Stubits, "Introduction," in *Iran in Latin America: Threat or 'Axis of Annoyance'?*, ed. Cynthia Arnson, Haleh Esfandiari, and Adam Stubits (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars), 5-8.

<sup>24</sup> ALBA stands for "The Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas," an anti-US regional bloc created by Chávez in the early 2000s and integrated by Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and several Caribbean states. Iran joined the bloc as an observer. Ecuador and Bolivia are now former members.

<sup>25</sup> Ely Karmon, "Iran's Challenge to the United States in Latin America: An Update", *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 33: 2, (2011): 93-98. DOI: 10.1080/10803920.2011.571060.; Ely Karmon, "Iran's Challenge to the United States in Latin America," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 32(5), (October 2011): 276-296. DOI: 10.1080/10803920.2010.517123

a new stage with Chavez's aid. Bonded mostly by a shared opposition to US foreign policy, Iran and these Central and South American states found a common ideological cause.<sup>26</sup>

In the case of Argentina, Botta claims that its disposition towards Tehran is highly dependent on Buenos Aires' relation with the US.<sup>27</sup> And although Argentina under Nestor and Cristina Kirchner's leadership aimed to form independent alliances, free of Western dominance, Iran was not an active participant in these connections. Tehran's unwillingness to cooperate with the AMIA bombing investigation, which severely affected the relationship, especially during Nestor Kirchner's government, is perhaps the main reason to restraint Iran's intentions to expand.<sup>28</sup> However, rapprochement occurred during Cristina Kirchner's presidency, as Chavez's Venezuela began to exert more influence on her.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, other factors –such as economic crisis and internal political instability– have determined Argentina's engagement with Tehran, argues Todesca.<sup>30</sup>

As for Brazil, the relationship experienced a peak under Lula's leadership. Lula's Brazil had clear intentions of becoming an active participant in international politics, setting itself apart from US hegemony and leading a bloc of emerging regional powers. Lula planned to diversify Brazil's international partners, both economically and diplomatically, and Iran became an essential component of his agenda.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Dilma Rousseff distanced Brazil from Iran due to Tehran's human rights violations and her

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<sup>26</sup> Ilan Berman, "Iran and the New Monroe Doctrine," *Foreign Affairs*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2016-09-02/iran-and-new-monroe-doctrine>

<sup>27</sup> Paulo Botta, "Argentina e Irán entre 1989 y 1999: Entre las sombras de los atentados terroristas y el cambio de política exterior argentina," *Revista Iberoamericana de Filosofía, Política y Humanidades*, año 14, nº 28. (Segundo semestre de 2012): 155–178.

<sup>28</sup> Perednik, "Iranian Terror," 42

<sup>29</sup> "Argentine-Iranian relations: A pact with the devil?" *The Economist*, Jan 29, 2013. Accessed July 20, 2020. <https://www.economist.com/americas-view/2013/01/29/a-pact-with-the-devil>

<sup>30</sup> Nicolas Todesca. "Argentina e Irán: determinantes y evolución del comercio bilateral durante la presidencia de Cristina Fernández". (Tesis de Maestría, Universidad Di Tella, 2015), 46-56.

<sup>31</sup> Paulo Botta, "Brasil ¿El nuevo mejor amigo de Irán en América Latina?," *Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina*. Año VII Número 36 (May 2010): 8-12. Accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.resdal.org/newsletter/newsletter-RESDAL-Numero-36-mayo-2010.pdf>



willingness to improve Brazil's relationship with the US. Nonetheless, the relationship has proven to be durable in terms of trade, even when ideologically opposing governments were in power.

In economic terms, there are different opinions regarding Iran's reach. Ozkan argues that there is a tendency to overestimate Iran's economic actions because most economic agreements involving Iran and Latin American states fail to materialize; therefore, economic interdependence remains marginal. Nevertheless, it is important to differentiate between the agreements Iran has signed with Venezuela and the ALBA bloc and the commercial ties with Argentina and Brazil. While the lack of transparency makes it challenging to quantify how many deals happen, trade between Iran and Argentina and Brazil remains transparent in numbers. Moreover, it has been growing consistently in the last two decades in Brazil's case, while it has had fluctuations in the case of Argentina. Official trade with Venezuela remains almost non-existent.<sup>32</sup> Hence, for countries with a large agricultural sector like Brazil and Argentina, expanding trade with Iran proves economically beneficial, regardless of ideological positions. Meanwhile, from an Iranian perspective, securing essential goods remains vital, while maintaining economic interdependence with Brazil and Argentina allows Tehran to work its way through politically, even when dealing with governments of dissimilar ideological beliefs.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, although the commercial relation with Venezuela remains minimal, Iran's use of Venezuela's banking system, which is employed to surpass the financial sanctions on Iranian banks imposed by the US, is perceived as a considerable benefit for Iran. Many believe that Iran is laundering sanctioned funds and introducing them into the Latin American financial system.<sup>34</sup> The ALBA's virtual currency, the SUCRE, could be used as an ideal sanctions-busting method for Iran to gain access to US dollars.

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<sup>32</sup> Mehmet Ozkan, "Iranian Foreign Policy Toward Latin America", Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara, (July 2017). Accessed July 20, 2020.

[https://iramcenter.org/d\\_hbanaliz/Mehmet\\_OYzkan-Iranian\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_toward\\_Latin\\_America.pdf](https://iramcenter.org/d_hbanaliz/Mehmet_OYzkan-Iranian_Foreign_Policy_toward_Latin_America.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Paul Antonopoulos, "The Unlikely Friends: Iranian–Latin American Relations and Washington's Anxiety," *Strategic Analysis*, 42:2, (2018): 154-167. DOI: [10.1080/09700161.2018.1439330](https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2018.1439330)

<sup>34</sup> Berman, "In the Americas," 4-6.



Experts also suspect that Venezuela's financial system is used to finance terrorist activities in the region. Moreover, Berman argues that Iran's covert operations, support for terrorist groups, and military actions in the area are financed by Iranian money through Venezuela.<sup>35</sup>

Iran's nuclear program and the import of nuclear materials from the region –especially from Bolivia and Venezuela– perturbs scholars and security experts.<sup>36</sup> Besides, Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina have been very receptive to Iran's nuclear program in different ways and times. While Lula publicly spoke in favor of Iran developing nuclear energy, Venezuela –supposedly– has provided nuclear resources,<sup>37</sup> and so did Argentina in the past. Lula's Brazil and Venezuela publicly supported Iran's right to develop its nuclear program, which contributed to strengthening their relationship.

According to Watson, Latin America could potentially have large deposits of uranium and thorium (used as nuclear fuel), as well as other raw materials such as beryllium, zirconium, and hafnium, which are necessary for nuclear reactors.<sup>38</sup> In the past, under intense US pressure, Argentina canceled an agreement with Iran for uranium enrichment and substantial water production facilities in 1990.<sup>39</sup>

Additionally, the creation of a military school in Bolivia, under the sponsorship and supervision of both Venezuela and Iran, has generated fear among security experts.<sup>40</sup> There is evidence showing Venezuelan military forces training alongside Iranian personnel. Chavez, notably, showed a particular interest in asymmetric warfare tactics.

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<sup>35</sup> Ilan Berman, "Iran Courts Latin America," *Middle East Quarterly*, Volume 19, (Summer 2012): 63-69.

<sup>36</sup> Penny L. Watson, "On the 25th Anniversary of Michael Desch's When the Third World Matters: Explaining Why Iran's Latin America Grand Strategy Poses a Security Threat to the United States," *Democracy and Security*, 16:1, 60-61. DOI: 10.1080/17419166.2019.1566064

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Penny L. Watson, "Iran's Latin America Strategy: 2005 to Present," *Democracy and Security*, 13:2, (2007): 132-133. DOI: [10.1080/17419166.2016.1264304](https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2016.1264304)

<sup>39</sup> Paulo Botta, "La cooperación en el ámbito nuclear entre Argentina e Irán:(1986-1997)", *Centro de Estudios en Relaciones Internacionales de Rosario*, número 101 (2010): 4-8

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Johnson, "Iran Is Working Hard to Revive Anti-U.S. Operations in Latin America," *Foreign Policy*, June 1, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/01/iran-venezuela-alliances-latin-america/>

A common tactic associated with asymmetric warfare is terrorism.<sup>41</sup> Venezuela, suggest Hirst, entered this dark world by allowing Hezbollah "to plan, fundraise, train, coordinate, and carry out operations, mostly fundraising and intelligence collection."<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Hezbollah has developed cells in the Triple Border Area (TBA), where Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil converge, and reports are showing close collaboration with Venezuela's government, Colombia's FARC, and Mexican drug cartels.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, another aspect of Iran's ideological immersion in Latin America is what Ozkan calls 'Shiite Propaganda': the opening of religious and cultural centers throughout the region and the recruitment of local students traveling to Iran for educational purposes.<sup>44</sup> The establishment of an Iranian-sponsored television network (HispanTV) is yet another step to spread and promote the regime's message abroad.<sup>45</sup> However, as these actions are costly, and Iran faces economic distress, most centers have shut down. Therefore, Iran's attempt to spread its revolution through cultural promotion has been diminished, with the notable exception of HispanTV.

## Iran's Foreign Policy

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has become a key actor in the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Iran has continuously been in the middle of deep tensions due to its geostrategic position and interaction with other global and regional actors. Ayatollah Khomeini's influence in Iran's political system shaped the Islamic Republic's internal and external policies. Khomeini sought to execute a foreign policy based upon

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<sup>41</sup> Watson, "2005 to Present". 134-137.

<sup>42</sup> Joel Hirst, "The ALBA, Iran's Gateway," in *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, ed. Ilan Berman, Joseph Humire (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 25-26

<sup>43</sup> Douglas Farah, "Report," *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College*, (2012): 14-18. Accessed July 20, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11848](http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11848)

<sup>44</sup> Ozkan, "Toward Latin America", 7-8.

<sup>45</sup> Tereza Dvorakova, "HispanTV: Iran's Attempts to Influence The Spanish Speaking World," Radio Farda, April 19, 2020,

<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/hispanTV-iran-s-attempts-to-influence-the-spanish-speaking-world-/30564208.html>

maintaining Iran's sovereignty and independence from the West and advocated to export Iran's revolution abroad.<sup>46</sup> Khomeini promoted a discourse of 'Neither East nor West, but the Islamic Republic,' supported militant Islamic and opposition groups in other Middle Eastern countries, and often rejected the international order and norms.<sup>47</sup> All these actions drove Iran apart from the global powers and almost all of its regional neighbors. Soon after the revolution, Iran became increasingly isolated, forcing the regime to seek allies overseas.<sup>48</sup>

For the Ayatollah, the regime's survival was linked to Iran's capacity to remain independent of the superpowers. Moreover, while acquiring a nuclear weapon was perhaps the best method to establish legitimacy and secure Iran's sovereignty, some reports claimed that Khomeini was against developing nuclear or chemical weapons due to religious reasons. (Khomeini strictly refused to use nuclear and chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq war).<sup>49</sup> However, Khomeini was determined to enforce Iran's sovereignty and increase Iran's importance globally. Furthermore, as the first true modern Islamic State, the Ayatollah believed that Iran "must remain independent of the superpowers, but it must seek to promote just Islamic societies in other regions."<sup>50</sup> Khomeini thought that Muslims should form a single entity and that existing borders among them were artificial. Additionally, Khomeini believed Iran was to be the standard-bearer for the dispossessed and oppressed, regardless of religious background. According to Ramazani, in Khomeini's worldview, "Islamic democracy" was superior to both Eastern and Western types of democracies. In Khomeini's words: "We should try hard to export our revolution to the world. We should set aside the

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<sup>46</sup> Kasra Aarabi, "The Fundamentals of Iran's Islamic Revolution," *Institute for Global Change*, (February 11, 2019):

<sup>47</sup> Maziar Behrooz, "Trends in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979-1988," in *Neither East Nor West*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Mark J. Gasiorowski (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 14-15.

<sup>48</sup> Shireen Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2010), .; Loftian, "Iran's Foreign Policy," 35-36.

<sup>49</sup> Gareth Porter, "When the Ayatollah Said No to Nukes," *Foreign Policy*, October 16, 2014. Accessed July 20, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/16/when-the-ayatollah-said-no-to-nukes/>

<sup>50</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, "We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology," MERIP Reports, no. 88 (1980): 22-25. Accessed July 29, 2020. doi:10.2307/3011306.

thought that we do not export our revolution, because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently and is the supporter of all the oppressed peoples of the world."<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the supreme leader sent a letter to Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev suggesting that he should "study and conduct research into Islam," and "not fall into the prison of the West and the Great Satan." Khomeini was convinced that the Iranian revolution was the natural successor to Soviet Communism, and declared: "I openly announce that the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the greatest and most powerful base of the Islamic world, can easily help fill up the ideological vacuum of your system."

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The Ayatollah's plan to export the revolution to all Islamic and 'oppressed' countries had effects shortly after the 1979 revolution. Iran attended the Non-aligned Movement's (NAM) Summit in Havana in September of 1979, the first-ever NAM meeting for Iran to attend as a member after the fall of the pro-West Iranian monarchy. The summit helped establish a connection between Iran and Cuba and between Iran and other socialist, leftist, and generally anti-US members of the Movement (including the Sandinistas in Nicaragua).<sup>53</sup> At the time, both Cuba and Nicaragua were governed by radical left-leaning regimes who opposed US interventionism and had revolutionary ambitions. It was the Islamic Republic's first engagement in Latin America.

Before the 1979 revolution, Iran's connection with Latin American states was minimal and mostly performed through minor economic agreements and symbolic diplomatic exchanges. The establishment of a political connection with Venezuela in the 1960s as co-founders of the OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) was perhaps the most prominent link to the region.<sup>54</sup> However, a drastic diplomatic shift happened once Mohammad Reza Pahleví, Shah of Iran, was overthrown and the

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<sup>51</sup> Rouhollah Ramazani, *"Independence Without Freedom, Iran's Foreign Policy,"* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 116.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 135-136.

<sup>53</sup> John A Graham . "THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT AFTER THE HAVANA SUMMIT." *Journal of International Affairs* 34, no. 1 (1980): 153-60. Accessed July 29, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/24356346](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24356346).

<sup>54</sup> Stubits, Introduction, 6-8.

Islamic Republic founded. Khomeini's intention of spreading Iran's influence overseas included Latin America, a volatile region frequently intervened by previous US governments since the implementation of the Monroe Doctrine.<sup>55</sup>

At the time, the international context can perhaps explain Iran's involvement in a region with limited economic, religious, or historical ties, as well as Khomeini's ambition of projecting power. According to Lotfian, several historical events drove Iran to look at Latin America:

"The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, the imposition of economic sanctions by the US in the wake of the hostage crisis and the subsequent rupture of diplomatic relations, and the growing political isolation of Iran during the 1980s due to the War and its negative ramifications were the key factors leading to the increased importance of expanding relations with the accommodating Latin American governments."<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, Iran had legitimate security concerns due to the constant presence of foreign troops in the Middle East. Additionally, the hostile behavior of neighboring countries made matters worse. As noted by Lotfian, the further political and economic segregation Iran was facing due to stricter US sanctions, and the confrontational rhetoric used by US leaders towards the Islamic regime undoubtedly contributed to Iran's strategy of creating new bonds in Latin America. These reasons are perhaps why all post-revolution presidents have endorsed a multi-dimensional foreign policy that requires to look for allies beyond Europe and the Middle East to confront the fact that Iran's neighbors antagonize Tehran's policies and, many of them, were US allies.

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<sup>55</sup> The Monroe Doctrine was a US policy that opposed European colonialism in the Americas. Created in 1823, it proclaimed the US as the sole protector of the Western Hemisphere, and it is often regarded as the groundwork for US expansionist and interventionist practices in the decades to come within the Hemisphere.

<sup>56</sup> Lotfian, "*Foreign Policy*," 34-36.

Since the revolution, and regardless of significant changes in the dynamics of internal politics, structural changes in neighboring countries, and a shift in the global balance of power, Iranian foreign policy priorities have proven noticeably consistent. Moreover, although each Iranian administration has pursued different approaches, the main pillars of Iran's foreign policy –Pan-Islamist, Pan-Shia, anti-Western, anti-Imperialist, anti-Zionist, and pro-Resistance Front– have remained stable. Together, these principles intensify Iran's isolation in the international arena. Furthermore, while the international system and structural conditions drive Iran's foreign policy priorities, domestic political factors have also played a significant role in shaping Iran's foreign policy over the past four decades, claims Golmohammadi.<sup>57</sup>

According to Ramazami, Iran's foreign policy pillars revolve around a rejection of dependency on either the West or the East; the identification of the US as Iran's main enemy; the struggle against superpowers and Zionist power; close relations with all oppressed peoples, especially those in Muslim countries; the liberation of Jerusalem and opposition to pro-Israel states; and standing against imperialism while supporting the oppressed peoples of the world.<sup>58</sup>

Most of these pillars –although with some disparities– are somewhat relatable to Chavez's beliefs: a constant struggle against imperialism and US interventions in the region, rejection of Western-backed institutions, and support to Palestine and the oppressed peoples around the world. Even less radical leaders such as Lula in Brazil, and Nestor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina would agree regarding the negative sentiment generated by years of US interventionism in Latin America.<sup>59</sup> These

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<sup>57</sup> Vali Golmohammadi, "The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Prospects for Change and Continuity," *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, V8, N1, (2019): 93-102.

<sup>58</sup> Ramazami, *Iran's Foreign Policy*, 82-84.

<sup>59</sup> "Lula critica la intromisión de Estados Unidos y FMI en Brasil," *EFE/El Universo*, July 30, 2002. Accessed July 15, 2020.

<https://www.eluniverso.com/2002/07/30/0001/14/E2EBF68BA42C437CB61CA32142D31E99.html?p=14A&m=2349>; Abraham Lowenthal, "Estados Unidos y América Latina a principios del siglo XXI," *Revista Nueva Sociedad*, NUSO N° 206, (NOVIEMBRE - DICIEMBRE 2006) <https://nuso.org/articulo/estados-unidos-y-america-latina-a-principios-del-siglo-xxi/>

commonalities smoothed Iran's entry in the region, especially after left-leaning governments consolidated their presence in South America.

Furthermore, President Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales have fiercely condemned and criticized Israeli policies towards the Palestinians on different occasions (Chavez's critics labeled him as anti-semitic).<sup>60</sup> Cristina Kirchner also disapproved of countries that refused to recognize the Palestinian State and questioned Israel for its disproportionate use of force against Palestinian civilians at the 69th General Assembly of the United Nations.<sup>61</sup>

On the other hand, Brazil was the most cautious about the Israel-Palestine issue; it recognized Palestine as a state in December of 2010 and, at the same time, intensified its relations with Israel by promoting the idea of a free trade agreement between Israel and the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), which would have been the first of its kind between Mercosur and an extra-regional state.<sup>62</sup> This was most likely due to Lula's aspiration to engage in the Middle East's politics, and particularly, to play an essential role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. This behavior also applied to Lula's intention of becoming a broker regarding Iran's nuclear program. All of these features are perhaps a clear indication of Brazil's diplomatic ambitions under Lula's leadership.

While analyzing Iran's foreign policy, it is essential to note that, as Djalili described, since the revolution, Iran's foreign policy can be divided into different stages.<sup>63</sup> Each stage addressed Iran's affairs abroad differently, and Latin America was no exception.

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<sup>60</sup> Margarita Figueroa, "La emergencia y aumento del antisemitismo en los gobiernos de Hugo Chávez y su relación con la profundización de las relaciones entre Venezuela e Irán (2005-2013)." *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad*, 13(1), 239-268, (2018).

<sup>61</sup> "Argentina a favor de Estado palestino en la ONU," *UN News*, September 21, 2011.  
<https://news.un.org/es/story/2011/09/1226161>

<sup>62</sup> Giselle Datz "Brazil and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict in the New Century: Between Ambition, Idealism, and Pragmatism," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 7:2, (2013): 43-57, DOI: [10.1080/23739770.2013.11446551](https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2013.11446551)

<sup>63</sup> Mabel Moreno, "Irán en el actual escenario internacional: el ascenso de las relaciones con América Latina," *CLACSO*, (2010): 63-64. Accessed July 10, 2020.  
<http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/Argentina/cea-unc/20110420093437/07-Moreno.pdf>



The end of the 1980s saw the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War and the beginning of the post-War reconstruction era at the national level, while at the international level, the end of the Cold War concentrated the world's attention. The tremendous impact of these two simultaneous events led to the initiation, under President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), of a less idealistic and more practical foreign policy behavior. Rafsanjani realized that the cost of performing an ideologically-driven foreign policy agenda would far exceed the potential benefits.<sup>64</sup> Iran expanded relations with different countries under governments with differing political –and even ideological– views during Rafsanjani's presidency. While the US remained Iran's primary challenge, the new pragmatic foreign policy approach aimed to establish and expand ties with many countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America.<sup>65</sup> For instance, by the early 1990s, Iran's relationship with the radical governments of Cuba and Nicaragua moderately settled. Instead, Iran sought to normalize its foreign policy by opening embassies in Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay<sup>66</sup> –all countries whose governments were politically moderate and maintained a friendly position towards the US–. The change in Iran's foreign policy attitude could be explained, in part, by the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, which inevitably produced tremendous changes within the international system, and forced peripheral countries to adjust their foreign policy objectives.

Additionally, during the 1990s Iran improved economic ties with Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay –all three countries with large agricultural sectors–. These three countries supplied Iran with essential agricultural products, creating an extremely favorable trade surplus for the South American countries. These economic alliances were appreciated by Iranian authorities, as the effects of the US-imposed economic sanctions and international isolation was starting to hit Iran's economy.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Iran: Stuck in Transition* (New York, Routledge, 2017), 192-199

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Lotfian, "Iran's Foreign Policy," 35.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.



The victory of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), who was perceived as a reformist, opened a new page in Iran's foreign policy. According to Ramazani, Khatami intended to improve Iran's connections with the world through détente and mutual respect. He was successful in improving the image of both the Ayatollahs and Iran. The new, positive impression of the Islamic Republic helped it gain a more prominent status and play a more influential role in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>68</sup> By 2001, Khatami's initiative, the Dialogue among Civilizations, had given much respect to Iran and its president. Moreover, Khatami's fondness for dialogue and his administration's policy of reducing tensions with the West managed to bring a quickly worsening nuclear setback under control through the signing of the Tehran Agreement in October of 2003 with the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the UK) Foreign Ministers, which required the temporary suspension of Iranian enrichment activities.<sup>69</sup>

It is during this time that the Chavez-Iran relationship grew considerably. Khatami visited Venezuela three times before leaving office, and Chavez reciprocated twice, marking a turning point in regards to Iran's treatment towards Latin America. Bilateral agreements and Iranian investments in Venezuela and other Latin American countries were put in place, planting the initial seed for Iran's growing influence in the Western Hemisphere.

While Khatami attempted to reduce tension with many Western countries, and skillfully forge new alliances, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's (2005-2013) presidency polarized Iran's international agenda. His confrontational foreign policy and anti-US stance helped strengthen Iran's partnership with Latin America's radical left. However, more moderate leaders such as Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil and Nestor Kirchner in Argentina were cautious about openly engaging with Ahmadinejad, fearing possible

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<sup>68</sup> Ehteshami, *In Transition*, 199-209

<sup>69</sup> "Statement by the Iranian Government and Visiting EU Foreign Ministers," *The International Atomic Energy Agency*, 21 October 2003, [https://www.bits.de/public/documents/iran/Tehran\\_EU\\_Iran\\_Agreement03.pdf](https://www.bits.de/public/documents/iran/Tehran_EU_Iran_Agreement03.pdf)

retaliation from Washington.<sup>70</sup> Ahmadinejad advocated for a pro-poor, justice-seeking, egalitarian government domestically, and a highly rhetorical, confrontational foreign policy. While Khatami believed in dialogue as an instrument for resolving foreign policy disputes, including Iran's nuclear program, Ahmadinejad brought a different viewpoint and discourse. Furthermore, right after taking office, he put to rest the 2003 nuclear agreement and ordered the resumption of uranium enrichment, which led to the resumption of Iran's nuclear case by the UN Security Council.<sup>71</sup>

Ahmadinejad visited Latin America four times between 2006 and 2010, twice in 2012, and three times between January and May of 2013. He visited Venezuela each time. Trips also included Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Cuba, and Nicaragua.<sup>72</sup> Except for Brazil, all these countries were governed by radical left-leaning governments, which indicates Ahmadinejad's ideological preference and acceptance. Ahmadinejad's presidency was marked by some of the same foreign policy attitudes to that of the first decade of the revolution, emphasizing the importance of developing and extending Iran's relations with the Third World.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, with Latin America's leftists' expansion—particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador— and oil prices rising, Iran and Venezuela aimed to decrease the developing world's dependence on the international economic system dominated by Western powers. During this period, Iran and Venezuela declared that the goal of their relations was to end US global hegemony, to create a multipolar world, and to establish a more just and equitable international system.

Subsequently, the administration of Hassan Rouhani (2013 to present) —a pragmatic politician willing to negotiate the Iran Nuclear Deal, officially The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the US— opted to maintain Iran's engagement with Venezuela and the ALBA bloc. Although Rouhani's stance was less politicized, less

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<sup>70</sup> Johnson, "Full Report," 10-12.

<sup>71</sup> Maaiké Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013), 138-140.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 3-6.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 32-40.

virulent when speaking, partly due to Iran's willingness to reach a favorable agreement with the US, he still places Latin America as a crucial region for Iran's interest.<sup>74</sup> Iran's leader might have changed the style but not the primary objectives of Iran's foreign policy in the continent: to maintain alliances with the anti-US states, lessen Tehran's international isolation and bypass the economic sanctions, and to secure essential goods in times of sanctions.<sup>75</sup>

While there is a clear objective in trying to influence the Western Hemisphere, each president has had a different approach. Furthermore, Iran's short-term strategy has been focused on effectively using a global anti-US network of alternative allies to increase diplomatic support, impede US and European efforts to tighten international sanctions while preserving its enrichment program. Longer-term, it could be argued that Iran aims to establish an alternative structure of global governance that will allow non-Western states to trade, borrow, invest, and provide for their sovereignty and national security with complete independence of Western institutions. In this context, Venezuela –especially under Chavez and before its social and economic collapse– played an important role. Hence, sustaining political, diplomatic, and economic ties with Latin America, near US soil, has become an imperative objective for Tehran. In the hope that political changes will occur soon, the Islamic Republic still aims to strengthen cooperation based on Tehran's principle of solidarity among the oppressed peoples.

## **Iran in Latin America Post 9/11**

A crucial moment for Iran's involvement in Latin America was the 9/11 terrorist attacks on US soil. After the attacks, Washington accused Iran of promoting and sponsoring terrorist organizations worldwide, thus considering Iran to be a severe threat to US national security. Furthermore, former President George W. Bush publicly denounced

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<sup>74</sup> Ely Karmon, "Iran in Latin America: President Rouhani's Era," International Institute for Counter Terrorism, (October, 2014)

<sup>75</sup> Ehteshami, *In Transition*, 235-240

the existence of an "Axis of Evil," a group of pariah states supposedly supporting terrorist activities, and integrated by Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. At the same time, after 9/11, the US focused most of its resources fighting terrorism in the Middle East, neglecting its long-time "backyard." The fact that Ahmadinejad visited Latin America more times than Bush proves a complete lack of interest by US authorities.<sup>76</sup> Iran recognized the opportunity and, coinciding with the left-wing wave that swept across the region, presented itself as a reliable ally for the incoming governments looking to challenge the international order.

Moreover, as this work shows, Washington's predisposition towards Latin America can play an enormous role in containing Iranian advancements and shaping foreign policy in general. Particularly in the case of Argentina, the level of interaction reached by Buenos Aires and Tehran was primarily influenced by Argentina's alignment towards the US. Furthermore, although moderate left-wing governments in Brazil and Argentina are likely to challenge US hegemony, and tend to act more independently, the US's might and its enormous market still condition the foreign policy decisions of Latin American leaders. Hence, the lack of interest shown by Washington was beneficial for Iran's growing influence.

However, as Iranian activities in the Hemisphere increased, US politicians and security experts became aware of this new "security threat", urging Washington's action. For instance, Republican Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (then-House Foreign Affairs Committee chairwoman) declared in 2012 that lack of US attention regarding Iranian activities "can pose an immediate threat by giving Iran -directly through the IRGC, the Quds Force, or its proxies like Hezbollah– a platform in the region to carry out attacks against the United States, our interests, and allies."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ely Karmon (2010), *"Iran Challenges the United States in Its Backyard, in Latin America"*, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 32, (April 2010): 276-296. DOI: 10.1080/10803920.2010.517123

<sup>77</sup> Ilan Berman, "What Iran Wants in the Americas," in *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, ed. Ilan Berman, Joseph Humire (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 5-6

The topic also began to be discussed among US security analysts. Some suggested that Iran aimed at making inroads into the enemy's backyard.<sup>78</sup> Karmon concluded that Ahmadinejad wanted to retaliate at the US in its Hemisphere, trying to destabilize US-friendly governments in order to negotiate with Washington from a position of greater strength.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, Watson argued that Tehran sought to develop asymmetric capabilities to deter and counter-attack the US threat of forceful regime change.<sup>80</sup> Iran's informal activities are often perceived as the real danger, noting that Iran "views Latin America as a latent theatre of operation."<sup>81</sup> These security experts –often from US-based conservative think tanks–, claim that Iran is building its capacity and capability throughout the Americas. Hirst further expresses that Iran wants to "position its Revolutionary Guards and terrorist proxies to attack Western targets."<sup>82</sup>

Berman warned about the lack of attention paid by Washington –and the regional governments with close ties to the US regarding Iran's strategic cooperation with the region's anti-American regimes. Instances of Iranian-sponsored subversion organized in Latin America, and aimed at US interests and allies are often overlooked. Moreover, Iran's overall interactions on the economic and diplomatic field remain non-transparent, Berman asserts.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, Berman's economic worries can be easily refuted, as most of the significant commercial activity performed by Iran, as this work shows, is connected to Argentina and Brazil, whose institutional frameworks tend to push them towards transparency.<sup>84</sup> However, while it can be argued that Iran intended to improve economic activity with Venezuela and the ALBA bloc, most of these plans did not materialize.

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<sup>78</sup> Lotfian, "Foreign Policy," 36.

<sup>79</sup> Ely Karmon, "Iran's Challenge to the United States in Latin America," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 32(5), (October 2011): 276-296. DOI: 10.1080/10803920.2010.517123

<sup>80</sup> Penny L. Watson, "Iran's Latin America Strategy: 2005 to Present," *Democracy and Security*, 13:2, (2007): 128-133. DOI: [10.1080/17419166.2016.1264304](https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2016.1264304)

<sup>81</sup> Humire, "Preface," xv.

<sup>82</sup> Hirst, "Gateway," 21-22.

<sup>83</sup> Berman, "The Americas," 1-11.

<sup>84</sup> Farah, "An Overview," 14-15.

## Hezbollah in Latin America

The illicit activities and covert operations performed by Hezbollah and other Islamic groups under Iran's supervision are repeatedly cited among the most concerning elements of Iran's presence in the Hemisphere.<sup>85</sup> For instance, Douglas Lovelace, director at the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College, claimed that radical left-leaning governments with ties to Tehran "have developed a clearly articulated view hostile to the United States. That view also adopts a military doctrine of asymmetric warfare that embraces the use of weapons of mass destruction," suggesting that the connection between Hezbollah, Iran, Venezuela, and Colombia's FARC can become a severe threat to US national security.<sup>86</sup>

According to Humire, after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the regime began implementing a plan that infiltrated Iranian assets in Latin America. These individuals worked through secret networks established under the guise of cultural and commercial exchanges.<sup>87</sup> These initial efforts were the first steps implemented by the Islamic Republic to expand its influence and capabilities in the Western Hemisphere. For instance, Humire points to Iranian cleric Mohsen Rabbani, former commercial attaché to Argentina, who is usually labeled as the Iranian official that initiated covert operations in Latin America and is suspected to be one of the main plotters of the AMIA attack in Buenos Aires.<sup>88</sup>

Hezbollah is often signaled as the perpetrator of the two terrorist attacks that occurred in Buenos Aires in the 1990s. Meanwhile, Iran is believed to have assisted and planned

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<sup>85</sup> Jon B. Perdue, *The War of All the People: The Nexus of Latin American Radicalism and Middle Eastern Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012)

<sup>86</sup> Douglas Lovelace, "Report," *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College*, 2012. Accessed July 28, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11848](http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11848)

<sup>87</sup> Humire, "Preface," xvi.

<sup>88</sup> Jon B. Perdue, "A Marriage of Radical Ideologies," in *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, ed. Ilan Berman, Joseph Humire (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 13-16

the attacks. Both Hezbollah and Iran are believed to have plenty of capabilities and assets to carry out attacks against enemy targets throughout Latin America, where the Jewish community is especially susceptible to attacks. These possible attacks would come as a response against Israeli operations targeting Iranian objectives, Hezbollah itself, or other Islamic groups elsewhere. If the US, Israel, or the international community as a whole threatens the regime's survival or the continuity of Iran's nuclear project, Latin America would be a preferred theater for retaliation, some experts argue.<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, the deployment of Iran's long-range missiles to Venezuela at the request of President Maduro, if he were to feel threatened, is a possible scenario, suggests Karmon, a researcher for the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, an Israeli think tank.<sup>90</sup>

The two terrorist attacks on Argentina's soil suggest that the region is quite vulnerable to future terrorist plots. The lack of coordinated intelligence operations among regional states, and the absence of a recognizable, visible terrorist threat could facilitate covert operations. Costanza argues that because Latin American governments perceived Hezbollah as a legitimate political organization, attempts to "effectively apply counterterrorism resources to root out the entrenched Hezbollah infrastructure in the region that can potentially carry out directives by its leadership or by serving as a proxy of Iran" are often unsuccessful.<sup>91</sup>

Furthermore, Hezbollah has had tangible success in the region; with Iran's assistance and aided by the large Lebanese diaspora living in the area, it controls most illicit activities in the Triple Border Area (TBA), where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay merge.

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<sup>89</sup> Ely Karmon, "Iran and its Proxy Hezbollah: Strategic Penetration in Latin America," *Real Instituto Elcano*, (Abril, 2009): 31-32.  
[http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/899558804f018ad7a79de73170baead1/WP18-2009\\_Karmon\\_Iran\\_Hezbollah\\_Latin\\_America.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=899558804f018ad7a79de73170baead1](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/899558804f018ad7a79de73170baead1/WP18-2009_Karmon_Iran_Hezbollah_Latin_America.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=899558804f018ad7a79de73170baead1)

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> William Costanza, "Hizballah and Its Mission in Latin America," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35:3 (2012): 193-210, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2012.648155

Additionally, it has developed close ties with narco-trafficking groups, and it has also set up a sophisticated money-laundering scheme. A 2017 article by POLITICO magazine revealed that Hezbollah collected as much as US\$1 billion per year from drugs and weapons trafficking, money laundering, and other criminal enterprises. According to POLITICO, the investigation, led by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and ran in the midst of the Iran Nuclear Deal negotiation, was later blocked by the Obama administration in an effort to de-escalate tensions with Iran and reach a nuclear agreement.<sup>92</sup>

DEA's Project Cassandra showed the strength and influence of Hezbollah throughout Latin America. The group can smuggle hundreds of tons of South American cocaine –especially from Venezuela, where it benefits from governmental protection– to the US and Europe, it launders the money through a Lebanese bank based in Canada, to finally send it back to the Middle East. Furthermore, it is believed that Hezbollah has turned into a significant drug organization, and has close connections with drug cartels from Colombia and Mexico and high officials from the Venezuelan government.<sup>93</sup> It has also been linked with Brazil's most extensive criminal enterprise, the First Capital Command (PCC).<sup>94</sup> Hezbollah, "the major international terrorist threat in the region," according to US officials,<sup>95</sup> has also been linked to Colombia's FARC (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, a Marxist guerrilla group). Moreover, because Venezuela is frequently accused of providing a safe haven to FARC, a possible connection between FARC, Venezuela, and Hezbollah is regarded as the most severe security threat the region faces.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Josh Meyer, "The secret backstory of how Obama let Hezbollah off the hook," *POLITICO*, December, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/obama-hezbollah-drug-trafficking-investigation/>

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Kyra Gurney, "Police Documents Reveal 'Hezbollah Ties' to Brazil's PCC," *Insight Crime*, November 10, 2014, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/police-documents-hezbollah-ties-brazil-pcc/>

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<sup>96</sup> "US Indictment Claims Venezuelan Politician Linked to Hezbollah, Hamas," *Insight Crime*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/venezuela-hezbollah-hamas-indictment/>



Moreover, starting in 2007, DEA agents believed that a commercial jetliner from Venezuela's state-run Conviasa airline flew from Caracas to Tehran via Damascus, Syria, loaded with drugs and cash. The cargo, known as "Aeroterror," would come back with weapons and Hezbollah and Iranian operatives whom the Venezuelan government would provide with fake identities and travel documents.

Hezbollah's activities have been well documented by the late Argentine state prosecutor Alberto Nisman, who was in charge of investigating Iran's responsibilities in the AMIA bombing. According to Nisman, Hezbollah's activities in the region were and continue to be facilitated by an extensive network of informal contacts and illicit activities organized by Iranian operatives throughout the Americas.

Costanza adds that "Hezbollah's role as Iran's proxy in Latin America is largely predicated on its perceived role as an operational and logistical support network for Iran's covert terrorist activities."<sup>97</sup> Moreover, recently, Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, stated in an interview that Hezbollah has active cells in Venezuela, adding that "Iranians are impacting the people of Venezuela," because Hezbollah is trained, funded, and equipped by Tehran.<sup>98</sup>

Nevertheless, regarding Hezbollah as an exclusive proxy of Iran would be misleading. Hezbollah has its own political agenda that it has pursued by conducting terrorist acts globally to support its strategic interests. Furthermore, as the group increased its strength, it has also gained independence. Johnson argues that "although Hezbollah cells were once thought to respond to Iran's calling, they most likely act independently." Therefore, it would be problematic to link all of Hezbollah's actions in the region to Iran.

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<sup>97</sup> Costanza, "Latin America," 195,198

<sup>98</sup> Jon Sharman, "Trump's secretary of state Pompeo says Hezbollah is active in Venezuela," The Independent, February 7, 2019,

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/venezuela-crisis-hezbollah-mike-pompeo-trump-ma-duro-iran-juan-guaido-a8767186.html>

Additionally, while the presence of Hezbollah in the region is certain, its strength can, sometimes, be overrated. Professor Brancoli argues that the group uses the area to launder money on a small scale, but it has no organized structure in the region, and likely cannot launch significant attacks.<sup>99</sup> The US has pushed the narrative that Hezbollah is a danger in order to justify its war on terror and its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. Moreover, since mid-2019, four Latin American countries have taken steps to support Trump's strategy by designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.<sup>100</sup> The Trump administration has also proposed that Israel provide military counterterrorism instruction to Latin American nations to help them fight Hezbollah, which several countries accepted. In any case, Hezbollah and its reach can be used to politicize a more significant issue.

When analyzing Iran's expansion in the region, Hezbollah and Iran's covert operations are often perceived as having better chances to sustain if unfavorable political changes occur. Hezbollah –with Iran's aid– has built structures throughout the region that can allow them to work steadily even when internal political changes or crises occur. However, the Lebanese group still relies heavily on Maduro's Venezuela for support and logistics. If regime change were to happen in Venezuela, Hezbollah would most likely see their operations disrupted.

In Iran's case, military cooperation can only be achieved under some specific political circumstances, which means a radical, anti-US government such as current Venezuela. For instance, the recent coup in Bolivia pushed Evo Morales –a left-wing, Iran-friendly president– to exile. Consequently, a new administration took office, freezing relations with Iran, Venezuela, and the ALBA bloc. Moreover, an 'anti-Imperialist' military school

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<sup>99</sup> Kate Linthicum, "Could Iran—and Hezbollah—strike in Latin America?", *LA Times*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-01-10/the-trump-administration-is-warning-that-hezbollah-could-strike-in-latin-america>

<sup>100</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Trump fights Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' in Latin America," *Atlantic Council*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/trump-fights-irans-axis-of-resistance-in-latin-america/>

built with Venezuela's and Iran's support in Bolivia under Morales leadership was promptly closed, demonstrating that a political change can affect Iran's ambitions greatly, especially non-transparent activities.<sup>101</sup>

## South-South Cooperation

Iran's revolutionary ideology has been strongly influenced by both militant Third Worldism and leftist ideologies, both of which have also been influential in Latin America, and have created a specific bond between the Islamic regime and leftist Latin American countries.<sup>102</sup> In this regard, South-South cooperation is another important aspect of Iran's growing influence in Latin America and fundamentally essential to sustaining Iran's ties to the region. According to the UN, "South-South cooperation alludes to the technical cooperation among developing countries in the Global South. It is a tool used by the states, international organizations, academics, civil society, and the private sector to collaborate and share knowledge, skills, and successful initiatives in areas such as agricultural development, human rights, urbanization, health, climate change".<sup>103</sup> With the commodities boom in the 2000s, developing countries saw an opportunity to gain independence and influence international politics. Therefore, Chavez, Lula da Silva, and the Kirchners intended to expand partnerships and cooperation among the Global South. According to Elodie Brun, "Venezuela's president often expressed his desire to diversify foreign relations, while also encouraging other developing countries to follow suit to reduce dependence on the twin superpowers, the United States and to a lesser extent, the European Union."<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, Iran also

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<sup>101</sup> "El Gobierno de Bolivia cerró la escuela militar antiimperialista creada por Evo Morales," *Infobae*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2020/01/18/el-gobierno-de-bolivia-cerro-la-escuela-militar-antiimperialista-creada-por-evo-morales/>

<sup>102</sup> Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy the Post-Soviet Era* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 225-235.

<sup>103</sup> "What is 'South-South cooperation' and why does it matter?", *UN News*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/intergovernmental-coordination/south-south-cooperation-2019.html>

<sup>104</sup> Elodie Brun, "Iran's Place in Venezuelan Foreign Policy," in *Iran in Latin America: Threat or 'Axis of Annoyance'?*, ed. Cynthia Arnson, Haleh Esfandiari, and Adam Stubits (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars): 35-40.

established more robust ties with Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua –all states with a close connection with Caracas- and it was granted ALBA membership as an observer.

Although some have argued that the Iranian-Latin American relationship is based purely on political opportunism,<sup>105</sup> Iran and leftist Latin American states have sought to deepen their relations beyond mere short-term economic arrangements. Moreover, the relationships Iran forged with Venezuela and Brazil under Lula da Silva aimed to go beyond mutual financial gain. These countries share a world view resembling a multipolar world order, that is opposed to Western political and military interventions. According to Heydemann, "Iranian leaders have skillfully used concerns amid developing nations about US dominance. They have tried to boost Iran's influence by promoting a more fair distribution of resources and power in the international system. They blame the US and its allies for using globalization as a tool of Western power."<sup>106</sup> Globalization, Ahmadinejad argued, imposes Western will and values on non-Western states forcefully. Thus, Iran promotes a confrontational stance towards imperialist powers and an everyday discourse of solidarity towards the oppressed and the poor, which explains Iran's positive perceptions among the radical left.

As the section discussing Brazil shows, cooperation among the Global South was a governmental priority for Lula da Silva and Iran benefited from it accordingly.

## **Chapter Two: Brazil and Iran**

The connection between Brazil and Iran dates back to 1903 with early contact through cultural exchanges. However, it was not until 1961 when Brazil's diplomatic representation in Tehran became an embassy. The relationship strengthened as Brazil aimed to promote its cultural presence in the Middle East through films, arts, and

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<sup>105</sup> Stubits, Introduction, 6-8.

<sup>106</sup> Heydemann, "Alternative Allies," 195-196.

intellectuals and professors' exchange.<sup>107</sup> By 1975 both countries had agreed to establish a commission on economic and technical cooperation.<sup>108</sup>

After the 1979 revolution, relations slowed down because of Brazil's inclination towards Iran's regional rival, Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Even though on paper Brazil remained neutral during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), the Brazilian government extensively supplied military equipment to Iraq's armed forces (by 1985, Iraq was Brazil's most significant client). Moreover, Brazilian companies established branches in Iraq to work on rebuilding Iraqi infrastructure.<sup>109</sup>

Brazil only resumed its relation with Iran after the Iran-Iraq war ceased. Under the presidency of Jose Sarney, Brazil and Iran signed several agreements in 1988. Moreover, a Brazilian technical team visited Iran to discuss the supply of equipment for power plants. Subsequently, Iran's industries minister visited Brazil and announced the two countries had the intention to expand trade up to US\$1.5 billion.<sup>110</sup> Soon after, trade increased considerably, mostly due to large amounts of Iranian imports. Additionally, after eight years of exclusive sales to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Brazil began to sell the Tucano EMB-312 military aircraft to the Islamic Republic, and, for several years afterward, it trained members of the Iranian military to pilot the planes, showing a positive shift in their bilateral interaction.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, Brazil and Iran's governments established conditions for the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the ministries of agriculture of the two countries in February 1992.<sup>112</sup> By then, Brazil had established a new form of peaceful cooperation with Iran, and though Iran had financial difficulties, Brazil's agricultural sector was benefitting from this partnership.

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<sup>107</sup> Jose L. Silva, "As Relações Brasil-Irã: dos antecedentes aos desdobramentos no século XXI," *Fundación Centro de Estudios del Medio Oriente Contemporáneo-CEMOC ANMO: África del Norte y Medio Oriente* Vol. 1, No. 1, (Otoño 2011): 46.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Alan Riding, "Brazil's Burgeoning Arms Industry," *The New York Times*, November 3, 1985. Accessed July 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/03/business/brazil-s-burgeoning-arms-industry.html>

<sup>110</sup> Silva, "Seculo XXI," 46.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 48.

Another important step that helped improve Iran's image in Brazil was Iran's Khatami's foreign policy approach. Farhi argues that as tensions decreased with the West, Khatami's renewed leadership granted confidence to countries like Brazil to interact with Tehran, withstanding US pressure or the threat of economic sanctions.<sup>113</sup> It is under these circumstances, which coincided with the presidency of well-respected Fernando Enrique Cardoso (1995-2002), a centrist politician from Brazil's Social Democratic Party, that diplomatic contact consolidated and trade became the most crucial element in the Iran-Brazil alliance.

## **Lula da Silva's Presidency**

The most significant improvement in the Iran-Brazil relationship came during Lula da Silva's presidency (2003-2010.) As Brazil engaged actively internationally, cooperation and trade with Iran swiftly benefited. In 2004, Brazil and Iran took a step toward closer economic and political ties, agreeing to cooperate in the petrochemical sector, holding talks on agricultural sales to Iran, and discussing ways to boost trade. For instance, Brazil's state-owned oil company Petrobras obtained permission to explore Iranian oil fields.<sup>114</sup> The same year, Lula and Khatami met in Caracas for the first time, as both leaders attended the Non-Aligned G-15 summit. Talks about bilateral trade and cooperation soon had positive results. "Since then, Brazil exports to Iran have doubled, and Brazil has been Iran's largest Latin American trade partner for several years, with its exports to Iran as high as those of neighboring Turkey and India."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Farideh Farhi, "Tehran perspective on Iran-Latin American Relations," in *Iran in Latin America: Threat or 'Axis of Annoyance'?*, ed. Cynthia Arnson, Haleh Esfandiari, and Adam Stubits (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars): 26-27.

<sup>114</sup> Borzou Daragahi, "Iran: Petrobras To Drill in Caspian," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2004. Accessed July 15, 2020.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/07/business/world-business-briefing-middle-east-iran-petrobras-to-drill-in-caspian.html?login=smartlock&auth=login-smartlock>

<sup>115</sup> Farhi, "American Relations," 27.

However, although the relationship improved noticeably, Brazil remained skeptical of some of Iran's actions. In 2005, the Lula administration refused to assist Venezuela with its nuclear program once it was clear that Caracas was not willing to proceed without the direct collaboration of Iran, demonstrating that although relations improved significantly, Brazil's institutional framework would not allow this sort of transactions, which could have jeopardized Brazil's international prestige. In particular, Venezuela sought a uranium enrichment technology transfer from Brazil in October 2005.<sup>116</sup> The possibility of Iranian involvement led Brazilian officials to reconsider the agreement. A spokesperson for Brazil's Ministry of Science and Technology declared: "In view of possible Iranian participation, as President Chavez has suggested, such a partnership would be risky for Brazil," adding that, "Brazil is not interested in cooperating with countries that do not follow international treaties and whose programs are not monitored by competent authorities."<sup>117</sup> This particular measure revealed that despite US security concerns regarding left-wing leaders in Latin America, most of them remained within the international legal framework.

The relationship entered a new stage once Ahmadinejad became Iran's president. His incendiary speeches and defiance of Western institutions restrained Brazil from engaging with Iran openly. Moreover, Ahmadinejad wanted to visit Brazil during his Latin American tour in 2007, but reports indicated that President Lula declined to meet due to a schedule conflict. Most likely, Brazil's president had not wanted to be associated with Ahmadinejad's anti-American policies and discourse.<sup>118</sup> Nonetheless, In June of 2007, withstanding US pressure, Petrobras signed a \$470 million contract to help Iran develop a pair of oil blocks in the Caspian Sea. The state-run National Iranian

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<sup>116</sup> "Nuclear cooperation: Brazil denies Venezuelan approach," Mercopress, May 23, 2005. Accessed July 20, 2020. <https://en.mercopress.com/2005/05/23/nuclear-cooperation-brazil-denies-venezuelan-approach>

<sup>117</sup> Douglas Farah, "Iran in Latin America: An Overview," in *Iran in Latin America: Threat or 'Axis of Annoyance'?*, ed. Cynthia Arnson, Haleh Esfandiari, and Adam Stubits (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars): 14-15. Accessed July 10, 2020, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/Iran\\_in\\_LA.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/Iran_in_LA.pdf)

<sup>118</sup> Denise Marin, "Itamaraty Dribla Líder do Ira, Mas Quer Dialogo," *Agência Estado*, September 25, 2007. Accessed July 20, 2020. <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,itamaraty-dribla-lider-do-ira-mas-quer-dialogo,56444>

Oil Co. was interested in cooperating with Petrobras, which had better expertise in deep and very deep offshore drilling.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, despite the problem of Ahmadinejad's visit, Brazil also remained interested in expanding economic ties with Iran. As a sign of this interest, Brazil's foreign minister, Celso Amorim, visited Tehran in November of 2008. During this trip, he declared that Tehran and Brazil could upgrade their partnership beyond commercial exchanges to include scientific, industrial, technological, and cultural cooperation. Amorim also stated that "Brazil does not recognize unilateral sanctions imposed on Iran, whether by the United States or the European Union, and the Iranian government should fully cooperate with the agency because it is the best way to avoid sanctions."<sup>120</sup> Both Petrobras' defiance of US pressure and Brazil's support for Iran's right to maintain its nuclear program were perceived as significant diplomatic victories in Tehran, while Brazil demonstrated its willingness to act more independently internationally.

The relationship improved as Lula's international leadership grew. In November of 2009, during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Brazil –the first Iranian leader to do so since Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi visited in 1965– Lula suggested that the international community needed to engage, not isolate Iran. He also defended Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, as long as there was "clear respect for international agreements."<sup>121</sup> Ahmadinejad highlighted his particular focus on the expansion of relations with Latin American states, and specifically with Brazil, in broader terms than economic cooperation. During the visit, Iran's president stated that "Brazil is seeking a new order in the world and its revolutionary president's viewpoints are close to ours."<sup>122</sup> Ahmadinejad purposely –and conveniently– interpreted his interactions with Lula in revolutionary terms. Moreover, being received by Lula had substantial symbolic

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<sup>119</sup> Spencer, Swartz, "Iran Official: In Talks with Petrobras on Caspian Oil Blocks," *Dow Jones & Company*, June 4, 2007. Accessed July 15, 2020. [http://www.rigzone.com/news/article.asp?a\\_id=45975](http://www.rigzone.com/news/article.asp?a_id=45975)

<sup>120</sup> "Brazil Doesn't Recognize Unilateral Sanctions on Iran," *Tehran Times*, November 10, 2008. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/182053/Brazil-doesn-t-recognize-unilateral-sanctions-on-iran>

<sup>121</sup> Alexei Barrionuevo, "Brazil Leader Defends Iranian's Visit," *The New York Times*, November 23, 2009. Accessed July 20, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/world/americas/24brazil.html>

<sup>122</sup> Lotfian, "Foreign Policy," 42.



importance for Ahmadinejad, as, at the time, Western powers were trying to ramp up pressure on Iran to curb its nuclear ambitions.<sup>123</sup> Thus, Lula's explicit support for Iran's nuclear program was a significant diplomatic victory for Tehran. On the other hand, as protests erupted throughout Iran questioning the legality of the June 2009 presidential election,<sup>124</sup> Lula's support and Brazil's engagement gave legitimacy to Ahmadinejad's reelection, helping the Iranian elite to spread the idea that Iran was not completely isolated from the international community.

Another major diplomatic success happened in June of 2010, as Brazil –which held a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council at the time– voted against imposing new sanctions on Iran and its nuclear program.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, Lula's administration and Tehran had already started negotiating a deal regarding Iran's nuclear program.

Also in 2010, Lula led a 300-member delegation to Tehran and announced that Brazil was going to finance US\$1.2bn of food exports to Iran over the next five years, to facilitate trade between the two countries and make it less dependent on foreign banks. "It does not make sense that the trade between Iranian and Brazilian companies depends on the credit and goodwill of foreign banks," Lula said in a speech to Iranian and Brazilian traders. The two parties ended up signing 11 cooperation deals, including oil and financial agreements.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, Behrouz Alishiri, then-head of an Iranian government body promoting investment in the Islamic Republic, said trade between Iran and Brazil could increase nearly five-fold to some US\$10bn. Nonetheless, to this day,

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<sup>123</sup> Taylor Barnes, "Why Iran's Ahmadinejad is warmly welcomed in Brazil," *The Science Monitor*, November 23, 2009, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2009/1123/why-iran-s-ahmadinejad-is-warmly-welcomed-in-brazil>

<sup>124</sup> Pariza Hafezi, "Ahmadinejad's victory greeted by Tehran protests," *Reuters*, June 13, 2009. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election/ahmadinejads-victory-greeted-by-tehran-protests-idUSEVA14340720090613?sp=true>

<sup>125</sup> Sarah Dielh, "Brazil Challenges International Order by Backing Iran Fuel Swap," *Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI)*, July, 2010. Accessed July 20, 2020. <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/brazil-backing-iran/>

<sup>126</sup> Fernando Exman, "Iran seeks to boost Brazil trade as sanctions loom," *Reuters*, May 16, 2010, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-brazil-trade/iran-seeks-to-boost-brazil-trade-as-sanctions-loom-idUKTRE64F1PW20100516>

these numbers were not reached. During the same trip, the head of Brazil's energy regulator, Haroldo Lima, said that the two countries were likely to sign a memorandum that would open the way for Brazilian firms to cooperate in the modernization of Iran's oil sector.<sup>127</sup>

However, Petrobras' participation in Iran's oil sector was suddenly canceled after a prominent US pension fund pulled its money from petroleum companies, including Petrobras, due to fears of doing business with Iran. In March of 2010, and fearing the possible violation of the 1996 US Iran Sanctions Act, Petrobras suspended its Iranian operations. Following the suspension of bilateral oil cooperation between Brazil and Iran, Iran's minister of industry and mines Ali Akbar Mehrabian suggested that Brazilian ethanol exports may be a way for Brazil to avoid sanctions on refined petroleum exports to Iran.<sup>128</sup>

Subsequently, in 2010, Brazil and Iran signed a memorandum to arrange a technical partnership to explore, extract, and process minerals in Brazil. Significantly, the agreement contained a troubling confidentiality clause, with both parties agreeing to maintain the confidentiality of documents, information, and data. The confidentiality clause concerned security experts as some interpreted it to have a hidden agenda.<sup>129</sup> The agreement "fueled speculation that the memorandum could serve as a vehicle for furthering Iran's nuclear effort. These fears were fanned further by disclosures regarding Iran's mining activities in Venezuela and Bolivia, where the Islamic Republic was believed to be extracting uranium ore and other strategic minerals for use in its nuclear program."<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, since Brazilian institutions and civil society are far more developed than

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<sup>127</sup> Fatemeh Aman, "Can Brazil's Relationship With Iran Survive a New Administration?", *The Atlantic Council*, December 12, 2018.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/can-brazil-s-relationship-with-iran-survive-a-new-administration/>

<sup>128</sup> Johnson, "Full Report," 70-71.

<sup>129</sup> Leonardo Coutinho, "Iran and Islamic Extremism in Brazil," in *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, ed. Ilan Berman, Joseph Humire (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 45-46.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

other Latin American states, illegal or suspicious activities are harder to perform. In this case, time showed that no illegal activity was performed, and no Brazilian minerals ended up supplying Iran's nuclear program.

## **Brazil's New International Role**

As Lula's popularity increased, and Brazil's economy grew steadily –lifting millions out of poverty–, Brazil became a new model for democracy and demilitarization and a model of success in other latitudes. A strong economy supported most of Brazil's international behavior; from 2000 to 2012, Brazil was one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world –an economic boom related to the commodity super-cycle of the mid-2000s<sup>131</sup> –. Brazil was able to use its vast reserves of raw materials, cheap labor, and production costs to profit from high demand for raw materials from China and India's growing economies. Moreover, after the 2008 financial crisis, global liquidity entered emerging markets like Brazil and further boosted the country's economy.<sup>132</sup>

This economic boom enabled Lula to lead a movement of global solidarity throughout the Global South. Zilla claims that “the Lula government sought to conquer the international stage, instrumentalizing its national size and socioeconomic success for foreign policy purposes.”<sup>133</sup> Amar highlights “President Lula's efforts to find a Global South counterbalance to US hegemony.”<sup>134</sup> Moreover, Brazil aimed to become a leader of emerging Global South powers and an articulator of new forms of South-South cooperation. According to Amar, “Brazil wanted to convince northern powers,

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<sup>131</sup> Rob Dwyer, “How to Bring Brazil’s Economy Back to life,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/11/how-to-bring-brazils-economy-back-to-life/>; Edmund Amann, “Brazil as an emerging economy: a new economic miracle?”, *Brazilian Journal of Political Economy*, 32(3), (2012): 412-423. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0101-31572012000300004>

<sup>132</sup> “The Brazilian economy: From boom to bust,” *RFI Group*, 2018. <https://www.rfigroup.com/global-retail-banker/news/brazilian-economy-boom-bust>

<sup>133</sup> Claudia Zilla, “Brazil's Foreign Policy under Lula,” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, Research Paper, (March 2017): 5-8.

<sup>134</sup> Paul Amar, “Introduction,” in *The Middle East and Brazil*, ed. Paul Amar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1-3.

particularly the United States and Europe, that South America's superpower was ready to provide "mature" world leadership and would act as a stabilizing force in global affairs."<sup>135</sup> For Brazil, South-South cooperation became a governmental priority –as did the Brazilian government's efforts to distance itself from the United States–. Instead of strengthening ties with Washington, the Lula administration focused on international "underprivileged" partners as allies, courting them for, among other reasons, support in Brazil's campaign for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.<sup>136</sup> Under these circumstances, Iran found a potential ally in diplomatic terms and support for its nuclear program.

Another demonstration of Brazil's new role happened in 2003 when Brazil –home of a population of one million Muslims and almost eight million descendants of Arab origin– joined the Arab League as an observer. Moreover, in 2005, the "Brasilia Declaration" was signed between several heads of state from the Middle East and the Americas. This declaration launched the South America-Arab States bloc, dedicated to commercial, diplomatic, and cultural exchange, coordination, and solidarity between the two emergent world regions.<sup>137</sup>

Lula's government implemented a foreign policy strategy based on the principles of multipolarity, aiming to decentralize power and reinforce multilateralism and cooperation among the Global South. According to Zilla, Lula prioritized “South-South orientation, based on an intensification of cooperation with developing countries and newly industrialising countries, with a focus on South America and Africa as well as the Middle East”.<sup>138</sup> Brazil's new foreign policy approach emphasized on “an anti-status quo and pro-justice discourse, which exposed the unequal distribution of material and immaterial

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 18-20.

<sup>136</sup> Vigevani, “Through Diversification,” 1314-1318.; João Vargas, “Campanha permanente: O Brasil e a reforma do Conselho de Segurança da ONU,” Rio de Janeiro, Brasil: Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV). (2011)

<sup>137</sup> Amar, “Introduction,” 6-8.

<sup>138</sup> Zilla, ‘Under Lula,’ 5-6.

resources on a global level.”<sup>139</sup> Moreover, Brazil promptly embraced relations with South Africa and India, establishing the IBSA Forum,<sup>140</sup> and later became a member of BRICS—a group of five major emerging economies integrated by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—. The creation of BRICS is a firm demonstration of Brazil's intentions to lessen its economic dependence on the United States and the European Union. It particularly intended to diversify Brazil's foreign trade partners.<sup>141</sup> In this context, the Middle East became a region of strategic relevance for Brazil's commercial interests. Accordingly, President Lula focused his efforts on furthering commercial trade with various governments in the region. Essential to Brazil's policy in the Middle East is Iran, a country with 81 million people, vast oil resources but little refinery capacity, and potential demand for Brazilian ethanol.

Brazil's new leadership role also influenced South America. In March of 2009, Brazil and Venezuela established the South American Defense Council within the intergovernmental Union of South American Nations (UNASUR).<sup>142</sup> This defense council aimed to increase transparency in military expenditures, promote military cooperation among its member states, and resolve regional disputes. Meanwhile, because Venezuela was highly associated with Iran, this type of initiative would raise eyebrows among US security experts, mainly because of the possibility of military cooperation between Venezuela, Iran, and a major country such as Brazil.<sup>143</sup> However, as the institutional framework of most South American multilateral institutions remains weak, initiatives such as UNASUR tend to die off with time. Between 2018 and 2020, after right-wing governments gained control in their respective countries, Chile, Brazil,

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Johannes Maerk, “A partir, de dentro e entre o Sul: a cooperação entre Índia, Brasil e África do Sul,” *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Africanos*, (November 2015): 1-8.

<sup>141</sup> Pedro Vieira, “Brazil and the BRICS: The Trap of Short Time,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 22(2):404, (August 2016)

<sup>142</sup> Milton Bragatti, “Ten Years of the South American Defense Council: Regional International Security Architecture,” *Geopolítica(s). Revista De Estudios Sobre Espacio Y Poder*, 10(1), 69-86.  
<https://doi.org/10.5209/GEOP.59777>

<sup>143</sup> Adrian Oliva, “A Bolivian Base for Iran's Military Advisors” in *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, ed. Ilan Berman, Joseph Humire (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 72-74

Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, and Paraguay decided to suspend their participation in UNASUR,<sup>144</sup> an organism mostly tied with Chavez's Venezuela and the Workers' Party of Brazil, Lula's political home.

Brazil's new foreign policy approach had its most significant moment when Lula –along with Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan– tried to set up a nuclear deal with Iran. In April 2010, both countries tried to revive an interrupted atomic fuel deal with Iran, in an attempt to help the Islamic Republic to avoid new UN sanctions over its nuclear program. Both Turkey and Brazil insisted that Iran's nuclear program was entirely peaceful and intended solely for generating electricity. In May, Lula personally visited Iran to meet with Ahmadinejad and Erdogan to negotiate an alternative nuclear deal. On May 17, Brazil, Iran, and Turkey issued the "Tehran Nuclear Declaration."<sup>145</sup> The three leaders announced an agreement to supply Iran's nuclear energy program with enriched uranium. Iran would have transferred 1,200 kilograms of low-enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for 120 kilograms of more highly enriched uranium to satisfy research and energy program needs.<sup>146</sup> Despite receiving considerable support from the international community, the US and Israel fiercely rejected the deal and, instead, Washington unilaterally imposed new sanctions on Iran. Although negotiations did not thrive, the international community acknowledged Brazil's intentions, and the deal was primarily perceived as a missed opportunity.<sup>147</sup>

While many praised Lula's political activism abroad, critics also emerged. After the Lula administration engaged too often with Tehran, observers from many sectors questioned Brazil's ties with Iran. Many observers –including Brazilian diplomats– warned that a strategic partnership with Iran, even if it were only political, would place Brazil among a

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<sup>144</sup> Andrea Amaya, Seis países suramericanos anunciaron suspender su participación en UNASUR. France24, April 22, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/es/20180421-unasur-paises-miembros-retiran-bloque>

<sup>145</sup> Guedes, "Tehran Declaration," 6-8.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Gonul Tol, "The Turkey-Brazil-Iran Nuclear Deal : Another Missed Opportunity?", *Middle East Institute*, May 24, 2010, <https://mei.edu/publications/turkey-brazil-iran-nuclear-deal-another-missed-opportunity>

vulnerable group of nations, exacerbating Brazil's separation from its traditional Western allies and even endangering its position at the UN. While this might have been the case, at that period, President Lula was able to circumvent all criticism due to its charismatic figure, tremendous popularity, and Brazil's economic success.<sup>148</sup>

After Brazil's major diplomatic attempt to become a prominent player in a significant Middle East conflict, the country desisted in its venture of becoming an active player on the world stage. Following Dilma Rousseff's inauguration, Brazil retrieved from its assertive posture as a conciliator between the West and Iran. What is more, Rousseff was particularly wary of Iran's human rights issues, and re-examined Brazil's posture towards Iran.

## **Dilma Rousseff's Presidency**

The relationship suffered a setback under Dilma Rousseff's presidency (2011-2016). Iran believed Rousseff was undermining Lula's efforts, under whom Brazil had been virtually the only major Western country with friendly ties to Ahmadinejad's regime. Things worsened in her first year as president when Brazil supported a vote at the UN Human Rights Council to send a Special Rapporteur for Human Rights to Iran.<sup>149</sup> Under Lula, by contrast, Brazil often abstained from supporting such resolutions. The new Brazilian president, herself considered a human rights activist, looked unfavorably upon the Islamic Republic's track record in that sphere.

The attitude change caused significant irritation in Tehran and led to protests by high-ranking Iranian officials. According to Behrouz Kamalvandi, then-Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for the Americas, Brazil's abrupt change was influenced by demands

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<sup>148</sup> Marcelo de Paiva Abreu, "Brasil Fanfarrão," *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 31 May 2010, <https://economia.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral/brasil-fanfarrao-imp-559207>

<sup>149</sup> Joe Leahy, "New Brazil creates some distance from Iran," *Financial Times*, January 23, 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/881b4494-45e7-11e1-9592-00144feabdc0>

from the United States. "The change in the Brazilian vote after the visit (of US President Barack Obama), while the human rights situation in Iran has had no significant changes, compared with the previous meeting, is not a desirable sign for public opinion neither in Iran nor in Brazil."<sup>150</sup>

Similarly, Amar argues that after her election, the United States had begun to assert a more aggressive and interventionist posture in South America. Furthermore, as the conservative military and economic elites within Latin America and the US grew dissatisfied with leftist and socialist governments, the US was urged to take a different posture. In Brazil, particularly, Washington had identified a growing threat of "terrorism" among Lebanese-Brazilian merchants in the southwest of Brazil, which the US State Department claimed had been infiltrated by Hezbollah elements. Washington's new stance perhaps constrained Dilma's initial overtures towards Iran. However, as time went by, she did exert a more independent foreign policy; it criticized the US role in Paraguay's Fernando Lugo coup, the role of northern powers in the Libya intervention, and the lack of substantial power emerging countries had over multilateral institutions. "We are concerned by the slow pace of reforms of multilateral institutions that still reflect an old world order. We are working tirelessly to reform the governance of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. We are also advocating fundamental reform in global governance via the enhancement of the UN Security Council," Dilma stated,<sup>151</sup> showing a distinct disposition towards changing the world order. However, Rousseff's posture did not seem to alleviate her concerns towards Iran.

Consequently or not, in 2012, trade dropped, by some estimates, 73 percent, and on the diplomatic front, "relations chilled, particularly as Dilma's administration became more vocal than Lula's in critiquing human rights violations in Iran, particularly around gender and sexuality issues. Dilma Rousseff was appalled by Iran's sentencing of

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<sup>150</sup> Coutinho, "In Brazil," 46.

<sup>151</sup> Amar, "The Middle East and Brazil: Transregional Politics in the Dilma Rousseff Era," in *The Middle East and Brazil*, ed. Paul Amar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 25-28.



Sakineh Ashtiani to death by stoning for adultery".<sup>152</sup> Moreover, in June of 2012, while Ahmadinejad was attending a conference in Rio de Janeiro, Rousseff refused to meet with the Iranian president officially. She believed that distancing from Iran and courting a friendlier relationship with the US –as opposed to Lula's stance– would facilitate Brazil's query for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council.<sup>153</sup>

Hassan Rouhani's election renovated the relationship. For instance, in July of 2013, just before Rouhani's presidential inauguration, the Iranian ambassador to Brazil, Ali Ghazenadeh, said that the new president would work toward rebuilding diplomatic ties between Iran and Brazil. Ghazenadeh offered an invitation to Brazil to discuss issues of technology and energy exploration.<sup>154</sup> In February of 2014, less than a year later, the president of Iran's parliament, Ali Larijani, and the Chairman of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, welcomed a contingent of four high-ranking Brazilian congress members, selected from among the parties that support Dilma's government, to re-establish ties between the two countries.

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In 2015, Rousseff met Rouhani in New York. Both parties agreed to bolster economic and cultural cooperation. Rousseff declared that "Iran and Brazil enjoy common viewpoints in various international organizations," supporting the lift of sanctions imposed on Iran by the West. "Brazil regards Iran as a regional power and is interested in expanding bilateral trade and economic ties. We invite Iranian firms for investment in Brazil," she added.<sup>156</sup> In April of 2016, Brazil's Deputy Foreign Minister Jose Alfredo Grasa Lima, while visiting Tehran, stated that Brazil aims to develop a long-term relationship with Iran in politics, economics, and culture. Then Iran's Deputy Foreign

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Eduardo Gomez, "Why Iran-Brazil friendship has gone cold," *CNN*, April 5, 2012, <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/05/opinion/gomez-iran-brazil-chill/index.html>

<sup>154</sup> Coutinho, "In Brazil," 45-46

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Eman Askerieh, "Iran is an influential regional power: Rousseff," *Iran Front Page*, September 26, 2015, <https://ifpnews.com/iran-is-an-influential-regional-power-rousseff>

Minister for European and America Affairs Majid Takht Ravanchi, replied, "Brazil has a special position in Iran's foreign policy and is always at the top of Iran's foreign policy agenda." Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif pointed out that "given its status in Latin America and BRICS, Brazil has always been prioritized in Iran's foreign policy."<sup>157</sup> Rousseff's attitude change can be attributed to internal political and economic elements. After the economy deteriorated, Brazil needed international cash flows, and Iran, a large consumer of its agricultural commodities, could fulfill Brazil's needs. Politically, as mass protests and an impeachment process was conducted against her administration, Rousseff perceived that as Brazil's military and political elite –often with support from the US– were against her, she ought to find political allies elsewhere. Iran also fulfilled that need.

## **Temer and Bolsonaro**

In August of 2016, the political scenario changed with the soft-coup against Rousseff and the accession of Michel Temer to Brazil's presidency. Temer, a centrist, pro-US politician, and former vice president, ended nearly sixteen years of governments led by the left-leaning Workers' party. Therefore, ideologically, Temer stood far from Iran's revolutionary ambitions. Nevertheless, in economic terms, the relationship was not affected; instead, it prospered, showing that trade is the fundamental pillar of the Iran-Brazil relationship.<sup>158</sup>

In 2017 Brazil's state-run oil company Petrobras announced its willingness to expand oil and gas cooperation with the National Iranian Oil Company in the oil and gas-rich Caspian Sea region. Petrobras has vast experience in undertaking deepwater

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<sup>157</sup> Jose da Cruz, "Brazil-Iran Relations in the Post-Cold War," *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, November 6, 2017,

<https://www.coha.org/brazil-iran-strengthened-in-the-post-cold-war-international-systems-kerry-announce-s-the-monroe-doctrine-is-dead/>

<sup>158</sup> Antonopoulos, "Washington's Anxiety," 156-157.

exploration and drilling projects.<sup>159</sup> The same year Brazilian officials invited Iranian banks to open branches in the South American country. Furthermore, officials from both Iran and Brazil underlined the necessity of improving banking relations to boost bilateral trade and investments.<sup>160</sup>

In April of 2018, Temer met Zarif in Brasilia, and both politicians share cordial words, emphasizing the need to boost trade and cooperation. In September, the government of Brazil announced a plan to allocate US\$1.2 billion through the Brazilian Development Bank, aimed at Brazilian business people wishing to work with Iran in the face of reinstated US sanctions.<sup>161</sup> Temer's short presidency was a demonstration that Brazil and Iran can maintain cordial relations even when political changes occur.

However, since right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro became Brazil's president (2019-present), the relationship has suffered several impasses. Motivated by his evangelical beliefs, voter base, and admiration for Donald Trump, Bolsonaro suggested he would transfer Brazil's embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Soon after, several Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, threatened to boycott Brazilian agricultural products.<sup>162</sup> Only the prompt intervention of Brazil's agriculture minister and the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce calmed fears among Brazilian farmers. This particular incident exemplifies the importance of the Iranian market for Brazil's agricultural sector, and the influential capacity this sector has on Brazil's politics. On the

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<sup>159</sup> "Petrobras Explores Caspian Sea Energy Opportunities," *Financial Tribune*, September 22, 2017

<https://financialtribune.com/articles/energy/72900/petrobras-explores-caspian-sea-energy-opportunities>

<sup>160</sup> "Removal of Banking Hurdles to Boost Iran-Brazil Trade Ties," *Financial Tribune*, September 12, 2017

<https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-business-and-markets/72278/removal-of-banking-hurdles-to-boost-iran-brazil-trade>

<sup>161</sup> "Zarif meets Brazilian president, calls for using national currencies in trade ties" *Tehran Times*, April 2018,

<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/422556/Zarif-meets-Brazilian-president-calls-for-using-national-currencies>

<sup>162</sup> Ana Mano, "Brazil risks Middle East trade with Israel embassy move," *Reuters*, November 8, 2018,

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-israel-trade-analysis/brazil-risks-middle-east-trade-with-israel-embassy-move-idUSKCN1ND33T>

other hand, a complete boycott of Brazilian agricultural products could lead to a food shortage in the Islamic Republic.

Then, in July of 2019, Iran's ambassador to Brasilia was quoted in Iran's Fars news agency arguing that Tehran could reconsider imports from Brazil if it continued to deny the refuel of two Iranian vessels stranded there.<sup>163</sup> The ships waited off the coast of the southern state of Parana for nearly two months. Petrobras declined to supply fuel, arguing that the vessels were under US sanctions and would risk significant fines. Bolsonaro, who has sought closer ties with the US, said he stood by the US-backed sanctions on Iran. A few days later, Brazil's top court ordered Petrobras to refuel the two Iranian grain vessels.<sup>164</sup> At the time, Iran was the biggest buyer of Brazilian corn.

Finally, last January, Iran's foreign ministry summoned Brazil's chargé d'affaires in Tehran following an official Brazilian statement that some experts interpreted as backing the US killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani.<sup>165</sup> Bolsonaro has established a different foreign policy approach towards the Islamic Republic. However, both countries' diplomatic bodies seem to be willing to maintain cordial relations, mainly based on economic terms.

## **The Importance of Trade**

When it comes to analyzing Iranian exports, numbers are somewhat problematic. Furthermore, while in Brazil's case differences in numbers are minimal, figures differ

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<sup>163</sup> Diane Jeantet, "Brazil at diplomatic impasse with Iran over US sanctions," *AP News*, July 25, 2019, <https://apnews.com/77c98fac12c1465d8bd8a545b96dfa7a>

<sup>164</sup> Lisandra Paraguasu, "Brazil court orders Petrobras to refuel Iran grain vessels," *Reuters*, July 25, 2019 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-iran-sanctions/brazil-court-orders-petrobras-to-refuel-iran-grain-vessels-idUSKCN1UK2PK>

<sup>165</sup> "Iran summons Brazil's charge d'affaires in Tehran after Soleimani comments," *Reuters*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-iran-brazil/iran-summons-brazils-charge-daffaires-in-tehran-after-soleimani-comments-idUSKBN1Z61IF>

significantly between the three different sites used to document Iran's trade: The UN Comtrade Database (UNCD), The Atlas of Economic Complexity (AEC) of Harvard University, and The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) all have very different amounts for Iranian exports to Brazil.

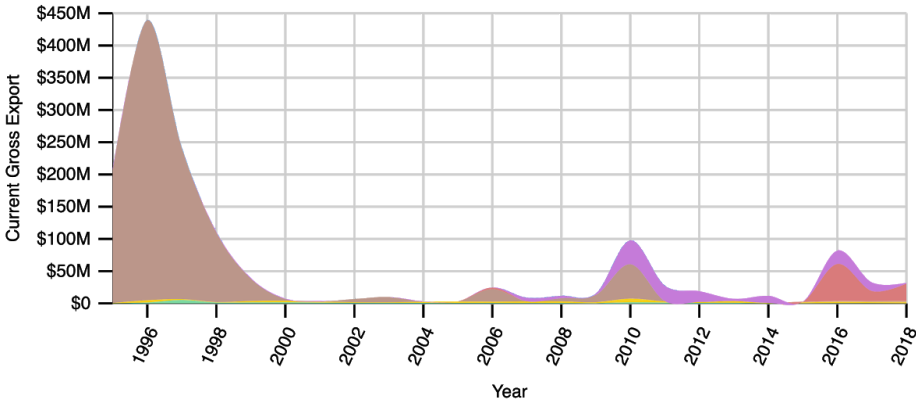


Figure 1: Iran’s exports to Brazil from 1996 to 2018.<sup>166</sup>

For instance, in 1997, UNCD reported US\$8 million, AEC, US\$235m, and OEC had US\$306. According to the UNCD, Iran exported less than US\$6m a year from 1998 to 2006. Furthermore, besides 2010, 2014, and 2016 (US\$90m, US\$77m, and US\$111m respectively), exports were minimal. The AEC also details small numbers, except for 2010 and 2016 (US\$100m and US\$78m). Finally, The OEC data showed US\$131m in 1998; US\$134m in 2010; US\$70m in 2016, and the rest below US\$50m. Anyhow, Iranian exports to Brazil are still a tiny figure taking into account that Brazil imports US\$6 billion worth of fertilizers, US\$6.5 billion worth of plastic products, and \$1.3 billion on iron and steel each year. All these products could be potentially supplied to the Brazilian market by Iran.

<sup>166</sup> Source: The Atlas of Economic Complexity (AEC).

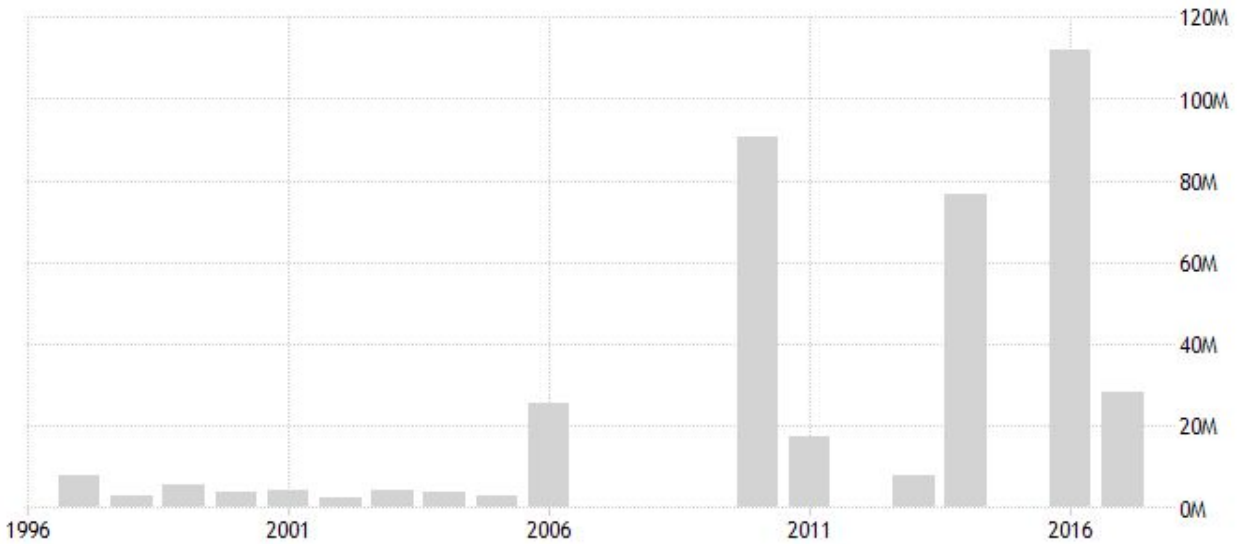


Figure 2: Iran's exports to Brazil from 1996 to 2017 with UN Comtrade data.<sup>167</sup>

On the other hand, during Cardoso's presidency, according to the UN Comtrade Database, Brazil exported US\$244 million to Iran (mostly soybean oil, seeds oils, raw sugar). Brazilian exports to Iran remained stable until 2003; that year –Lula's first year in office– saw a significant jump to US\$869m (soybean oil, soybeans, corn). As the graphic shows, during Lula's presidency, exports to Iran remained healthy and stable. And while some have argued that significant jumps in Brazilian exports to Iran can sometimes be attributed to Argentinian products being exported from Brazil – as the relation between Iran and Argentina suffered difficulties at times due to the AMIA case–, the consistent increase in trade seems to be a direct effect of improved bilateral relations.

<sup>167</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.

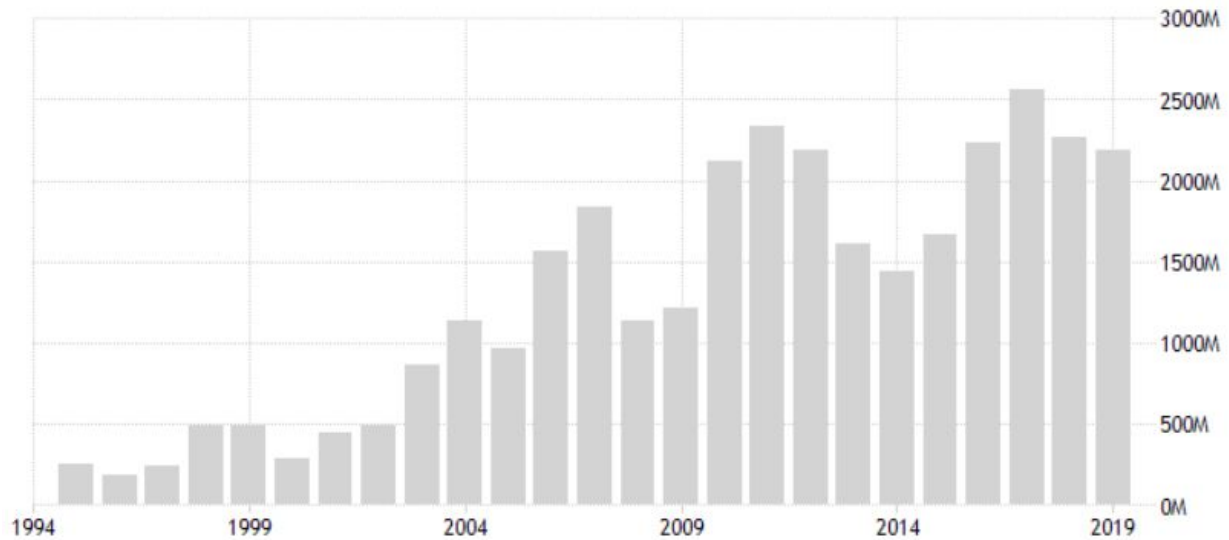


Figure 3: Brazil's exports to Iran from 1994 to 2019, with UN Comtrade data.<sup>168</sup>

Another considerable increase in trade occurred in 2006 when Brazil exported US\$1.57b to Iran and US\$1.8b in 2007. The agricultural sector remained Brazil's main asset when it came to trade with Iran: raw sugar, soybeans, corn, soybean oil, frozen bovine meat, and soybean meat are the primary products imported by Iran. The years 2008 and 2009 –amid a global economic recession– was the only time exports decreased considerably whilst Lula was in office, though exports remained above US\$1b.

In 2010, Lula da Silva's last year as president, Brazil exported US\$2.12b while it only imported US\$21.2m (nitrogenous fertilizers, ethylene polymers) from the Persian country, producing a tremendous trade surplus in favor of the South American giant. In 2011 –the year Dilma Rousseff took office– numbers went up to US\$2.32b, and in 2012 it amounted to US\$2.18b. However, as Rousseff's presidency went on, the relationship deteriorated, and trade was affected.

<sup>168</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.

As diplomatic tensions arose during Rousseff's mandate, Brazilian exports waned in the subsequent years: US\$1.6b in 2013 and US\$1.4b in 2014. Even though the lower amount could be associated with Rousseff's negative attitude towards the Islamic Republic, the main reason for this decline can be associated with US sanctions on Iran. In fact, after the Iranian nuclear deal in 2015, trade increased in the subsequent years: US\$1.66b in 2015 and US\$2.23b in 2016.

In 2017, when Temer entered his second year as Brazil's acting president, trade between Brasilia and Tehran reached an all-time high of US\$2.56b. In 2018, Temer's last year in office, exports amounted to US\$2.27b. In 2019, Bolsonaro's first year as president, exports reached US2.19b.

Finally, when it comes to the trade balance, numbers are tremendously beneficial for Brazil. According to the World Bank, in 2011, trade surplus was US\$2.297b; in 2012, US\$2.16b; in 2015, it reached an estimated US\$1.664bn, the eighth highest trade balance for Brazil that year. In 2016, Iran came fifth, with a positive balance of US\$2.154bn. In 2017, the trade surplus reached US\$2.518bn (Iran ranked fourth), while in 2018 US\$2.228bn (ranking sixth).<sup>169</sup> These numbers highlight the importance of the Iranian market for Brazil and might be an indicator of why both countries remain in good terms even when political changes occur.

## **Conclusion**

This relationship's economic and diplomatic strength seems to overcome political differences arising after internal political changes occurred in Brazil. Economic interdependence exceeds political differences. Thus, Iran has found ways to maintain an alliance with a country of strategic importance based on trade, achieving two of the

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<sup>169</sup> World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BN.GSR.GNFS.CD>.



most important goals it aimed for when it entered the region: securing essential goods for its population while demonstrating that it is not isolated from the world.

Furthermore, even under Jair Bolsonaro's tenure, the importance of Iran's market to Brazil's agricultural sector had to be considered before any substantial political changes were done. Iran has successfully created economic leverage vis-a-vis Brazil. Moreover, even though the Islamic Republic could purchase similar products in closer markets –with better logistics and transportation costs–, Tehran remains a loyal consumer to the Brazilian market. While critics still consider trade with Iran insignificant compared to Brazil's commercial ties with the United States, China, or the European Union, the Islamic Republic has demonstrated to be a reliable, trustworthy partner. Furthermore, if sanctions are lifted, Iran can turn into an even more profitable market for Brazil's economy, which was initially one of Lula's objectives.

On a political level, Brazil's international significance makes it a very attractive potential ally for Iran. Therefore, maintaining ties with Brazil might produce new strong political bonds in the future, based on South-South cooperation and economic deals.

### **Chapter Three: Argentina and Iran**

Argentina's relation with Iran has had different phases. It began with Nuclear cooperation during the 1980s, which was later disrupted when Carlos Menem took office. Subsequently, two terrorist attacks were perpetrated on Jewish targets in Buenos Aires in the 1990s, with presumed Iranian participation. The relationship continued mostly based on commercial exchanges. Then, ties were cut entirely under Nestor Kirchner's administration (2003-2007). Afterward, with Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's ascension to power in 2007, communication and cooperation resumed. Finally, Mauricio Macri's government decided to openly align with the West, pushing the country out of Iran's orbit.

Undoubtedly, the investigation surrounding the two terrorist attacks have dictated the levels of interaction between the two countries. While Argentine authorities have tried to conclude if Iran had any responsibilities organizing and carrying out these attacks, Tehran has denied any involvement.<sup>170</sup> Consequently, diplomatic impasses have altered the political scenario, which accordingly had a direct effect on trade, which mainly consists of Argentine exports.

As the shadows of the two terrorist attacks still darken everything surrounding Tehran, trade is the primary political element binding these countries together. Argentina's economic necessities, commitment towards the Global South, and its willingness to be independent of Washington and its institutions are central to Iran's intentions of maintaining its presence in Argentina. This was particularly noticeable during Cristina Kirchner's second mandate. After the country's economy deteriorated profoundly, Buenos Aires was forced to find alternative sources of income, forging a new commercial bond with Iran.

Politically speaking, from an Argentine perspective, the most critical component dictating the degree of engagement with Iran relates to its foreign policy strategy, which has failed to set up a clear and consistent plan when dealing with the Islamic Republic. Moreover, since the "Argentine constitution enables the concentration of decisions about foreign policy in the executive,"<sup>171</sup> it is the president who sets the tone for the country's international agenda, which can explain why each administration has had a different foreign policy approach since the end of Argentina's military rule. Furthermore,

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<sup>170</sup> Larry Rohter, "Defector Ties Iran to 1994 Bombing of Argentine Jewish Center," *The New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/07/world/defector-ties-iran-to-1994-bombing-of-argentine-jewish-center.html>

<sup>171</sup> Anabella Busso, "Neoliberal Crisis, Social Demands, and Foreign Policy in Kirchnerist Argentina," *Contexto Internacional*, 38(1), (2017 ): 103-104. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-8529.2016380100003>

Botta claims that while democratic, Argentina's disposition towards Iran has been highly dependent on Buenos Aires' attitude vis a vis the US.<sup>172</sup>

In this context, the initial nuclear collaboration with Iran was a logical consequence of Argentina's international insertion model, which aimed to reach higher levels of autonomy within the international system and prioritized "South-South" cooperation, which was particularly noticeable during Raul Alfonsín's presidency in the 1980s.<sup>173</sup>

## **Nuclear Cooperation and Terrorism**

Although diplomatic contact began in 1902, cooperation intensified once Tehran requested Argentina's nuclear expertise in the mid-1980s. In May of 1987, after 18 months of negotiations, Argentina's Investigaciones Aplicadas (INVAP) and the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran signed a US\$5.5 million agreement for INVAP to provide Tehran with a new core for its US-supplied research reactor at the Tehran Nuclear Research Center (TNRC).<sup>174</sup> In addition to the reactor core, Argentina agreed to supply uranium enrichment technology. While Iran maintained that the technology would produce only low-enriched uranium, Argentina agreed to train Iranian experts at the Jose Balseiro Nuclear Institute as part of its fuel cycle technology transfer to Iran.<sup>175</sup> The CNEA (Commission Nuclear Energy Argentina) planned to provide the 115.8 kg of uranium from its Pilcanyeu enrichment plant.<sup>176</sup> In September of 1988, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) approved Argentina's sale of 115.8 kg of nearly 20 percent enriched uranium to Iran. It planned to supply the fuel by mid-1990. In April of 1989, Argentina replaced the core of Iran's research reactor at the Tehran Nuclear

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<sup>172</sup> Botta, "Exterior Argentina," 156-160.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 166-168.

<sup>174</sup> Paulo Botta, "La cooperación en el ámbito nuclear entre Argentina e Irán (1986-1997)", *Cuadernos de Política Exterior*, Número 101, Julio-Septiembre 2010, CERIR, Rosario, (2010): 2-8.

<sup>175</sup> Christina Walrond, "TIMELINE 1967-1993: ARGENTINE LOW-ENRICHED URANIUM AT TEHRAN RESEARCH REACTOR," *Institute for Science and International Security*, ISIS Report, (October 7, 2009). [https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Tehran\\_reactor\\_timeline.pdf](https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Tehran_reactor_timeline.pdf)

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

Research Center. In 1988 two other nuclear-related agreements were signed: Argentina committed to transfer nuclear technology and supervise the construction of a plant for uranium enrichment.<sup>177</sup>

However, during Carlos Menem's tenure (1989-1999), Argentina tried to renegotiate these contracts, acknowledging US concerns regarding Iran's nuclear intentions. In December of 1991, Argentina planned to deliver its first shipment of machinery and tools to an Iranian facility designed for uranium enrichment. Nevertheless, a sudden executive order suspended the transaction. By February of 1992, Argentine authorities did not consider Iran a trustworthy recipient of nuclear materials. Tehran unsuccessfully offered to increase trade as an incentive for Buenos Aires to proceed with the agreements. Nevertheless, on March 2, 1992, Menem canceled the delivery of all nuclear equipment and materials to Iran, arguing he could not guarantee the resources would be used for peaceful purposes.<sup>178</sup> Iranian authorities were extremely disappointed, and officially expressed their resentment towards Argentina's leadership.

A few days later, on March 17, a bombing attack was carried out against Israel's embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 and injuring more than 200 individuals.<sup>179</sup> The nature of the attack and intelligence regarding the actors involved pointed to international terrorists operating under the supervision of Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iran's long-time proxy.

Initially, the attack was associated with Argentina's unwillingness to cooperate with Iran's nuclear program. However, this scenario is unlikely since, at the time, Iran still hoped Argentina would reconsider its decision. Furthermore, the South American

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Botta, "Exterior Argentina," 157-160.

<sup>179</sup> Nathaniel Nash, "At Least 6 Die as Blast Destroys Israel's Embassy in Buenos Aires," *The New York Times*, March 18, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/18/world/at-least-6-die-as-blast-destroys-israel-s-embassy-in-buenos-ai-res.html?login=smartlock>

country did ship enriched uranium in 1993 as part of the 1987 deal. According to Johnson, "given Rafsanjani's determination to improve relations with the West, it is hard to believe that he would have personally ordered these actions. That he might have done so because Argentina had canceled an agreement to transfer nuclear technology to Tehran seems unlikely. Moreover, Iran did not have a particular reason to conduct attacks in Argentina that would have lasting negative repercussions".<sup>180</sup>

The other hypothesis traced the attack to the assassination of Hezbollah's leader Abbas Musawi a month before by Israeli security forces. In any case, Argentina's judiciary concluded that the Islamic Jihad –a cell with direct ties to Hezbollah– organized and carried out the attack.<sup>181</sup> There is still no conclusive evidence to demonstrate that Iran or Hezbollah were responsible for the attack. Some experts even pointed in other directions, claiming the explosives were placed inside the embassy compound rather than in a van, as the Argentine police initially claimed.<sup>182</sup> Nonetheless, in 1999 Argentina's Supreme Court indicted Hezbollah late military leader Imad Fayeze Mughniyeh for his presumed participation in the attack.

By June of 1992, and under intense pressure from the US, Argentina decided to cancel the two nuclear agreements signed in 1988 officially. However, the IAEA confirmed that Argentina exported a shipment of nearly 20 percent enriched uranium to Iran in 1993, fulfilling the accord signed in 1987.<sup>183</sup>

Although the relationship did not suffer as much as one would presume after the 1992 attack, matters changed radically on July 18, 1994, when the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires, was bombed, killing 85 people and injuring hundreds more in one of the most significant terrorist

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<sup>180</sup> Johnson, "Report," 7-10, 40-41.

<sup>181</sup> Mark Steinitz, "Middle East Terrorist Activity in Latin America," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Policy Paper on the Americas 14, Study 7, CSIS, (July 2003), 7.

<sup>182</sup> Johnson, "Report," 61-62.

<sup>183</sup> Botta, "(1986-1997)", 19-20.

attacks ever to take place in South America.<sup>184</sup> The attack disclosed a subject hardly discussed before: international Islamic terrorism had been developing cells in South America, and no government had anticipated its catastrophic consequences.

Among the reasons to attack a Jewish target in Argentina, Hugo Alconada lists Argentina's large Jewish population, its participation in the 1991 Gulf War and "the fluctuating relations that Argentine President Carlos Menem and his administration maintained with governments in the Middle East, while at the same time affirming an explicit alliance with the United States and a commitment to the defense of Israel."<sup>185</sup> Nonetheless, considering the scope of the attacks, all these are far-stretched hypotheses and have never been corroborated.

As a consequence, Argentina decided to suspend all nuclear cooperation with Iran. Since then, Iranian leaders have periodically sent signals to Argentine authorities in an attempt to reestablish nuclear cooperation. In February of 2002, Argentina's ambassador in Tehran reported that Persian authorities believed that, although the two countries did not agree on other subjects, nuclear technology transfers could be restored. Other reports also suggested that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad asked Venezuela's Hugo Chávez to intercede on Iran's behalf with President Kirchner in 2007.<sup>186</sup> In 2009, the Iranian representative to the IAEA also mentioned that Tehran would be willing to buy nuclear fuel from any supplier, including Argentina.<sup>187</sup>

According to information received by the US House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC), in February of 2010, Julio de Vido, then Argentina's Minister of Planning and Public

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<sup>184</sup> Frud Bezhan, "Explainer: Iran's Alleged Part In 1994 Bombing Of Buenos Aires Jewish Center," Radio Free Europe, June 1, 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-argentina-bombing-jewish/25004062.html>

<sup>185</sup> Hugo Alconada, "The Shadow of Iran in Argentina Takes on a Suspicious Shape," in *Iran in Latin America: Threat or 'Axis of Annoyance'?*, ed. Cynthia Arnson, Haleh Esfandiari, and Adam Stubits (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars): 52-56.

<sup>186</sup> Julian M. Obiglio and Diego C. Naveira, "Rewriting History in Argentina," in *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, ed. Ilan Berman, Joseph Humire (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 85.

<sup>187</sup> Johnson, "Report," 64.

Works, met with Venezuela's Vice President Elias Juau and offered to share nuclear technology with the Venezuelan government, which has had a nuclear cooperation agreement with Iran dating from November 2008.<sup>188</sup> Although some speculated Argentina's nuclear technology could have been transferred to Iran via Venezuela, there is no evidence to support such a claim. The HFAC also obtained documents indicating a financial relationship between Venezuela, Argentina, and Iran involving transfers of up to \$250 million to build some 200 factories in Venezuela –mainly in the food processing and industrial equipment sectors–. US intelligence reports could not confirm if the factories were ever built.<sup>189</sup>

In April of 2011 April, the Argentinean paper Perfil, citing confidential documents, reported that in a meeting in January with Iran's long-time ally, Syria's Bashar al Assad, Argentine Foreign Minister Hector Timerman offered to drop the investigations into the Buenos Aires attacks if economic ties (once valued at more than US\$1 billion) were reinstated. Timerman denied the report.<sup>190</sup> Moreover, after diplomatic contact was non-existent during Nestor Kirchner's period, the relationship resumed after Cristina Kirchner consolidated her power. With Cristina, and under the influence of Chavez –who is often seen as the middleman between Tehran and Buenos Aires–, Tehran hoped about the possibility of nuclear cooperation with Buenos Aires. The flirtation promptly disturbed the US Congress. For instance, in July of 2011, Congress members wrote a letter to then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, warning her about a possible triangulation of nuclear materials and technologies between Argentina, Venezuela, and Iran.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Jose Cardenas, "State snubs House request to examine Argentina-Iran ties," *Foreign Policy*, August 10, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/10/state-snubs-house-request-to-examine-argentina-iran-ties/>

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Pepe Eliashev, "El Gobierno negocia un pacto secreto con Irán para "olvidar" los atentados, Diario perfil, March 26, 2011, <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/politica/el-gobierno-negocia-un-pacto-secreto-con-iran-para-olvidar-los-atentados-20110326-0004.phtml>

<sup>191</sup> Jose Cardenas, "State snubs House request to examine Argentina-Iran ties," *Foreign Policy*, August 10, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/10/state-snubs-house-request-to-examine-argentina-iran-ties/>

Furthermore, In March of 2015, Brazil's weekly magazine *Veja* published an article describing Venezuela's role as a mediator between Argentina and Iran to transfer nuclear technology. *Veja* interviewed three out of the twelve Venezuelan whistleblowers that were then collaborating with the US Justice Department in a case of drug trafficking involving the highest ranks of Venezuela's regime. According to the magazine, in January of 2007, the informants witnessed a meeting where Ahmadinejad asked Chavez for Argentina's nuclear technology and to lift the international capture order set by INTERPOL due to the AMIA case. Chavez said he would personally look into these matters. According to *Veja*'s report, in exchange, Argentina would receive large sums of money for Cristina's presidential campaign. No official investigation nor evidence further supported any of these claims.<sup>192</sup>

## **The AMIA Case**

The AMIA investigation led by Argentine officials charged eight suspects, including former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, for their involvement in the planning of the attack. However, witness credibility became problematic. In 2003, Argentine television broadcasted Federal Judge Juan José Galeano offering a witness US\$400,000 to admit the sale of a van to the terrorists. Galeano is currently in prison, serving a six-year sentence. Later, in 2007, a former Argentine member of congress, Mario Cafiero, and a renowned politician, Luis D'Elía, described the two key witnesses as members of the Islamic-Marxist Mujahedin e Khalq (MEK), an organization committed to overthrowing the current Iranian regime.<sup>193</sup> The AMIA attack investigation was defined by incompetence and suspiciousness, and for more than a decade, Argentine authorities did not advance the case.

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<sup>192</sup> Leonardo Coutinho, "The Tehran-Caracas-Buenos Aires Connection," *Veja Magazine*, March 15, 2015. <https://veja.abril.com.br/blog/veja-international/the-teheran-caracas-buenos-aires-connection/>

<sup>193</sup> Johnson, "Report," 47-48. 61-62.



However, once Nestor Kirchner came to power, he created a special investigation unit dedicated to the AMIA case. Soon after, prosecutors Alberto Nisman and Marcelo Martínez Burgos announced in 2006 that the attack was "ordered by the highest authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran in conjunction with Hezbollah."<sup>194</sup> In November 2007, INTERPOL's general assembly voted to place five former Iranian officials on its "red list," accusing them of having planned and carried out the bombing. The list included Ahmad Vahidi, Mohsen Rabbani (former embassy cultural attaché), and Imad Fayez Mughniyeh.<sup>195</sup> Iran declared the resolution as "unfounded" and "unacceptable," and stated that bilateral cooperation had failed because of "the influence of Argentine Zionists. Subsequently, tensions increased when Iran designated Ahmad Vahidi as Defense Minister in August 2009.<sup>196</sup> In September 2009, then-President Cristina Kirchner urged Iranian authorities to cooperate in the extradition process of the five Iranian citizens linked to the attack during a speech at the UN general assembly. In July 2011, Iran showed a disposition to cooperate. However, Iran's Foreign Ministry claimed that no Iranian citizens played a role in either of the attacks.<sup>197</sup>

During Cristina's second tenure, she tried to implement a different strategy by signing a "Memorandum of Understanding" with Iran. The agreement, signed in 2013 in Ethiopia, sought the creation of a "Commission of Truth" formed by five international jurists (each country choosing two while consensually electing the fifth jurist), with the sole purpose of investigating the attack. It also stipulated that Argentine authorities could interrogate the five Iranians accused by Nisman on Iranian soil. Although Argentina's congress

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<sup>194</sup> Marcelo Martínez Burgos and Alberto Nisman, "AMIA Case," *Investigations Unit of the Office of the Attorney General*, (2006), 9, <http://www.peaceandtolerance.org/docs/nismanindict.pdf>.

<sup>195</sup> Douglas Farah, "Back to the Future: Argentina Unravels," *Inter-American Institute for Democracy*, (2013): 19-20.

<sup>196</sup> "Iran accuses Argentina of 'interfering in internal affairs'", *Merco Press*, August 24, 2009.

<https://en.mercopress.com/2009/08/24/iran-accuses-argentina-of-interfering-in-internal-affairs>

<sup>197</sup> Jorge Rosales, "Cristina Kirchner denunció a Irán en su discurso ante la ONU," *La Nación*, September 2009,

<https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/cristina-kirchner-denuncio-a-iran-en-su-discurso-ante-la-onu-nid1178321/>

–controlled by the Kirchneristas then– approved the agreement, the pact never materialized. Controversy quickly spread as the opposition and Jewish civil society groups rejected the Memorandum. Argentine justice finally determined the Memorandum was unconstitutional in 2014.<sup>198</sup>

A year later, special prosecutor Nisman accused then-President Cristina Kirchner and her chancellor, Hector Timerman, among others, of covering up Iran's participation in the attack when negotiating the Memorandum. According to Nisman, Kirchner's pact aimed to lift the INTERPOL's capture alert placed on the Iranian officials.<sup>199</sup> Nisman based his investigation on wiretaps and information obtained by Israeli and US secret services. He argued that due to Argentina's energetic crisis, Kirchner agreed to grant impunity to the Iranian officials linked in the attack in exchange for Iranian oil and other economic deals. President Kirchner denied these accusations, while Ronald Noble, then INTERPOL's secretary-general, contradicted Nisman's conjecture.<sup>200</sup>

Then, on January 18, 2015, a day before Nisman was supposed to testify in front of Argentina's congress, he was found dead in his apartment. His dead cause was labeled initially as a suicide, although later, a federal judge ruled that Nisman was killed, adding more suspiciousness to the case.<sup>201</sup>

In 2017, Judge Claudio Bonadio accused Cristina Kirchner of treason and called on the country's senate to allow her arrest and trial for allegedly covering up Iran's involvement in the case. Other former officials and people close to Kirchner's government will also be tried on charges of cover-up and abuse of power. Because of Kirchner's immunity as

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<sup>198</sup> Perednik, "Too Much," 40-45.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Raul Kollman, "Nisman: los que apuestan a que no se sepa qué pasó," *Página 12*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/243084-nisman-los-que-apuestan-a-que-no-se-sepa-que-paso>

<sup>201</sup> Perednik, "Too Much," 42.

a national senator, she avoided prison. The trial, on the other hand, has been postponed several times.<sup>202</sup>

Until this day, no one has been convicted in regards to the AMIA case. Hezbollah still denies any responsibility, and the Iranian government preserves its innocence. Furthermore, Tehran has condemned the terrorist attack and called for a prompt and neutral investigation to find the perpetrators. Additionally, some crucial sources still question whether Iranian officials ordered the attack. For example, James Bernazanni, a former head of the Hezbollah unit at America's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and collaborator to Argentine investigators, stated that although he presumes Iran was involved in the attack, the Argentines have only offered thin evidence.<sup>203</sup> Moreover, internal political disputes and corruption have undoubtedly tarnished the AMIA case. As Alconada stated, "investigators and prosecutors themselves perpetrate fraud and cover-ups, sacrificing the "means" (respect for the law) in favor of achieving acceptable "ends," ultimately provoking consequences opposite to those being sought."<sup>204</sup>

## **Menem and Iran**

When Carlos Menem initiated his presidency, Argentina's relationship with Iran was at its peak. Trade included not only primary products but also war material, and both countries had agreements regarding nuclear collaboration. However, in the 1990s, Argentina decided to change its foreign policy strategy. It did not prioritize cooperation among the Global South, which was established under Menem's predecessor, Raul Alfonsin. Instead, it decided to align with the US on several critical foreign policy issues.

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<sup>202</sup> Mariano Confalonieri, "Por qué Bonadio acusa a Cristina Kirchner de "traición a la patria"", Perfil, December 7, 2017, <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/politica/pacto-con-iran-por-que-bonadio-acusa-a-cristina-kirchner-de-traicion-a-la-patria.phtml>

<sup>203</sup> Alexis Barrionuevo, "Inquiry on 1994 Blast at Argentina Jewish Center Gets New Life," The New York Times, July 17, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/18/world/americas/18argentina.html>

<sup>204</sup> Alconada, "Suspicious Shape," 60.

For instance, Menem, born of Syrian parents, took Argentina out of the Non-Alignment Movement, and he also became the first Argentine president to visit Israel.<sup>205</sup>

Highly responsible for this paradigm shift is Carlos Escude. Escude –who served as exclusive advisor to Guido di Tella, Menem's Foreign Minister– is one of Argentina's most renowned IR scholars and author of IR theory 'Peripheral Realism.' This theory suggested that seeking high degrees of autonomy and confronting hegemonic powers –such as the US– ultimately only harms the citizens of weaker peripheral states, noting that Argentina's bold attitude abroad in the 1980s was partly responsible for the country's military, social and economic decay. According to Escude, the Falklands War and Argentina's nuclear ambitions positioned the country among a group of states he considers "rebel states," states that "despite lacking rule-making capabilities, refuse to adapt to the order imposed by the rule-makers." This attitude provokes unintended consequences, affecting the citizens' welfare.<sup>206</sup>

Therefore, Menem pursued a completely different foreign policy strategy. Moreover, to ingratiate the US, Argentina turned down its nuclear agreements with Iran. It also canceled the development of a ballistic missile project along with Egypt and Iraq, and it even sent naval forces to join an international military coalition free Kuwait in 1990. Menem's government also followed the Washington Consensus, which included macroeconomic stabilization, trade liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and other market-oriented policies. Menem intended to join the "first world club" and leave behind past governments' "third world solidarity." Therefore, "to improve its international insertion, Argentina had to live 'in tune with the time,' among other things by aligning its foreign policy with Washington and the neoliberal economic criteria prevailing worldwide in the 1990s" claimed Busso.<sup>207</sup> Turning to the US and freezing relations with a rebel state such as Iran was necessary for Argentina's new stance. This attitude came as an

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<sup>205</sup> Botta, "Exterior Argentina," 156-162.

<sup>206</sup> Luis Schenoni and Carlos Escude, "Peripheral Realism Revisited," *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 59(1): e002, (2016). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201600102>

<sup>207</sup> Busso, "Kirchnerist Argentina," 108-110.

effort to repair Argentina's international reputation, which was severely damaged after the country defied the world order. The Falklands War (1982), systematic human rights abuses during its last military dictatorship (1976-1983), the development of its nuclear program, and a border dispute that nearly escalated into a full-scale war against Chile are among the events that converted Argentina into a problematic state, suggests Escude.<sup>208</sup>

Botta claims that Argentina's restraint vis-a-vis Iran during Menem's administration is not only the result of the terrorist attacks, as most would presume, but also Argentina's international insertion and predisposition towards the US. He also emphasizes the impact of the Jewish lobby in Argentina's foreign policy decision-making process. According to Botta, Jewish groups from Argentina and the US –and the State of Israel– pressured Buenos Aires to cut diplomatic ties with Iran.<sup>209</sup> Surprisingly, during Menem's tenure –except for 1999, his last year in office–, political tension did not affect Argentina's exports to Iran. Iran's willingness to maintain commercial ties aimed, according to Klich, to reinstate political communication and, perhaps, nuclear collaboration.<sup>210</sup> Besides, with the 1990s liberalization of Argentina's economy, a few transnational corporations took control of the country's agroindustry. Therefore, since private companies with little state regulation were in charge of exports, amounts did not vary as one would expect. Nevertheless, with the cancellation of the nuclear contracts, the commercial relation could not be categorized as "strategic" anymore, and, as Argentina exported mostly raw materials, its market could be easily replaced elsewhere.

For instance, in 1998, during Khatami's presidency, and after constant tension related to the AMIA investigation, Iran's embassy in Argentina was reduced to only a commercial

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<sup>208</sup> Carlos Escude. "Who Commands, Who Obeys and Who Rebels: Latin American Security under a Peripheral Realist Perspective, in *Routledge Handbook of Latin American Security*, ed. David R. Mares and Arie Kakowicz, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 56-67.

<sup>209</sup> Botta, "Exterior Argentina," 172-175.

<sup>210</sup> Ignacio Klich, "Argentina-Irán, ayer y hoy. Constantes de la política exterior argentina en Oriente Medio," in *Irán. Los retos de la República Islámica*, ed. Ignacio Klich and Zidane Zeraoui. (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2011), 201–248.

officer. Argentina then reciprocated, announcing its intentions to demote relations with Iran "to the minimum." Subsequently, in 1999, Argentine exports to Iran dropped by threefold, reaching its lowest point since measurements are available.

## **The years of Nestor Kirchner**

To make this thesis more consistent, and due to Argentina's volatile political years between 1999 and 2003, this work will omit this period, moving forward to Nestor Kirchner's presidency (2003-2007). During the Kirchner years, the relation between Argentina and Iran reached an all-time low. Kirchner's commitment to finding the perpetrators of the AMIA bombing prompted mistrust in Tehran. In August of 2003, Argentina requested INTERPOL to arrest former Iranian ambassador Hadi Soleimanpour in London. Khatami condemned the arrest and threatened to respond severely.<sup>211</sup> Soleimanpour was later released, but the relations were severely damaged. Afterward, Iran decided to suspend all economic and cultural cooperation with Argentina. Relations froze, and communication was only carried out through multilateral channels.

During these years, the Argentine judiciary attempted several occasions to place Iranian officials on INTERPOL's "red list" for their presumed participation in the AMIA attack, further exacerbating Tehran. In March of 2004, President Khatami, while attending a Group of 15 Summit in Caracas, refused to meet with President Kirchner unless Argentina officially apologized for accusing Iranian involvement in the attacks. Despite Kirchner's interest in discussing bilateral economic ties, Khatami rejected the meet until "Buenos Aires formally apologizes to Tehran for falsely charging Iranian diplomats with involvement in the bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in 1994."<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> "Iran Envoy arrest row escalates," *BBC*, August 24, 2003, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/3177355.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3177355.stm)

<sup>212</sup> Farhi, "American Relations," 27.

In 2006, Argentina approved UN Security Council Resolution 1696, the first in a series of resolutions that aimed to restrict Iran's nuclear capabilities. In 2007, Kirchner canceled plans to witness the inauguration of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa when he learned that Ahmadinejad planned to attend. A few months later, Kirchner spoke at the UN General Assembly, denouncing Iran's responsibility in the bombing and its inability to cooperate with Argentina's justice system.<sup>213</sup> The same year, the Argentine government met a high official of the US State Department, Nicholas Burns, to discuss a strategic agenda regarding nuclear non-proliferation. In the meeting, both parties agreed to prevent Iran's nuclear advance. The US concerns arose as Kirchner collaborated with Chavez's Venezuela in energy ventures, financing, and commercial and economic businesses.<sup>214</sup> Finally, as mentioned before, in November of 2007, INTERPOL's general assembly voted to place five former Iranian officials on its "red list." Unquestionable, these diplomatic disputes –although small– had a direct effect on trade, which decreased considerably. However, while it is very plausible that Iran desisted to purchase Argentine products as a form of economic reprisal, other factors can also explain the sudden lack of Argentine exports.

While analyzing commercial exchanges, it is important to note that, for the most part, trade has remained stable, and even after the AMIA incident, Iran kept buying from Argentina's agroindustry. According to the UN Comtrade Database, in 1995, a year after the AMIA attack, Iran imported US\$509 million (seeds oil, corn, soybean oil, wheat). Exports were steady until 1999, when it dropped almost threefold from the year before, reaching only US\$155m. Most likely, this came as a consequence of impasses that occurred in 1998, when diplomatic relations were downgraded to a minimum due to tensions regarding the AMIA investigation. As the relationship normalized, trade increased: US\$417m in 2001 and US\$338m in 2002.

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<sup>213</sup> Johnson, "Report," 62-63.

<sup>214</sup> "Acuerdo con EE.UU. para contener a Irán". Diario La Nación. Buenos Aires, Feb. 11 2007. Accessed July 25, 2020. <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/882713-acuerdo-con-eeuu-para-contener-a-iran>

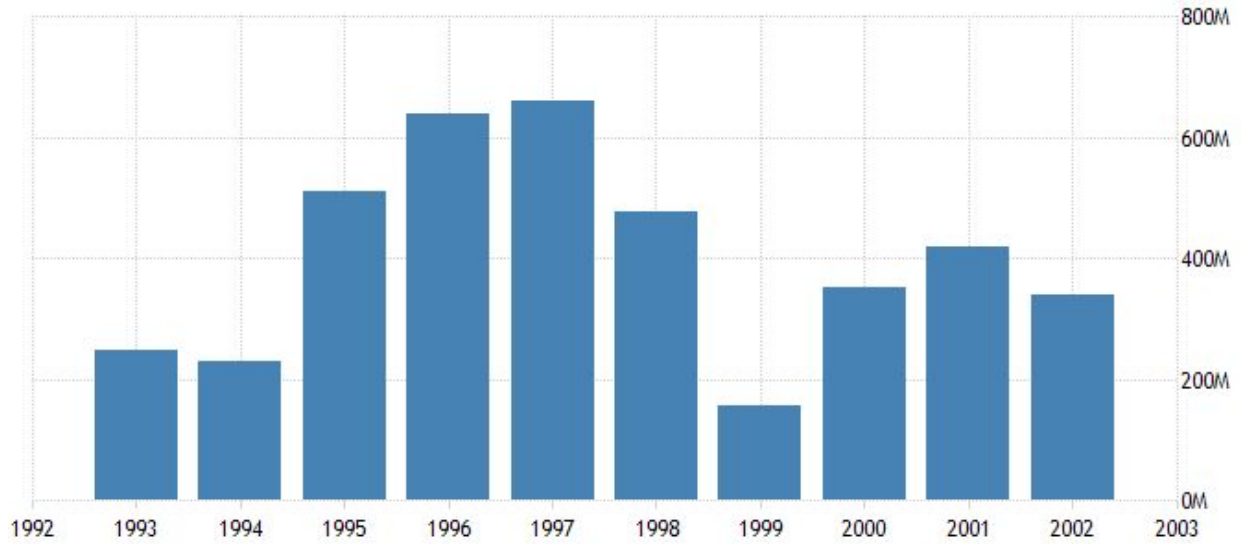


Figure 4: Argentine exports to Iran from 1992 to 2002.<sup>215</sup>

However, between 2003 and 2006, under Kirchner’s leadership, trade was almost non-existent. In 2007, its best year under Kirchner, Argentina exported US\$319m to Iran –mostly soybean and soybean oil–, while Iranian exports did not vary much, as the South American country has never been a big importer of Iranian products.

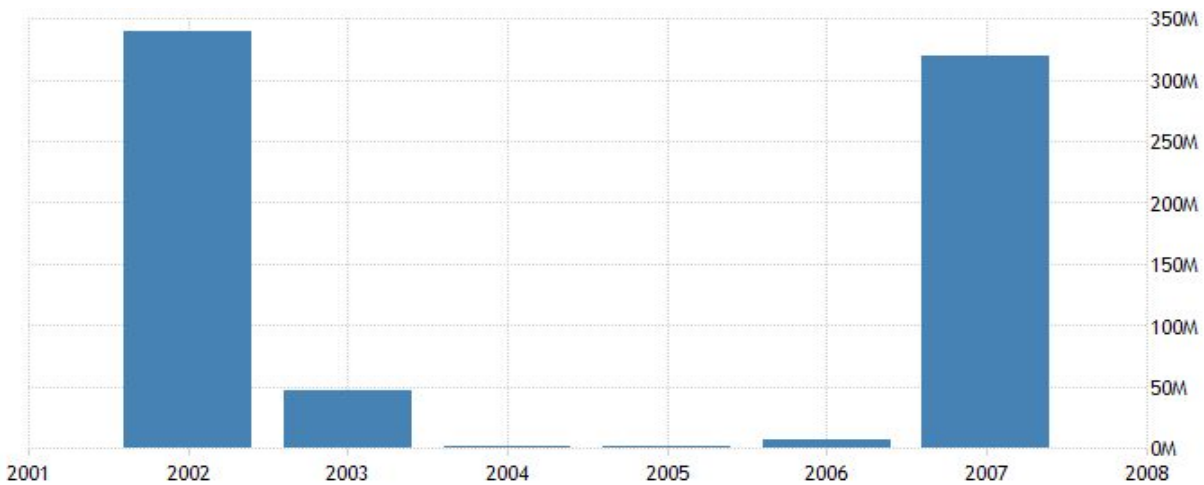


Figure 5: Argentine exports to Iran from 2002 to 2007.<sup>216</sup>

<sup>215</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.

<sup>216</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.



There are a few reasons why trade decreased to such a degree. Political tension surely was one of the leading causes affecting the commercial relation. Moreover, at the time, Iran's foreign trade –from transport to distribution- was vastly controlled by government-owned companies. Therefore, Tehran was able to use trade as an instrument to penalize Argentina's behavior. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that between 2003 and 2006, Argentina privileged the European market, and trade with most Middle Eastern countries decreased noticeably.<sup>217</sup>

Another significant factor is Iran's wheat production, which rose steadily after the Iranian government subsidized the production and consumption of wheat, going up from 6.6 million tons in 1979 to 14,6m tons in the 2000-2004 period.<sup>218</sup> Iran's leaders believed that because Western countries highly dominate wheat production, self-sufficiency was a matter of national security and political autonomy. However, Tehran's policy of subsidies had a high fiscal cost and could not be maintained during times of economic distress and low oil prices, forcing the country to import wheat and other basic goods as internal production suffered. This is an important element because Argentina's wheat accounted for almost 40% of exports to Iran in the years before the Soleimanpour arrest. Therefore, the overall numbers were affected accordingly.<sup>219</sup>

Large multinationals controlling agricultural commodities –in the case of grain, the world's market is roughly controlled by four companies<sup>220</sup>– are also a component to consider. These companies are often able to take commercial detours to surpass conflicts between states or sanctions. Thus even if financial flows are modified between countries, transactions can be done by transnational companies through a subsidiary. Therefore, it is no surprise if Brazil's exports to Iran suddenly rise when Argentina's drops, and vice versa. For instance, Brazil's exports went from US\$491 million in 2002

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<sup>217</sup> Todesca, "Cristina Fernandez," 37-38.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid. 24-25.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid, 30-34.

<sup>220</sup> Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Bunge, Cargill, y Louis Dreyfus controlled almost 73% of the global market. Todesca, "Cristina Fernandez," 32.

to US\$968m in 2005. Meanwhile, Argentine sales went from US\$338m in 2002 to US\$187k in 2005.<sup>221</sup> Similarly, from 2007 to 2008, Brazil's exports decreased by US\$704m, while Argentina's increased by US\$762, amounting to a total of US\$1081 billion. These variations would sustain the argument of commercial detours. From a political viewpoint, it can be argued that Kirchner's negative attitude pushed Iran towards a friendlier government –such as Brazil's Lula da Silva–. Nevertheless, it is likely that the products sold from Brazil were initially grown on Argentine soil.

In addition, the overall context did not help to bolster cooperation either. Argentina's internal political and economic situation was chaotic; Kirchner came to power in 2003, only seventeen months after Argentina suffered one of its most significant financial crises. The country had defaulted on its debt obligations –which had to be negotiated with bondholders from Western countries under the IMF's mediation–, fell into a deep recession, and underwent a period of tremendous political instability (in December of 2001, Argentina had five different head of states in two weeks). The economy contracted by 28 percent from 1998 to 2002, and over 50 percent of Argentines were living below the official poverty line.<sup>222</sup> Besides, international firms left the country, and foreign capital fled too. In particular, the 1999 Brazilian economic crisis and subsequent devaluation of its currency –the real–, adversely affected Argentina's economy. Moreover, Argentina's currency experienced a strong appreciation against its main trading partner and competitor in the agroindustry –Brazil–.<sup>223</sup> This appreciation led to a rapid fall in exports, as Brazil could not afford to pay Argentine products. Besides, many countries preferred to trade with Brazil's discounted prices.

Finally, to contextualize the relation between Argentina's foreign policy strategy and Iran's success, Kirchner's international insertion has to be analyzed. Logically, the

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<sup>221</sup> UN Comtrade.

<sup>222</sup> Miguel Kiguel, “Argentina’s 2001 Economic and Financial Crisis: Lessons for Europe,” *Brookings Institution*, June 2016, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/11\\_argentina\\_kiguel.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/11_argentina_kiguel.pdf)

<sup>223</sup> “Lessons from the Crisis in Argentina,” *International Monetary Fund*, October 8, 2003, <https://www.imf.org/external/np/pdr/lessons/100803.pdf>

2001-2002 crisis had a significant impact on most of his administration's policies. Therefore, foreign policy was significantly driven by internal political issues. Busso argues that "Argentina's external projection had to be refocused to align with its domestic needs, despite the fact that this would bring the country into conflict with a large number of international actors with whom it had enjoyed cordial relations in the 1990s."<sup>224</sup> Moreover, Kirchner was focused on bringing down Argentina's international debt, to end IMF influence on Argentina's international economic policies and break, at least in theory, Argentina's continuous period of large recurring debts.<sup>225</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to remark that as the IMF and other US-supported institutions were often targeted as responsible for Argentina's economic decay, Kirchner, from time to time, would back this idea and promote an anti-imperialist discourse. For instance, in 2005, he openly defied US President Bush when discussing the possibility of establishing a free trade area in the Hemisphere.<sup>226</sup> Although the Kirchner administration was on paper close to the axis Chavez-Castro, open to forging new alliances with emerging countries, and had a distant disposition towards the US, Iran could not capitalize politically or diplomatically. As Kirchner made the AMIA investigation a top priority for his government, the relationship was significantly affected, demonstrating that Iran has to overcome several barriers in order to consolidate its presence in Argentina.

## **Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's Presidency**

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's tenure (2007-2015) continued some of the policies implemented by her predecessor, her husband, Nestor. The INTERPOL order placed on

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<sup>224</sup> Busso, "Kirchnerist Argentina," 97.

<sup>225</sup> Matt Finkel, "Navigating the Leftist Spectrum in Argentina: An Economic Classification of the Kirchner Era." *Inquiries Journal*, 9 (01), (2017), <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1517>

<sup>226</sup> Juan Yofre, El informe clasificado sobre Néstor Kirchner que la embajada norteamericana le preparó a George Bush," *Infobae*, March 8, 2020, <https://www.infobae.com/sociedad/2020/03/08/el-informe-clasificado-sobre-nestor-kirchner-que-la-embajada-norteamericana-le-preparo-a-george-bush/>

Iranian officials was still conditioning the level of interaction. In September of 2008, at the UN General assembly, Cristina called on Iran's government for not cooperating with Argentina's judiciary. A similar speech was given in 2009 at the same meeting.<sup>227</sup> By 2010, Argentine and Iranian officials met at the INTERPOL headquarters to discuss possible cooperation with little success. Later in 2010, Cristina offered to continue the investigation on a third, partial country. In 2011, Iran's Foreign Ministry offered to cooperate with the cause, but it did not progress. Subsequently, in late 2011, Cristina Kirchner softened her diplomatic stance towards Iran. That year, at the annual UN general assembly meeting, the Argentine delegation did not walk out of the speech given by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then Iran's president, as it had traditionally done for years.<sup>228</sup>

Then, in 2013 the "Memorandum of Understanding" was signed. As mentioned in the AMIA section, the agreement did not materialize as it was found it violated Argentina's constitution. More importantly, state prosecutor Nisman accused Cristina of secretly negotiating with Iran a parallel deal in which Argentina would guarantee not to proceed with the investigation, offering impunity to Iranian officials. In return, Iran would purchase more substantial amounts of Argentine agricultural products and provide discounted oil. Nisman concluded that "Cristina understood Iranian oil would have the capacity to alleviate the severe energy crisis that the country is going through. Exchanges, for example, of 'grains for oil,' were seen as a solution to the emergency."<sup>229</sup> However, Argentine imports of Iranian products were insignificant, with 2010 reaching the highest amount of only US\$23 million. Moreover, researchers from the Observatory of Energy, Technology and Infrastructure for Development (OETEC) showed that the Argentine interest in Iranian oil was non-existent, adding that it would have been

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<sup>227</sup> Julian M. Obiglio and Diego C. Naveira, "Rewriting History in Argentina," in *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, ed. Ilan Berman, Joseph Humire (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 81-84.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>229</sup> Maria Hernandez, "El informe Nisman: inmunidad judicial a cambio de petróleo," *El Mundo*, January 21, 2015. Accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2015/01/21/54bf6dea22601d13618b4578.html>

impossible for Tehran to supply Argentina's demand. Moreover, Argentina did not need to import crude oil (its energy deficit was related to other products), nor does Iranian oil adapt to Argentine refineries' production conditions.<sup>230</sup> Considering that Nisman's report was mostly based on this thesis, it is hard to sustain his case.

Nevertheless, there was an evident attitude change from Cristina's administration. The new posture can be attributed to Argentina's profound economic collapse, a change in its foreign policy approach, and Tehran's increasing isolation and internal political issues. On the one hand, Argentina became increasingly dependent on alternative sources of trade due to economic mismanagement during Cristina's mandate. Economic policies under her leadership provoked high inflation rates, low economic growth, increasing fiscal deficit, and scarce foreign investment, among others. Because of poor financial management, the country was forced to seek alternative sources of revenue. At the same time, to avoid criticism, Cristina intensified her attacks against the IMF and the World Bank, claiming Argentina's external debt payment method was abusive and causing more economic stress to the country. Relations with Washington hit rock bottom in September 2014 when Cristina Kirchner insinuated that the US was trying to overthrow her government.<sup>231</sup> As resentment grew towards the US and its institutions, Cristina pursued a more independent foreign policy, one that sought closer ties with Chavez's Venezuela.

On the other hand, Tehran's interest in renewing its relationship with Argentina relates to its need to find allies and trade partners. Because of the harsh economic sanctions imposed on the country over its nuclear program, and internal production issues, Iran experienced shortages of essential goods. A sharp decline in its internal food production scheme due to harsh weather conditions and low oil prices pushed Tehran, amid

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<sup>230</sup> Raúl Dellatorre, "El negocio que no fue ni podría haber sido," *Página 12*, January 25, 2015. Accessed July 20, 2020, <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/economia/2-264686-2015-01-25.html>

<sup>231</sup> Federico Merke, "Examining Argentina's New Foreign Policy under Macri," *RUSI Newsbrief*, Central and South America, Global Security Issues, March 2016, Accessed July 20, 2020. <https://rusi.org/publication/newsbrief/examining-argentina%E2%80%99s-new-foreign-policy-under-macri>

intense protests against the government, to find new agricultural providers.<sup>232</sup> Therefore Argentina –and Brazil– remained as critical strategic providers of primary goods for the Islamic Republic.

Some claim that Argentina has not honored the US-imposed sanctions and, instead, became one of the largest exporters to Iran.<sup>233</sup> For instance, during Cristina's presidency, Argentine exports to Iran rose from US\$319m in 2007 to US\$1.08 billion in 2008. In 2010 sales went up to US\$1.45b, while in 2013, that figure reached US\$1.10b.<sup>234</sup> To put it in perspective, Iran was Argentina's 10th destination of goods in 2010 and 21st in 2013. Moreover, it is safe to say that trade flourished consistently during Cristina's years.

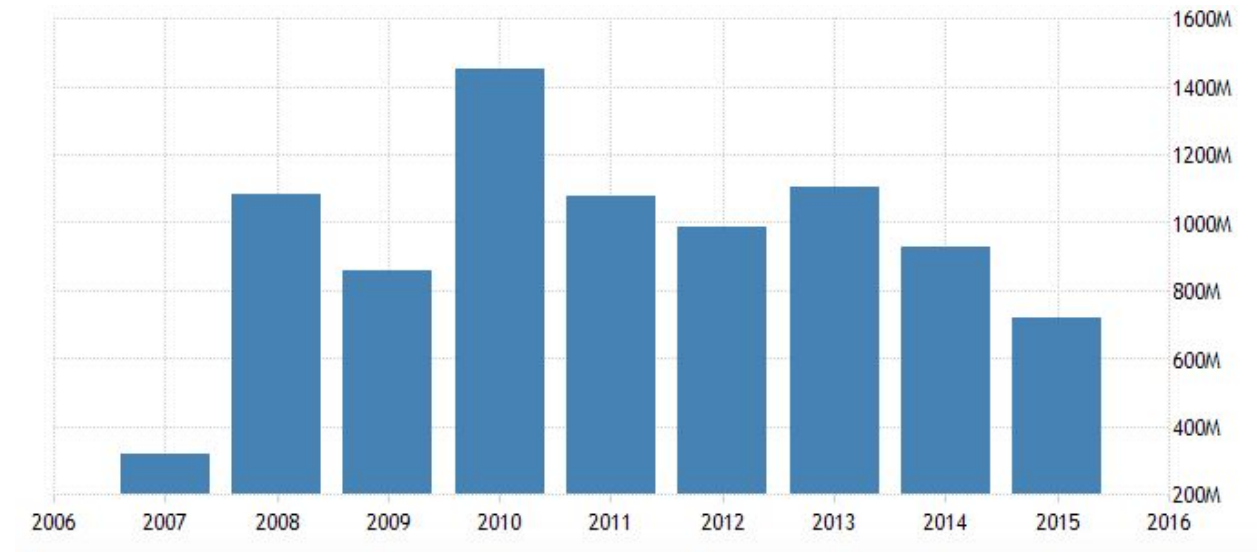


Figure 6: Argentine exports to Iran from 2007 to 2015.<sup>235</sup>

According to Obiglio, her administration seemed to put aside its conflictive past with Iran to establish a new political bond and a source of economic support.<sup>236</sup> However, Watson

<sup>232</sup> Todesca, "Cristina Fernandez," 46-50.

<sup>233</sup> "A new Pact with the devil?", *The Economist*, Jan 29, 2013. Accessed July 10, 2020. <https://www.economist.com/americas-view/2013/01/29/a-pact-with-the-devil>

<sup>234</sup> UN Comtrade database.

<sup>235</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.

<sup>236</sup> Obiglio, "in Argentina," 86-87.

claims that compared to Argentina's trade with the rest of the world, Iran's portion is still tiny, arguing that Iran's objectives go beyond economic deals.<sup>237</sup>

Todesca suggests that Argentine trade during Cristina's years did not increase as much as one would think and that it was not due to political rapprochement but other elements. Regardless of the will of the Argentine authorities to increase trade, numerous internal economic, political, and social factors occurred in Iran influenced the growth in trade, particularly in 2008 and 2010. For instance, the increment of food commodity prices, food shortages in Iran, and the willingness of transnational companies to supply the Iranian market.<sup>238</sup>

From a political viewpoint, it can be argued that Iran realized that avoiding trade with Argentina was a burden against its own interest. Tehran sensed that Cristina was willing to pursue a more radical foreign policy agenda, concordant with Chavez's Venezuela, Evo's Bolivia, Rafael Correa's Ecuador, and Lula's Brazil. Moreover, Venezuela and Chavez exerted a vast amount of influence on Cristina, assisting to the reopening of relations with Iran and thereby allowing the Islamic Republic to regain lost ground in Argentina. Therefore, as the radical left consolidated throughout Latin America, Cristina felt more comfortable to exercise what she called a "sovereign foreign policy," which promoted a multi-polar world not dominated by the traditional Western powers.

For instance, in 2013, Cristina, together with Brazil's Dilma Rousseff, requested to change the UN's structure, criticizing the veto power enjoyed by the permanent members of the Security Council, asking to abolish this privilege. She also argued against the current international economic system, stating that it favors the great powers and punishes developing countries.<sup>239</sup> Furthermore, Cristina firmly believed that

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<sup>237</sup> Watson, Penny L. "Iran's Latin America Strategy: 2005 to Present". *Democracy and Security*, 13:2,130, (2017). DOI: [10.1080/17419166.2016.1264304](https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2016.1264304)

<sup>238</sup> Todesca. "Cristina Fernández," 67-68.

<sup>239</sup> "Brasil y Argentina piden cambios en la estructura de la ONU y en el FMI," RTVE, Sept. 25, 2013, <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20130925/brasil-argentina-piden-cambios-estructura-onu/750620.shtml>



US-backed financial institutions –such as the IMF and the World Bank– and the so-called 'vulture funds' (those investors who refused Argentina's proposals to reorganize its debt) were taking advantage of her country.

Cuadro argues that the multi-polarization process the international system underwent in the past years, pushed Argentina, under the Kirchners, to decentralize its foreign policy approach, diversifying external markets and international political support, while coping with the US and Western institutions in some fundamental issues.<sup>240</sup> Moreover, Cristina was an active participant of the UNASUR and CELAC (The Community of Latin American and the Caribbean States). While UNASUR is commonly linked to Venezuela and Latin America's left, CELAC's explicit objective was to coordinate regional policies without US intervention. The 2010 Argentine recognition of Palestine as a free and sovereign state –despite Argentina's large Jewish community and the negative reception from their Israeli counterparts<sup>241</sup>– also demonstrates the boldness of Kirchner's foreign policy approach.

Nevertheless, even when the political conditions were favorable, Iran had a hard time expanding its influence in Argentina during Cristina's mandate. The bond was mostly based on trade, which is very favorable to Argentina, and little diplomatic or political events occurred, showing that Iran's intentions to build alternative power structures will often be met with distrust from Argentina's leadership, making Tehran's efforts futile.

## **Macri and Iran**

Mauricio Macri, a right-wing politician who ruled the country between 2015 and 2019, implemented a foreign policy based on pragmatism and ideologically friendly towards the US. Argentina's foreign policy made concessions to the powerful –in this case, the

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<sup>240</sup> Mariela Cuadro, "Multipolarity Under Construction: New Paths and Difficult Balances in Argentina–Middle East Relation During the Kirchner Governments," in *Latin American Foreign Policies Towards the Middle East*, ed. Marta Tawil (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), 77-98.

<sup>241</sup> Miguel Jorquera, "Es el momento de reconocer a Palestina como estado," Pagina 12, Dec. 7, 2010, <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-158245-2010-12-07.html>



US— to safeguard their own interests. Macri stated he intended to leave behind Argentina's confrontational stance with the world, aiming "to develop an intelligent international insertion, in a complex global context in which Argentina opted for responsibility and to make a substantial effort to strengthen multilateralism."<sup>242</sup> However, his initial approach to the US did not seem to work as Washington imposed tariffs on Argentine products. Biodiesel, aluminum, and steel, some of the most exported products from Argentina to the US, suffered from Donald Trump's economic policies.<sup>243</sup>

Anyhow, Argentina under Macri became a frequent critic of both Iran and Venezuela. One of his first policies as president was the cancelation of the 'Memorandum of Understanding' signed with Iran by Cristina Kirchner.<sup>244</sup> Buenos Aires also suspended its participation in UNASUR and, instead, promoted the creation of the Group of Lima, a pro-US organism led mostly by right-wing leaders from the subcontinent.

In 2018 and 2019, Macri, at the UN General Assembly, demanded Iran to cooperate with Argentina's judicial system to help clarify the AMIA attack in Buenos Aires. He also condemned the Venezuelan government of President Maduro.<sup>245</sup> Also, in 2018 Buenos Aires froze the assets of Bakart, a suspected Hezbollah fundraising network, and, in 2019, it officially labeled Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, as the US and Israel had requested in an effort to pressure Tehran.<sup>246</sup> Additionally, In 2016 and 2019, Argentina issued an extradition warrant aimed at Ali Akbar Velayati, a former Iranian Foreign

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<sup>242</sup> Federico Merke, "Examining Argentina's New Foreign Policy under Macri," *RUSI Newsbrief*, Central and South America, Global Security Issues, March 2016, Accessed July 20, 2020.

<https://rusi.org/publication/newsbrief/examining-argentina%E2%80%99s-new-foreign-policy-under-macri>

<sup>243</sup> Juan Tokatlian and Roberto Russell, "Macri: en busca de una nueva inserción internacional," *ANUARIO INTERNACIONAL CIDOB* (2016-17): 218-220.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid*, 224-228.

<sup>245</sup> "Argentina's President Calls on Iran to Cooperate in Probe Into 1994 Bombing of Jewish Center," *Haaretz*, Sept. 27, 2018.

<https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/argentine-leader-calls-on-iran-to-cooperate-in-probe-into-amia-bombing-1.6512657?lts=1596196028417>

<sup>246</sup> "Argentina freezes assets of suspected Hezbollah fundraising network," *Times of Israel*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/argentina-freezes-assets-of-suspected-hezbollah-fundraising-network/>

Minister accused of participating in the AMIA attack. Velayati is now a senior aide to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and remains on INTERPOL's "red list."<sup>247</sup>

Not surprisingly, diplomatic and political ties were almost null, and trade, consequently, decreased. In 2016, Argentina exported US\$426 million, down from US\$721m the year before. In 2017 exports –mostly soybean oil and soybean meal– accounted for US\$447m and US\$382 in 2018.

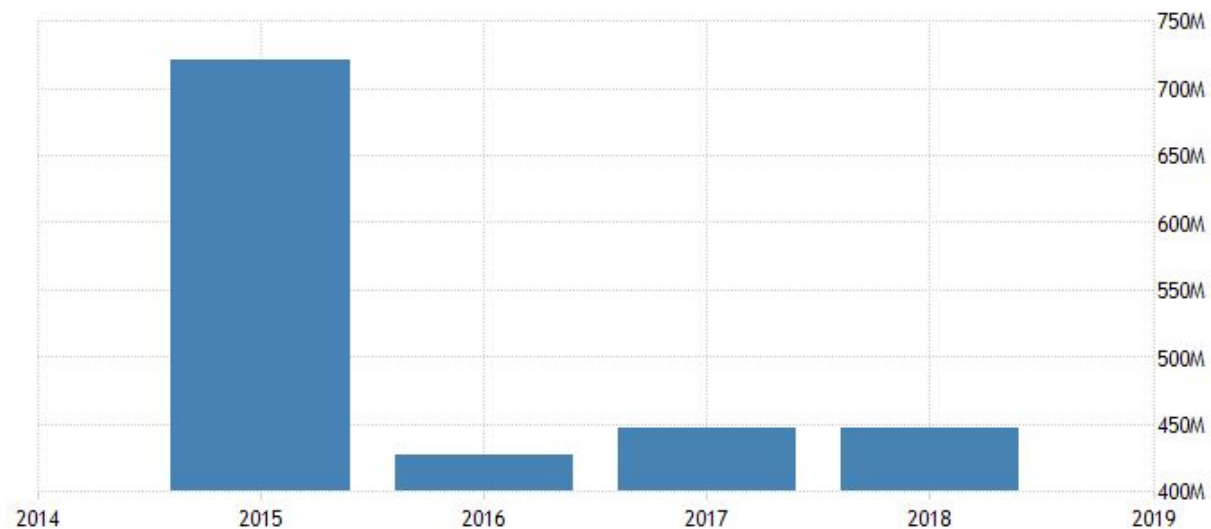


Figure 7: Argentine exports to Iran from 2015 to 2018.<sup>248</sup>

It is no surprise that during Macri's government, Iranian activity would be affected considerably. Moreover, as Macri's right-wing government attempted to please the US, confronting Tehran was necessary. Fortunately for Tehran, Argentina has elected a new government, a left-wing administration greatly influenced by Cristina Kirchner,

<sup>247</sup> "Argentina renews extradition call for Iranian ex-minister," *Times of Israel*, October 21, 2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/argentina-seeks-extradition-of-iran-ex-minister/>

<sup>248</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.

Argentina's new Vice-president. Therefore, cooperation and trade should resume to prior levels.

## **Conclusion**

The AMIA investigation has certainly restricted the relationship between Argentina and Iran. Communication and cooperation depend not only on the political stance of a particular government but also on this government's willingness to investigate the case. For instance, Nestor Kirchner, a left-leaning president, did not establish any form of cooperation after Tehran refused to collaborate on the AMIA case. Furthermore, even though the relationship improved under Cristina Kirchner's presidency, Iran's objective to consolidate its presence in the country is sustained on weak fundamentals and reduced to trade only. No sound politician would be willing to risk their political capital on improving political or diplomatic ties with Iran. Simultaneously, while commercial activities can help maintain communication between the two parties, any sudden commercial increase would be looked upon with suspiciousness. Therefore, Iran will face a severe challenge while trying to increase or even sustain its presence in Argentina. Additionally, it is important to indicate that most reports describing concerns about Iran's growing influence in Argentina –especially during Cristina Kirchner's presidency– tended to exaggerate or were based on false premises.

## **Chapter Four: Venezuela and Iran**

The Iran-Venezuela relationship dates back to the 1940s when both countries sought better treatment from international oil companies and played a crucial role in founding the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960. With the Shah's ousting in 1979, Venezuela was among the first countries to recognize the new Iranian

government, and for the next two decades, the two countries collaborated on oil-related issues.<sup>249</sup>

The relationship deepened with the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998. It allowed Iranian forces to consolidate their presence within the Western Hemisphere. Diplomatic, economic, and political cooperation soon flourished; between 2001 and 2013, there were more than a dozen diplomatic visits between the Chavez and the Khatami and Ahmadinejad administrations. The two countries signed more than 300 agreements and even established a joint development fund.<sup>250</sup>

Once he took power, Chavez, a critic of US interventionism in Latin America, aligned with Cuba and created the ALBA bloc. The bloc's members believed that regardless of their size, history, and real possibilities of influencing the international arena, they could influence the world's politics. It is under this scenario that Iran's expansion became useful for Chavez and his allies. For Venezuela and its ALBA counterparts, being part of the Iranian expansion –as one of the significant disruptive elements of the post-Cold War era– fueled their unmistakable anti-American discourses and gave them legitimacy abroad and internally.

## **The Khatami Years**

Chavez, leading a significant OPEC member state, enjoyed a warm relationship with Iran's Khatami. He first visited Iran in 2001 after touring Saudi Arabia for talks about oil price instability; Chavez aimed to persuade other OPEC member countries to agree on oil prices, which had been adversely affected by the 9/11 terrorist attacks.<sup>251</sup> In 2003,

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<sup>249</sup> Johnson, "Report," xiii.

<sup>250</sup> Moises Rendon, "Understanding the Iran-Venezuela Relationship," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-iran-venezuela-relationship>

<sup>251</sup> Lotfian, "Foreign Policy," 42-44.

Presidents Khatami and Chavez agreed to reinstate an inactive tractor assembly plant in Ciudad Bolívar. Iran pledged to invest \$34 million and supply parts and machinery.<sup>252</sup> Khatami officially visited Venezuela on three occasions during his eight-year tenure. During his last visit to Caracas in 2005, the two parties signed more than twenty agreements in technology, agriculture, construction, energy, and petrochemicals.<sup>253</sup> Furthermore, Chavez conferred the honorary medal of the Order of the Liberator to Khatami, and vowed Venezuelan support in defense of the Iranian right to nuclear energy by declaring that: "Before the threats of the US government against the brother country of Iran, the Iranians can count on our support, our affection, and our solidarity."

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Chavez firmly defended Iran's nuclear development and the production of atomic energy, while at the same time, he was very vocal in criticizing the US and its foreign policy towards Iran. Furthermore, he spoke about his aspirations to develop nuclear weapons "for peaceful purposes" for Venezuela. For instance, in September of 2005, Venezuela voted against an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) resolution criticizing Iran's nuclear program.<sup>255</sup>

Not surprisingly, one of Khatami's last international tours as president, in 2005, included Venezuela. Khatami visited Ciudad Bolivar for the inauguration of the Veniran Tractor Company, one of many joint-ventures developed under his administration. The same year, Iran signed its first free trade agreement with Venezuela, further consolidating the partnership.

## Incendiary Times

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<sup>252</sup> "Joint Venture to Produce Tractors in Venezuela," *Events*, March 2005. Accessed July 20, 2020, <http://www.events.ir/?directory=008&page=006&issue=No.%208.%20March%202005:%20Joint%20Venture%20to%20Produce%20Tractors%20in%20Venezuela>

<sup>253</sup> Lotfian, "Foreign Policy," 42-44.

<sup>254</sup> Sarah Vagner, "Venezuela's Chavez Defends Iran's Right to Atomic Energy," *Venezuelanalysis.com*, 11 March 2005, Accessed July 20, 2020, <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/994>

<sup>255</sup> Sarah Dielh, "Venezuela's Search for Nuclear Power or Nuclear Prestige," *Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI)*, May 7 2009, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/venezuelas-search-nuclear-power/>

Subsequently, the partnership evolved after President Ahmadinejad took office in August of 2005. With Venezuela's aid, Iran forged closer alliances with other left-wing governments in the region such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Cuba, gaining support for its nuclear quest. For instance, Venezuela and Cuba were, alongside Syria, the only three countries that supported Iran's nuclear program in a February 2006 vote at the UN's IAEA.

In 2006 President Chavez and Ahmadinejad signed a cooperation agreement that involved Iran Khodro Company (IKCO) automaker in the opening of a car factory. Iran's investment in the agreement was reported to be \$99 million.<sup>256</sup> In September, Ahmadinejad made his first visit to Venezuela and signed 29 commercial accords, including an agreement to create a binational development fund through the Export Development Bank of Iran (EDBI) with an initial capitalization of \$200 million, which later expanded into a full bank. Between 2001 and 2007, Iran and Venezuela entered 180 cooperative agreements, valued by Iran at \$20 billion.<sup>257</sup> Nevertheless, for 2006, the UN Comtrade database estimated their bilateral trade at just US\$50 million.

In 2008 Venezuela decided to approve the establishment of Iran's Banco Internacional de Desarrollo (BID) in Caracas. BID, a branch of EDBI, provided Tehran access into the Venezuelan banking system, in an effort to circumvent US financial sanctions and penetrate Western institutions. The bank provided traditional public services, from checking and savings accounts, to car loans, and credit cards. In October of 2008, the US Department of the Treasury imposed economic sanctions on EDBI for supposedly helping Iran's Defense Ministry finance its weapons programs. In April 2009, Ahmadinejad and Chávez proceeded to inaugurate the Tehran-based Iran-Venezuela Joint Bank, capitalized with contributions of \$100 million from each country. Shortly after that, the Venezuela-Iran Single Binational Fund opened in Caracas. In 2010, the

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<sup>256</sup> Johnson, "Report," 28-30.

<sup>257</sup> Peter Howard Wertheim, "Venezuela, Iran sign energy accords," *Oil & Gas Journal*, Sept. 25, 2006, <https://www.ogj.com/general-interest/article/17280782/venezuela-iran-sign-energy-accords>

European Union said it would freeze all funds and resources belonging to the Venezuelan branch of EDBI for alleged ties to Iran's nuclear program. While trade between the two countries remained marginal, Iran's use of Venezuela's financial system was perhaps even more valuable for Tehran.<sup>258</sup>

Around the same time, Washington started to pay attention to Iran's activities. The Manhattan District Attorney's office launched an investigation against Venezuela for collaborating with Iran to obtain funding and materials (including uranium) for weapons production in violation of US and international sanctions.<sup>259</sup> Worries increased when in November of 2008, Turkish officials confiscated a suspicious Iranian shipment bound for Venezuela. The cargo meant to transport "tractor parts" carried instead containers of nitrate and sulfite chemicals, often used for explosives. Turkey then engaged their Office of Atomic Energy and military specialists to review the materials.<sup>260</sup> Likewise, the plants and factories built by Iran in Venezuela have generated doubts among security specialists. Robert Morgenthau, former District Attorney for New York County, suggested that "we should be concerned that illegal activity might be taking place" due to the remote and secretive nature of the plants.<sup>261</sup> The undercover and somewhat illegal actions performed between Iran and Venezuela are the most controversial and dangerous elements of this relationship.

From an Iranian perspective, there were a few reasons to intensify their partnership with Caracas. Farhi argues that the US attempt to become the dominant player in the Middle East –which Iran sees as its area of influence– and efforts to isolate Tehran from the world, both politically and economically, forced Tehran to respond. And Ahmadinejad did so by actively forging alliances in the US's backyard, in an effort to disturb the

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<sup>258</sup> Jonhson, "Report," x, 30-32.

<sup>259</sup> Cynthia J. Arnson and Haleh Esfandiari, "Preface," in *Iran in Latin America: Threat or 'Axis of Annoyance'?*, ed. Cynthia Arnson, Haleh Esfandiari, and Adam Stubits (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars), x.

<sup>260</sup> Stubits, "Introduction," 2-3.

<sup>261</sup> Robert M. Morgenthau, "The Emerging Axis of Iran and Venezuela," *Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203440104574400792835972018>

Hemisphere's political environment. Iran's president also wanted to make a point: if the US can set foot on Iran's region of influence, Tehran can reciprocate by positioning itself near US soil. Ideologically, Iran sensed that it was the right time to form alternative power structures in order to expand and reinforce their sovereignty. Thus, all parties involved aimed to find alternative channels to conduct commercial exchanges. However, these efforts were often stopped by US sanctions.<sup>262</sup>

## Chavez's Ideological Stance

From a Venezuelan perspective, understanding Chavez's inclination to interact with Tehran to such a degree can be explained by his ideals and by Latin America's past. Chavez's revolutionary ambitions were based on his idealistic vision of Simon Bolivar. Bolivar, a Venezuelan politician and military man, liberated and founded the republics of Gran Colombia and Bolivia in the early 1800s. He was one of the most distinguished figures of the Latin American emancipation against the Spanish Empire. Bolivar's contribution was decisive for the independence of present-day Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. Bolivar, as well as Chavez, believed that the union of the newly formed states was a necessary step to confront greater powers.<sup>263</sup> Thus, Chavez, who encouraged Latin American integration, has called his political movement a "Bolivarian revolution."

Backed by high oil prices, Chavez was able to promote social policies of redistributive nature, lifting millions out of poverty and improving social services. Venezuela, a highly economically unequal country before Chavez took power, became a poster-boy for renewed socialism, and he intended to spread it to the rest of the subcontinent.

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<sup>262</sup> Heydemann, "Alternative Allies," 192-196.

<sup>263</sup> Nicole Cacoza, "Hugo Chávez and The Bolivarian Dream," *Modern Latin America, 8th Edition Companion Website*,

<https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/chapters/chapter-8-venezuela/moments-in-venezuela-n-history/venezuela-and-el-libertador/>



Chavez's "twenty-first-century socialism" opposed Washington's neoliberal policies and the "Washington Consensus." Chavez argued that most of Latin America's economic deficiencies were related to the unequal relation of power between the US and its southern neighbors.<sup>264</sup> Furthermore, for Chavez, large international corporations, and US-backed financial institutions took advantage of the subcontinent's wealth and natural resources. According to Chavez, these were structural issues that could only be overcome by forming alternative structures of power. This mindset was almost entirely shared by Iran and especially by Ahmadinejad.

If imperialism was not contained, Chavez believed, Venezuela was to face retaliation from Washington. To support this argument, he would often recall historical events to denounce that any past Latin American government that tried to change power structures faced punishment and US interventions, which in several cases turned violent.<sup>265</sup> The intervened countries were then left with free-market economic policies supported by prominent financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the US Treasury. Therefore, given the history of US political intrusions in Latin America, Chavez was very reluctant about Washington's foreign policy and its interventionist past. Fighting anti-imperialism, then, became a cornerstone for Chavez's Venezuela. Consequently, finding allies to challenge the oppressor became a vital objective for Chavez's government. Suddenly, Russia, China, and Iran became a central part of Venezuela's foreign policy.<sup>266</sup>

Elodie Brun argues that both Venezuela and Iran used "oil as a political instrument to insert themselves internationally in a way that both characterize as revolutionary."<sup>267</sup> Furthermore, both Chavez and Ahmadinejad promoted discourses emphasizing the

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<sup>264</sup> Gregory Gilpert, "Chavez's Venezuela and 21st Century Socialism," *Research in Political Economy*, 24, (July 2007): 3-42.

<sup>265</sup> John H. Coatsworth, "United States Interventions," *ReVista*, Harvard Review of Latin America, Summer 2005, <https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/united-states-interventions>

<sup>266</sup> Marthoz, "a Course," 2-4.

<sup>267</sup> Elodie Brun, "Irán y Venezuela, Hacia un Acercamiento Completo," *Revista Politeia*, N° 40, vol. 31. Instituto de Estudios Políticos, UCV, (2008): 19-40.

need for autonomy and independence from the great powers, primarily the US and Europe. The struggle against imperialism and capitalism bound the foreign policies of the two countries.

Additionally, the Iran-Venezuela strategic partnership also included nuclear cooperation. According to Berman, "Venezuela emerged as an essential source of material assistance for Iran's nuclear program and a vocal diplomatic backer of Iran's will to atomic power."<sup>268</sup> Similarly, Watson argued that Venezuela and Bolivia could extract the sort of minerals used for nuclear production. German newspaper *Die Welt*, citing sources in "Western security circles," reported that Iran might seek to build a medium-range missile base in Venezuela.<sup>269</sup>

Johnson claims that "neither Iran nor the political or terror groups it supports at present constitute an existential threat to the United States."<sup>270</sup> However, concerns arise since the Chávez regime itself became a safe haven and source of financial support for Hezbollah, as aforementioned. In turn, Iran's feared Revolutionary Guards grew deeply involved in training Venezuela's secret services and police, which could potentially become a severe issue if regime change were to happen in Caracas.

## **Maduro and Rouhani**

When Chavez died in 2013, his successor, Nicolas Maduro, followed most of the policies implemented by his mentor. However, with Ahmadinejad's last official visit to Venezuela for 2013's Maduro inauguration, the revolutionary and vehement chapter was closed. When President Rouhani took office in 2013, he prioritized decreasing tensions with the West; thus, cooperation with Venezuela was not as frequent and loud as before. Because Rouhani intended to reach a nuclear deal to avoid the economic

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<sup>268</sup> Ilan Berman, "in the Americas," 2-3.

<sup>269</sup> Johnson, "Report," xiv.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

sanctions that were devastating to Iran's economy, he was forced to behave more conservatively and pragmatically abroad.

Nevertheless, by 2014, Venezuela and Iran supposedly had signed 265 agreements deriving from 58 projects in the industrial, environmental, agricultural, commercial, housing, cultural, energy, and scientific and technology areas. In 2015, during Maduro's tour to Tehran, Venezuela signed a deal with Iran for a \$500 million credit line to fund the development of joint projects as Venezuela's economy struggled.<sup>271</sup>

The relationship then entered a new stage as Maduro struggled at home. The legality of Maduro's government was questioned among Western circles. Low oil prices and a further internal political crisis led to millions of Venezuelan fleeing the country due to economic problems. For instance, Venezuela's National Assembly declared Maduro's election in 2019 illegal, and opposition leader Juan Guaidó stated that he would assume office as interim president until free and fair elections could be held. Guaidó was promptly recognized as interim president by the United States, Canada, most of the European Union, and the Organization of American States. However, Maduro retains the support of several major countries, including Iran, Russia, and China.<sup>272</sup> Nevertheless, almost four million fled the country, while almost 25% of the population is in need of basic assistance. As US sanctions suffocate the country even more, Maduro continues to defy the US. Iran, having to cope with a similar situation in terms of sanctions, has then come to Venezuela's support.<sup>273</sup>

While high-level officials visited each other on many occasions, the visits were mainly symbolic, and not much substance came out of these meetings. The constraints both

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<sup>271</sup> Aditya Tejas, "Venezuela, Iran Sign Economic Cooperation Deals; Venezuela Signs \$500M Credit Line With Iran," *International Business Times*, June 2015, <https://www.ibtimes.com/venezuela-iran-sign-economic-cooperation-deals-venezuela-signs-500m-credit-line-iran-1986665>

<sup>272</sup> "Instability in Venezuela," *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/instability-venezuela>

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

countries suffered due to stricter sanctions unquestionably affected their economies and their policies abroad. Therefore, in the last few years, the bond has mostly been sustained rhetorically. Perhaps the exception being the five oil tankers sent by Iran to Venezuela last May, after Venezuela's oil refining industry collapsed because of underinvestment and mismanagement. The ships generated some controversy as they were under US sanctions.<sup>274</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Venezuela remains Iran's most reliable ally in the region. However, sanctions and internal crises have affected the relationship significantly, to the point that it is now sometimes only based on rhetorical support. While Hezbollah still enjoys protection and support from the Venezuelan state, inter-state relations are nowhere near the level they reached during Chavez years, neither politically nor ideologically.

## **Final Remarks**

To conclude, Iran can only sustain and expand its influence in the region under a particular set of circumstances. While it did build some structures during its best years under Chavez's support, these are not enough when political changes occur. For instance, in Brazil, Iran is mostly limited to trade, and, unless a more radical leader with a large base-support takes charge, things will remain that way. The Lula years were exceptional, and even then, Iran was pushed to behave transparently.

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<sup>274</sup> "Iran says it is ready to continue fuel shipments to Venezuela," Reuters, June 1, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-iran-gasoline/iran-says-it-is-ready-to-continue-fuel-shipments-to-venezuela-idUSKBN2381HG>

In the case of Argentina, at best, Iran can improve commercial ties. The AMIA investigation is still central to the national political debate, and no politician would be willing to risk their capital on aligning with Tehran. Moreover, the relationship has more chances to deteriorate than improve if Tehran does not cooperate with the investigation.

Moreover, although its chances to succeed are better in Venezuela, the complete political chaos the Caribbean state is immersed in makes it practically a useless partner. Venezuela has nothing to offer to Iran except for providing its territory for illicit activities. And while illicit activities are worrisome, they most likely do not qualify to be considered a severe threat to the US or the Hemisphere.

Finally, it is essential to note that Iran's chances to improve its position are much better when left-leaning governments are in power. However, as this work showed, neither Brazil under Lula and Rousseff nor Argentina under the Kirchners were willing to enter domains that challenge the world order too much. Therefore, the fear of Iranian influence is overestimated.



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## Appendix

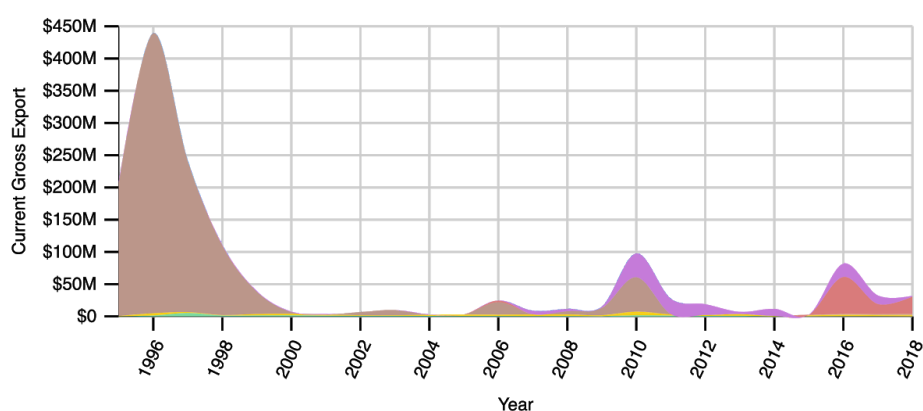


Figure 1: Iran's exports to Brazil from 1996 to 2018.<sup>275</sup>

<sup>275</sup> Source: The Atlas of Economic Complexity (AEC).

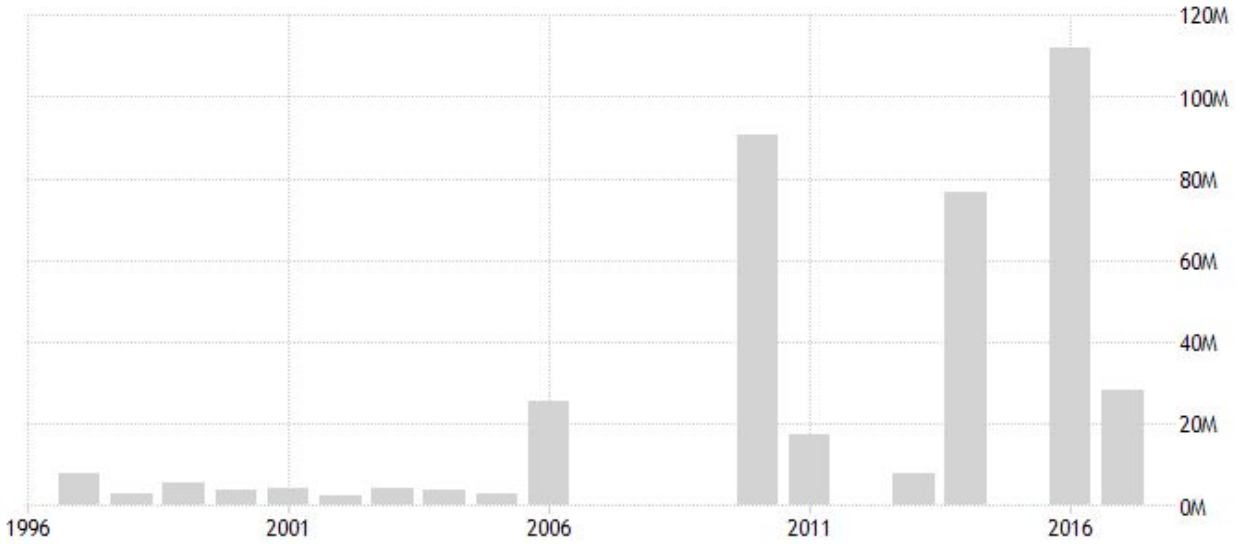


Figure 2: Iran's exports to Brazil from 1996 to 2017 with UN Comtrade data.<sup>276</sup>

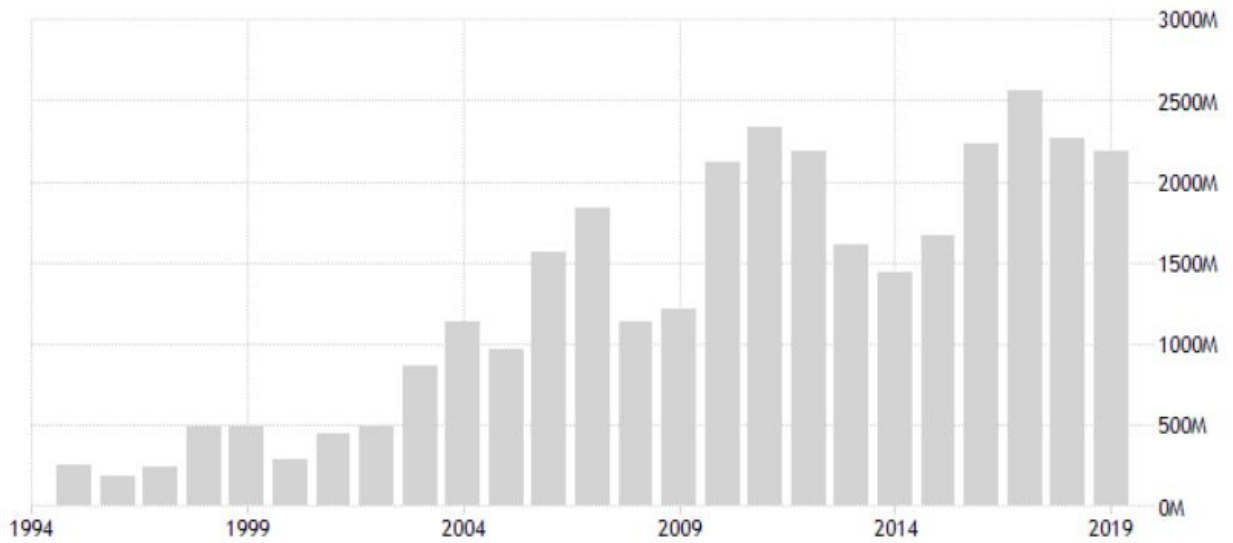


Figure 3: Brazil's exports to Iran from 1994 to 2019, with UN Comtrade data.<sup>277</sup>

<sup>276</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.

<sup>277</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.



Figure 4: Argentine exports to Iran from 1992 to 2002.<sup>278</sup>

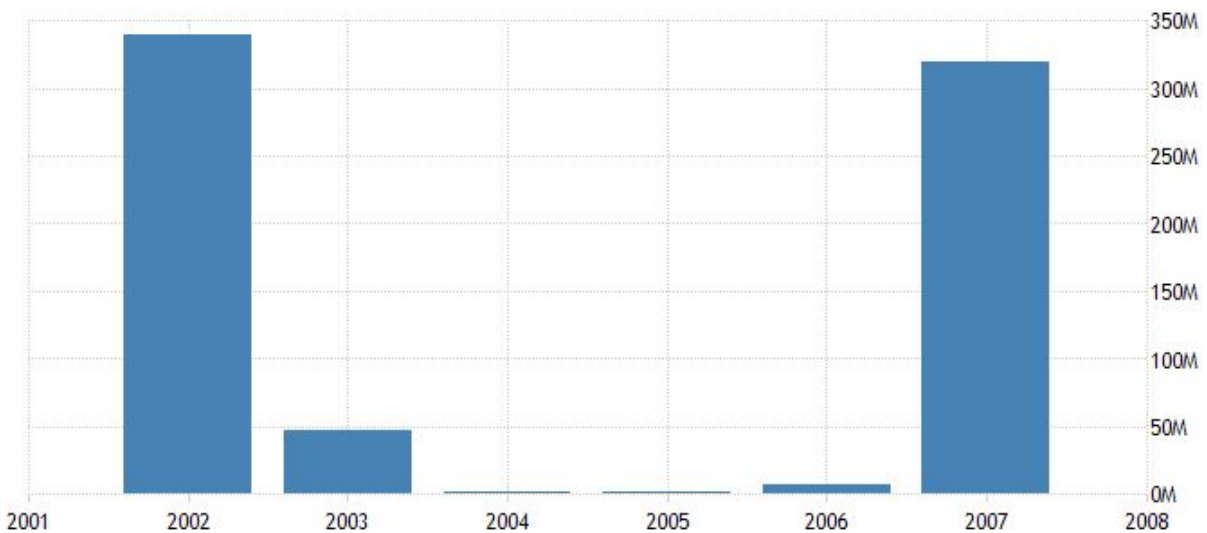


Figure 5: Argentine exports to Iran from 2002 to 2007.<sup>279</sup>

<sup>278</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.

<sup>279</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.



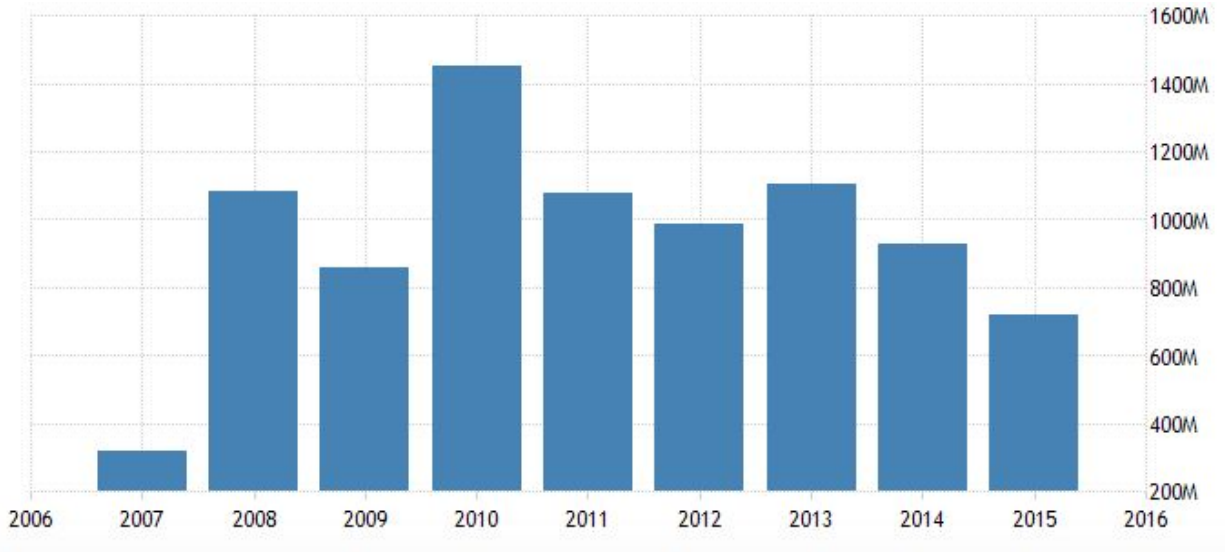


Figure 6: Argentine exports to Iran from 2007 to 2015.<sup>280</sup>

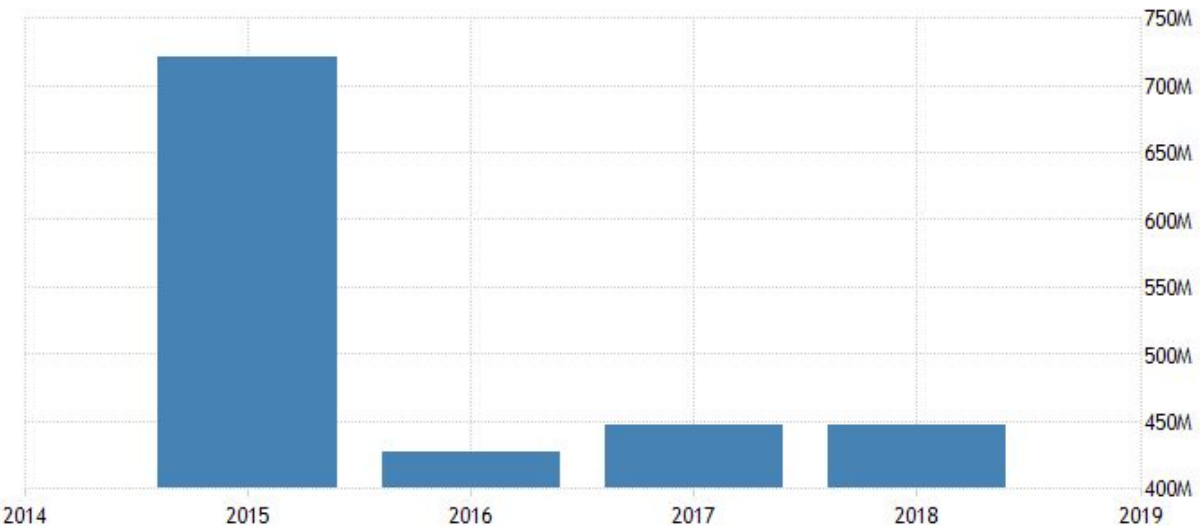


Figure 7: Argentine exports to Iran from 2015 to 2018.<sup>281</sup>

<sup>280</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.

<sup>281</sup> Source: Tradingeconomics.com with data from UN Comtrade.

