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Jorge Paredes Esteban

Abstract

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has actively sought to establish itself as a key player both in the Middle East and on the global stage. This ambition has been largely shaped by its antagonistic relations with the United States and Israel, along with critical factors like its nuclear program and ties with groups like Hezbollah. Iran's foray into Latin America is a strategic move, driven by a need to respond to international pressures and an opportunity to align with leftist governments sharing anti-American and anti-capitalist sentiments. This study delves into Iran's motivations for penetrating Latin America post-1979, examining the objectives and strategies of the Ayatollahs' regime. It also explores how Iran maintains its influence in the region and impacts political, ideological, and religious dynamics. The research synthesizes contributions from various global think tanks and academic institutions to provide a comprehensive view of Iran's presence in Latin America, its implications for security, defense, and international relations, and to offer new insights into the complex Iran-Latin America relationship.

Keywords: Iran, Latin America, Middle East, Hezbollah; Israel; United States

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Introduction

Since 1979, with the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to play a role on the international stage, both as a regional power in the Middle East and beyond the region. Iran's aspirations for power have been shaped by its enmity with the United States and its tense and bellicose relationship with adversaries such as Israel. The Iranian nuclear program, international sanctions, the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and Iran's involvement with groups like Hezbollah have all influenced the course of Iran's international politics in one way or another.

Iran's expansion into Latin America is also a response or reaction to the circumstances faced by the Islamic Republic. It is, to some extent, a response to a need, but it is also the exploitation of an opportunity. The relationships with radical leftist governments and movements in Latin America are a natural outcome of the dynamics shaping the international landscape since the late 20th century. The shared anti-Americanism, anticapitalism, or the rejection of the neoliberal globalization have fostered a sort of natural alliance between Iran and various Latin American leftist governments.

The present study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the reasons behind the Islamic Republic of Iran's decision to penetrate Latin America after the 1979 Revolution. It seeks to explore the objectives that guided the leaders of the Ayatollahs regime and the strategies employed to achieve this penetration. The study aims to investigate and examine the means through which Iran has maintained its presence in the region and sought to influence in favor of its political, ideological, and religious expansion and agendas.

This research aims to gather and synthesize existing contributions on this topic, advancing the understanding of the complex reality of Iran's presence in Latin America. The study aims to consolidate the efforts of prominent researchers and academics from various think tanks, universities, and research institutions, in Latin America, the United States, Europe, and other countries like Israel.

The topic of this study generates not only interest but also concern among professionals in the fields of security and defense, intelligence services in the United States and Israel, as well as in the Academia, research centers, think tanks, and other scholarly institutions. Ultimately, this work seeks to offer a comprehensive examination of the topic, providing a realistic perspective and contributing to a fresh understanding of the relations and implications of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Latin America.

Why Latin America? Iranian Interests in the Region

Shortly after coming to power, Ruhollah Khomeini started to explicitly express his intentions to expand the Islamic Revolution beyond the borders of Iran. And soon after, the penetration in Latin America began through clandestine networks that operated under the guise of cultural and commercial exchanges (Humire, 2014). From the mid-1980s onwards, Iran's presence intensified and became more evident. It is during this time that Iran began to promote the expansion of its proxy Hezbollah in the region. The initial steps of Hezbollah in Latin America took place in the area known as the "Triple Frontier" between Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil (Berman, 2014).

Since then, the Islamic Republic of Iran has found in Latin America a virgin fiefdom from which to operate according to its varied interests. Iran is no longer resigned to a merely regional role in the Middle East but has discovered in Latin America a platform from which to project itself to the world as the international power it aspires to be.

This incursion into Latin America is part of a systematic and long-term strategy not only to project itself internationally, but also to fight against its natural enemies, namely the United States and Israel, but also to carry out a wide variety of illicit activities that allow them to obtain financial resources or serve as means for other intelligence or propaganda purposes. Ultimately, Iran's objective is to expand its influence and capabilities in the whole Western Hemisphere. And they have certainly been achieving their objectives, with the result that the Iranian presence in the region has increased over the last decades

(Berman, 2014).

In order to answer the question “Why Latin America”, the following factors must be taken into account, as explained below.

Latin America is for Iran a privileged area from which to operate against its main international enemy: the United States.

On a theoretical-strategic level, Latin America is the backyard of the United States, and the Iranian presence is a challenge to the Monroe Doctrine of “America for the Americans” (Rubin, 2008). This is basically a challenge and a threat to U.S. interests in the region, on the one hand, but it is also a risk to its national security, on the other hand. If Iran becomes strong in the region, this implies that the United States has one of its enemies at its doorstep. In a certain sense, and relatively speaking, it represents a risk comparable to that of the Soviet Union’s presence in Cuba during the Cold War. An enemy power at the gates of major U.S. cities.

The Iranian threat to U.S. national security, using Latin America as a platform, is not just theoretical, it is not a nebulous issue that runs through security strategies or think tank papers. Rather, it is very real. The Iranian threat to the United States is concrete and has been demonstrated over the years. The paradigmatic example is the Cafe Milano plot in Washington DC in 2011, in which an assassination attempt on the Saudi ambassador in DC was foiled. In the investigation of the case, it was discovered that part of the plan was prepared from Mexico trying to use elements belonging to a drug cartel¹. In this case, the plot’s target was an Iranian enemy but not a US target. However, the plot took place on U.S. soil and the target was a subject critical to the U.S. because he was an ambassador of an allied state accredited in Washington.

In other cases, Iran directly targets American citizens, such as former National Security Advisor John Bolton², or Iranian opponents³, dissidents or exiles who have stood up in one way or another to the Ayatollahs’ regime with the intent to threaten, intimidate, kidnap, attack them or assassinating them on U.S. soil.⁴ In these cases, Latin America

1 See <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-men-charged-alleged-plot-assassinate-saudi-arabian-ambassador-united-states>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/01/04/iran-agents-once-plotted-kill-saudi-ambassador-dc-case-reads-like-spy-thriller/>

2 August 2022. A member of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Qods Force sought the murder of the former national security adviser John Bolton in retaliation for the killing of Qassim Suleimani. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/10/us/politics/iranian-john-bolton-assassination-charges.html>; <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/10/us-charges-iranian-of-plot-to-assassinate-john-bolton.html>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/08/10/bolton-iran-assassination-plot/>

3 July 2021. Four Iranian intelligence officials were charged with plotting to kidnap a New York-based journalist critical of Iran. The indictment did not name the target, but Masih Alinejad, an Iranian-American journalist, author and activist, said it was her. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57830677>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/13/nyregion/iran-masih-alinejad-kidnapping.html>

4 See Atlantic Council experts, “What will it take to deter Iran from targeting opponents inside the US?”, The Atlantic Council. January 27, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-will-it-take-to-deter-iran-from-targeting-opponents-inside-the-us/>

can be used as a platform to obtain funding or materials from illicit sources (through money laundering or drugs or arms trafficking) for such plans and operations.

“Taken together, the emergence of criminalized, strongly anti-American governments in the Western Hemisphere, in alliance with Iran and other states who sponsor terrorist organizations and consider the United States to be the Great Satan, now represent a tier-one threat to the security of the U.S. Homeland” (Farah, 2012, p. 4).

Latin America is also a geographical and political area from which Iran has attacked strategic targets of its other bitter enemy: the State of Israel.

In 1970, Argentina ranked eighth in the world and first in Latin America in terms of the highest Jewish population. It had a Jewish population of 282,000 individuals. As of 2021, it ranked sixth in the world. Similarly, in 1970, Brazil was the thirteenth country with the highest Jewish population globally and the second in Latin America. By 2021, it had risen to the tenth position worldwide (DellaPergola, 2021). Apart from the United States and some European countries like France, Latin America remains a region with a significant Jewish diaspora.

In this context, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its Quds Force has found ways and methods to weaken and hit Israel and Jewish targets. To do so, the Islamic Republic has used close collaboration between Iranian regime diplomats and agents, Quds Force operatives and Iran’s proxy Hezbollah (Alconada Mon, 2010; Karmon, 2009). The bloodiest example were the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in March 1992 and the bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) in July 1994.

The Argentinian prosecutor Alberto Nisman wrote a comprehensive report detailing the involvement of Iranian agents in the attacks as well as the networks they had established in the country, their methods, and ways of operating (Nisman, 2013). Nisman died under strange circumstances (alleged suicide) before he could account for the report and present it in detail to the public.

As researchers from the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) point out, “since the assassination in Tehran on November 27, 2020, of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the head of Iran’s military nuclear program, which the regime attributed to Israel, Iran has run an ongoing terrorism program against Israeli and Jewish targets spanning four continents” (Schweitzer, Shapira & Shine, 2022, p. 1), among them, LATAM stands out. Specific units in the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards and the Ministry of Intelligence have had the initiative, management, and direction of the attacks and operations. The Quds Force is the responsible for the recruit and operational management of the Iranian agents alongside local recruits, some of whom count with a criminal background, to murder Israelis and Jews, in exchange for benefits, mainly financial (Schweitzer, Shapira & Shine, 2022).

Iran has also found in Latin America a fiefdom from which to expand a narrative against the State of Israel, weaken Israeli interests in the region, and stand up for the Palestinian cause as advocates of the Palestinian people. Iranian agents in the region also work with the Lebanese Shia diaspora trying to spread anti-Israeli narratives. For these purposes, Iran operates through proxies, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah or the Global Gathering in Support of the Choice of Resistance (Tajammu/al-Tajammu).⁵

Latin America serves as a platform for Iran's international projection, to promote its foreign policy and find strategic allies.

Another reason for the presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the search for strategic symmetry with those with whom it wants to deal on equal terms, as well as the search for a strong international projection, which also allows it a prominent, or at least a better, position within the international scenario. Iran, as a medium-sized power and as a strong regional actor, yearns to have a stronger negotiating and operative position in the global panorama.

In this regard, the presence and activities of the Islamic Republic in Latin America is, on the one hand, a necessity and, on the other hand, an opportunity. It is a necessity because Iran needs allies to achieve its nuclear and political objectives in the Middle East. Iran needs sufficient support to counterbalance the weight of its enemies. In this sense "(1) Iran's non-aligned position in foreign policy has compelled it to seek out countries with similar ideological outlooks. (2) US efforts to keep Iran in diplomatic and economic isolation have forced it to pursue an active foreign policy" (Karmon, 2009, p. 2).

The policy of isolating Iran, international sanctions, as well as pressure from other regional players, has led Iranian leaders to see the expansion into LATAM as a necessity, but also as an opportunity to balance all these pressures with the help of strategic allies in the region. These strategic allies are countries with leftist regimes and governments that see Iran as a partner in the struggle against U.S. imperialism and power. Thus, the ayatollahs' regime found in Chavez's Venezuela a stupendous ally in ideological and rhetorical terms.

With Venezuela, Iran found another significant strategic ally: the group known as ALBA, which stands for the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de nuestra América.

The formation of ALBA largely stems from a process promoted by the Chávez government to strengthen a political, economic, and cultural agenda that opposes that of the United States and seeks alternatives to the neoliberal model prevalent in other Latin American countries. In the context of this opposition to the United States and

5 For an in-depth analysis of this issue, see Barak, M. (2021). Al-Tajammu: a Pro-Iranian International Platform to Leverage the Resistance Axis. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism. <https://www.ict.org.il/images/Al-Tajammu%20-%20Michael%20Barak.pdf>

the diversification of Latin American relations, ALBA countries have sought to expand their ties with non-regional powers such as Russia and China, and particularly with Iran (Caro & Rodríguez, 2009). In 2007, during the Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, Iran formally requested to become an observer member of ALBA, for example (Caro & Rodríguez, 2009).

Since then, the relations between Iran and ALBA have been maintained, continued to be cultivated, and have been further consolidated. In August 2021, for example, a delegation from ALBA held a meeting with the President of Iran Seyed Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran. Raisi and the Executive Secretary of ALBA, Sacha Llorenti, met to exchange ideas on mechanisms for collaboration between the Persian nation and Latin America. The alliance between the Iran and LATAM is strategically important in countering the United States' attack on the sovereignty of nations, making it a priority in Tehran's foreign policy, the President emphasized, according to TeleSur, a Latin American television network headquartered in Caracas, Venezuela, which is sponsored by the governments of Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua (TeleSur, 2021).⁶

Latin America as a platform for Iran's international projection came to the forefront especially with Ahmadinejad, who wanted to "strike back at the US in its own hemisphere and possibly destabilize US-friendly governments in order to negotiate with Washington from a greater strength" (Karmon, 2009, p. 3). Ahmadinejad established Latin America as a priority in his foreign policy and international agenda. He looked for an "alliance of revolutionary countries", an "anti-American axis", or the "Axis of Annoyance" as described by Arnson, Esfandiari and Stubits (2008).

The agenda for international projection of strength and presence has to be understood in the context of the structural deficit that Iran has been dragging along in its external projection since 1979 (Priego, 2022). Its isolation and lack of international support is the backdrop in the minds of those foreign policymakers in Tehran.

Iran's penetration and presence in LATAM is not only a form of international projection but also a means to circumvent the sanctions imposed by Western countries on Iran in response to the country's nuclear ambitions.

Since Ahmadinejad, political, diplomatic, economic and cultural relations expanded and grew significantly. But Tehran did not settle for that, as all this political, diplomatic, economic, and cultural activity was followed by the creation of covert networks. Ilan Berman, in the book *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America* (2014), explains how to all these overt efforts were followed by the erection of an asymmetric network: "Iran's formal presence in the region has been mirrored by an expansion of Iranian covert activities" (p. 5).

⁶ See also "Secretario Ejecutivo del ALBA-TCP sostiene encuentro con el nuevo Presidente de Irán", ALBA-TCP (04/08/2021). <https://www.albatcp.org/2021/08/04/secretario-ejecutivo-encuentro-nuevo-presidente-iran/>

Latin America is a preferred area for the expansion of Iranian rhetoric, narratives, and propaganda, as well as for the dissemination of revolutionary ideology and the penetration and propagation of Shia Islam.

Iran's religious and intellectual penetration of Latin America, its attempt to convert Christians and Sunni Muslims to Shia Islam and thus export the ideology and revolutionary beliefs of Ayatollah Khomeini is similar to the trend seen today in the Middle East, although it clearly does not reach the same proportions (Karmon, 2009, p. 11).

The victory of the Revolution in 1979 gave impetus to Islamists, and once the new regime was established in the Persian country, they saw an opportunity to expand Shia Islam and the revolutionary ideology of Ruhollah Khomeini, first in other areas of the Middle Eastern where Shia presence was significant, but also beyond their own region.

The objective was and still is to expand the "Iranian regime's "ideological legitimacy" among friendly governments in the region—and to diminish the influence of "dominance seekers", a thinly veiled reference to the United States" (Berman, 2014, p. 3).

Thus, in 1982, Tehran decided to export the Islamic revolution through the use of proxies such as Hezbollah, with the support of its embassies and an incipient network of agents operating from mosques and cultural centers. This is how they enter Latin America, and this is the way in which since the early 1980s, they began to create networks of covert agents and operatives in various countries of the region (Perdue, 2014).

Iran has made significant efforts in Latin America to engage with local and various indigenous populations. Iran has looked for extensive cultural contacts and some were made with the bases of political support for some leaders in the region such as Evo Morales in Bolivia or Rafael Correa in Ecuador. These cultural contacts or proselytization activities (Da'wa) have been carried out through networks of "informal ambassadors" operating in the area (Berman, 2014). These all are Iranian agents and operatives.

These operatives and agents started Da'wa campaigns through cultural centers and mosques. The Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions, published by Springer, explains that Da'wa "literally means "issuing a summons," "invitation," or "call" in Arabic and refers to the preaching of Islam and the exhortation to submit to Allah. It can also refer to proselytizing and preaching to non-Muslims in particular" (Chitwood, 2018). These Da'wa activities in Latin America have to do with promoting conversion, educating people about the foundations and teachings of Shia Islam, as well as fostering a greater understanding and acceptance of Shia principles and values in society. It is presented as a religious responsibility and a duty to spread the truth and message of Islam.

These Da'wa activities carried out by Iranian agents in the region were mixed with political and ideological narratives, especially the Khomeinist ideology. After the triumph of the Revolution and the establishment of the newly formed Islamic Republic, Khomeini outlined the fundamental principles that would guide and shape his foreign policy. This foreign policy merged political interests related to power and the State with

the expansion of the religious principles that underpinned the regime.

In Khomeini's view, transnational and Islamic goals are considered as one and the same thing. By proposing these goals, the Ayatollah called for organizing an international desirable worldwide for Islam and Iran. The goal of Khomeini was the propagation, dissemination or spreading of the foundational principles of the Islamic Revolution in the international arena (Darabinia, Marzband & Foroughiniya, 2017). These foreign policy guidelines or objectives are explained in a long-term perspective, and they are: "(1) Protecting the territory of Islam, (2) The exportation of the Islamic Revolution, (3) Providing human prosperity, (4) Creation of a single world community (Ummah)" (Darabinia, Marzband & Foroughiniya, 2017, p. 34).

Thus, in 1982 the Iranian regime sent Iranian cleric Mohsen Rabbani with diplomatic cover to Argentina. He was sent as one of the attachés working in the Iranian embassy in Argentina. As Alberto Nisman details in his report (2013), Rabbani created an extensive network of clerics and intellectuals that worked for Iran as operatives and agents. This network is still operating today and it is no longer limited to operating in Argentina, but it has expanded to other locations such as Chile. Further analysis of this network will be conducted in the section dedicated to Argentina.

All the forementioned foreign policy objectives, all these cover operations, Da'wa and propaganda activities are explained in a long-term perspective. The establishment of a foreign policy based on Shia Islam, on the necessity of exporting the Islamic Revolution and supporting the anti-imperialist movements of the world (specifically in Latin America) and replacing the Ummah instead of the "Nation-State" were at the supreme transnational goals of Khomeini (Darabinia, Marzband & Foroughiniya, 2017).

All of the above found a special reception in Latin America, where the circumstances of the 1980s facilitated the anti-imperialist rhetoric against the United States and where the strategic alliance with revolutionary and leftist actors forged without much difficulty. The issue of religious preaching was slower, considering the Christian majority in Latin American countries, but even with this reality, Iran and its operatives found two allies in carrying out certain activities.

On one hand, Da'wa activities focused on the Shia Lebanese diaspora settled in regions of Brazil or Argentina. On the other hand, Iranian agents and operatives found points of connection and common ground with a certain sector of local Christian communities (mainly Catholic) that fully embraced the so-called "Liberation theology", a mixture of Marxism and a misunderstood and ideologized Catholic doctrine. The anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist rhetoric, and support for workers and the poor facilitated certain synergies between the two.

All this activity was and continues to be carried out through cultural centers, mosques, and institutes or centers within universities, thanks to a mass of clerics and intellectuals that operate for Iran in the region. "By 2015, Iran or its proxy Hezbollah controlled some 80 cultural centers across the hemisphere, many of them carrying out activities with

radical populist groups that share the same anti-American agenda” (Farah & Babineau, 2019, p. 108).

An example of a cleric working for Iran is Abdul Karim Paz, an “Argentine convert to Shiite Islam, studied under [Mohsen] Rabbani in Qom [Iran] for five years” (Noriega, 2012). Abdul Karim Paz exemplifies the blend of Shia Islam with Khomeinist revolutionary ideology and with anti-imperialist, anti-American, and anti-Zionist narratives. His work in Latin America serves as an illustration of how Iran spreads its narratives through mosques and cultural centers (Abdul Karim Paz led At-Tauhid Mosque in Buenos Aires), through various media outlets (such as the Iranian HispanTV, the Lebanese Al Mayadeen in its Spanish version, or other Latin American leftist outlets), and social networks (Karim Paz frequently participates in various YouTube channels, for example). It is as well a perfect example of how Iran has leveraged Latin American leftist narratives to forge ties in the region. It also demonstrates how the Liberation Theology and a misunderstood concept of ecumenism have been used to gain ground in the religious sphere (in 2020 Abdul Karim Paz wrote a 280-pages book on these topics called *Los sacerdotes del tercer mundo y la visión islámica: Encuentros y desafíos en común*⁷).

Latin America is a rich continent in natural resources wanted and needed by Iran.

In Latin America there are huge amounts of natural resources, particularly minerals necessary for the production of nuclear weapons. Iran wants and needs to fuel its nuclear program with mineral resources that cannot be obtained, at least fully, within Iran.

For the production of nuclear weapons, uranium is necessary, a mineral present in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, or Peru. Other minerals necessary for the production of missiles such as thorium or lithium are also found in some places of Latin America, another reason that explains Iran’s presence in the region (Priego, 2022).

While Venezuela has its own routes for exporting these minerals, the Iquique Free Zone (Zona Franca of Iquique, ZOFRI) in Chile is the exit route for minerals from Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil. For this reason, in recent years Iran has increased its efforts to exert influence in Chile (Priego, 2022).

In relation to the extraction of minerals and natural resources and their shipment to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran has relied on its allies in the region to bypass sanctions and successfully transport the extracted materials to Iran. Operatives of the regime, many of whom belong to the Quds Force, established routes and transportation channels in strategic locations to facilitate this process. Almost all of these operations were conducted secretly, and the logistical structures supporting them have always been clandestine.

7 https://www.editorialbiblos.com.ar/libro/los-sacerdotes-del-tercer-mundo-y-la-vision-islamica_103803/

An example of this is the so-called “Tapa-Tapa railroad”. This project was carried out in Venezuela through a secret agreement between the Chávez regime and the Ahmadinejad regime. The project used the Tapa-Tapa Railroad to transport military and commercial cargo through tunnels in the mountains near Maracay, north of Venezuela.

The smokescreen was a commercial initiative using Iranian bicycle and automobile factories located in areas near the facilities of a Venezuelan firearms manufacturer owned by the Venezuelan Government called *Compañía Anónima Venezolana de Industrias Militares (CAVIM)*. These commercial relationships were a cover for smuggling processed uranium and other radioactive materials between Venezuela and Iran through weekly flights between Venezuela, Iran, and Syria (Defort & McLaughlin, 2019). The transportation was carried out through a Venezuelan and an Iranian airline, namely, *Conviasa* and *Iran Air* respectively. Both airline companies are stated-owned. “The designations Flight IR744 or Flight VO3744 were used for air traffic control purposes, and tickets for non-existent passengers were sold” (Defort & McLaughlin, 2019, p. 123). Researchers estimate that approximately 400 hundred flights took place over three years (Defort & McLaughlin, 2019).

These flights between Caracas and Damascus/Tehran were also used to carry drugs and weapons. Analysts and U.S. law enforcement officials believed that the *Conviasa* and *Iran Air* code-share flight was concurrently used as a cover to transport military technology from Iran to Venezuela. These suspicions were confirmed in 2009. At that time an anonymous website was created by *Conviasa* personnel. They denounced that these flights were used to illegally transport missile system components and radioactive materials on a regular basis (Rodil, 2014). “From 2007 to 2011, these flights were often “sold out” –with outside passengers unable to obtain a seat or able to do so only at prohibitive prices (approximately \$2,000) that put tickets out of reach of ordinary Venezuelans” (Rodil, 2014, p. 64).

All operations related to the extraction of resources of various kinds follow the same logistics. The structure of the “Tapa-Tapa railroad” operation was replicated to achieve similar objectives in other locations on the continent, such as Bolivia. Iran not only seeks uranium from Venezuela but also other products or chemical components such as Bolivian tantalite for the production of different types of explosive devices. “Every military project had a dual purpose: one that appeared to be legitimately linked to commerce or the transportation industry, but which also supported military objectives and other more nefarious covert purposes” (Defort & McLaughlin, 2019, p. 123).

Since the time of Chávez, two agendas were being pursued through the veil of these clandestine military projects between Iran and Venezuela. One, Iran was involved in locating and extracting valuable metals and strategic minerals in Venezuela to fulfill its nuclear weapons production requirements. Two, Iran have been providing missile technology to Venezuela in exchange for Venezuela procuring different materials for Iran’s missile and nuclear program, which Iran was unable to acquire anywhere else due to international sanctions (Defort & McLaughlin, 2019).

For Iran, Latin America represents an opportunity to pursue new military development projects.

Iran has found in certain countries in Latin America the opportunity to do business in the arms and defense industry sector, with the possibility of developing new military projects that also help circumvent international sanctions. Within Latin American countries, Venezuela stands out, especially during Chávez years.

Defort and McLaughlin (2019) identify three military projects that Iran has jointly developed with the Venezuelan regime in the last decades:

- 1.** Project J-85. This project was performed in Tehran. It focused on refurbishing 14 aircraft motors (J-85) transported to Iran from Venezuela. The Iranian government initially financed the installation of engines in Iranian aircraft. However, the production costs were paid by Venezuela and Iran jointly. The J-85 motor is used in F5 aircraft, part of the air forces of both Iran and Venezuela.
- 2.** Project BAHAM (related to ball powder). This was a chemical project developed on the coast of Morón, state of Carabobo, Venezuela. This project aimed to produce a special type of gunpowder (ball powder) that is used in many small arms and rifles. In the framework of the project, the powder was produced in Venezuela and its design and formulation was completed by Parchin Chemical Industries (PCI)⁸, a state-sponsored enterprise of Iran⁹, that has been heavily sanctioned¹⁰, and that is believed to produce propellants for the Iranian ballistic missile program. The Venezuelan Company of Military Industries (CAVIM) asked the PCI to do this work.
- 3.** The Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) project (a.k.a. M2). This project was performed in Maracay, state of Aragua. This UAV project was controlled by Ramin Keshavarz, a known IRGC's engineer. He ran the project in collaboration with KIMIA SENAAT, an Iranian state-owned enterprise, that is linked to the Quds Force front company. The technology transfer agreement was of 28 million USD. Qods Aviations was the responsible for this project.

In relation to these three projects, Rodil (2014, p. 65) explains that:

“Since 2008, two Iranian military enterprises—Parchin Chemical Industries and Qods Aviation Industries—have been established on Venezuelan territory, where they are developing joint military projects in collaboration with Venezuela’s military industry, the Compañía Anónima Venezolana de Industrias Militares (CAVIM). These joint venture projects have Iranian military officers stationed in Venezuela and vice versa”

8 See <https://www.iranwatch.org/iranian-entities/parchin-chemical-industries>

9 See <http://www.jpoasanctions.org/parchin-chemical-industries.html>

10 See <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/hp1071>

In addition to armament development in a strict sense, Latin America has also become a new scenario for Iran to develop and enhance its military capabilities, particularly in the naval domain. This has been perceived by the international community as a provocation, and the United States sees it as a serious threat that Iranian warships conduct maneuvers along the Pacific coasts or approach the vicinity of the Panama Canal, which is considered a major critical infrastructure.

In recent years, Iran has conducted naval exercises with warships and has ventured, with the permission of the states involved, into the territorial waters of Venezuela, Brazil, and even approaching Panama. In recent years, Iran has conducted naval exercises with warships and has ventured, with the permission of the states involved, into the territorial waters of Venezuela, Brazil, and even approaching Panama. Two Iranian Navy ships deployed in 2022 and have been operating in the Pacific: frigate IRIS Dena and IRINS Makran, Iran's largest warship. Both were tracked by the French Navy and the Royal Australian Navy (USNI NEWS, 2023).

According to some media reports, in August 2022, Iran conducted joint naval exercises with countries like China and Russia in the waters of Nicaragua and Venezuela.¹¹ Additionally, in January 2023, the Iranian news outlet, the Tehran Times, reported the statements made by Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani:

"Today, we have a great opportunity in the sea area for the development of the country, and we can turn this gift from an economic capacity into a civilizational capacity by using the maritime capacity properly. Today, the use of the sea is a geopolitical advantage for us, and those who do not have this capacity are suffering from geopolitical suffocation [...] So far, we have been present in all the strategic straits of the world and we have not been present in only two straits, in one of which we will be present this year and we are planning to be present in the Panama Canal" (Tehran Times, 2023)

These naval actions serve two clear purposes. First, to enhance the naval capabilities of the Iranian Navy. Secondly, as mentioned in section a., to annoy and disturb the United States in its backyard and approach infrastructures that the US consider as critical infrastructures as a way to threaten the United States. While these situations do not reach the gravity of the past, they are reminiscent of moments during the Cold War when the Soviet Union sought viable options to target and potentially launch various types of missiles towards US cities from its southern flank.

Iran has found sources of financing through illicit activities in Latin America.

Iran has found a fertile ground in Latin America to obtain economic resources through illicit activities. Among them, its involvement in the drug trafficking business stands out. However, the Latin American region, with its problems of corruption, lack of

¹¹ See <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/iran-china-and-russia-prepare-military-manoeuvres-latin-america/20220707164025157268.html>

institutionalism, or lack of regulations, has allowed Iran to exploit agents and assets to establish money laundering networks and structures to evade international sanctions imposed on the regime, on senior government officials, IRGC members, Iranian companies, or individuals directly linked to economic activities.

Due to its international isolation, Iran suffers from a regular structural resource shortage (Priego, 2022). International sanctions force Iran to seek alternative sources of funding. The US and the EU consider Iran as a regular participant in drug trafficking and money laundering activities. In this regard, Iran has established significant criminal networks in places such as Venezuela or Colombia, and especially in the Triple Border Area between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, generating funds from drug trafficking. This TBA is also used to launder capitals from drugs and arms trafficking as well as other criminal activities.

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Iran has gained access to “a series of safe havens currently controlled by nonstate actors for illicit trafficking activities, particularly in border regions, that would allow for the free movement of virtually any product across the northern tier of South America through Central America” (Farah, 2012, p. 23).

Regarding economic and financial crimes, Iranian banks, including its central bank, are largely barred from the Western financial systems. However, they operate and benefit from access to the international financial market using financial institutions located in Bolivia, Ecuador or Venezuela. Iranian proxies move the money as if it was originated in these Latin American legal financial systems (Farah, 2012). Chávez, Maduro, Evo Morales, and other Latin American leaders have allowed Iran to open financial institutions, monetary mechanisms, front companies, and dedicated shipping lines in their countries to evade international sanctions (Farah, 2012).

Regarding the issue of illicit activities in the continent, Iran relies on and has used its proxy Hezbollah, which has also established extensive networks to evade the security forces of various Latin American states. To carry out illicit activities, Hezbollah has operated and benefited from a huge family-based network of businesses with many years of experience in trade-based money laundering as well as the access to politically influential individuals and groups cultivated through a mix of ideological convergence and economic inducement (AEI Working Group on Transnational Organized Crime in The Americas, 2017). Furthermore, both Hezbollah and Iran have strategically

leveraged and capitalized to their advantage the widespread corruption at all levels of law enforcement and public administration across the region as well as the poorly secured and porous regional borders (AEI Working Group on Transnational Organized Crime in The Americas, 2017).

Over the years, Hezbollah has established an extensive and wide-ranging infrastructure for counterfeiting materials in Latin America and deals in forged goods such as CDs, clothing, food, cigarettes, medicines, currency, and documents, such as tax stamps, credit cards, checks, and Social Security cards for fake identities, in an industry that generates hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue for the organization (Riza, 2023). Part of these benefits are used to carry out operations following Iran's directives.

Ideological Alliances: The Red-Green Nexus

Having explained the reasons for the penetration, presence, and influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Latin America, it is now necessary to focus on the most significant aspect that has facilitated Iranian penetration and presence in the South American region.

In recent years, there has been a convergence between radical leftists and Islamists. Through significant ideological exchange and engagement at both state and non-state levels, these two movements are forming a united front against the United States and its allies. This common ground between Latin America and Iran is of an ideological nature and can be characterized as the "red-green nexus", "red-green alliance" or "red-green convergence" (Karagiannis & Mccauley, 2013) referring to this relationship both in the theoretical or ideational realm and in the tactical-operational arena between radical political Islam and revolutionary leftism.

On one hand, historically, within Marxist or socialist thought, religion was considered incompatible with Marxist-Leninist or socialist ideology. Religion was considered a bulwark against communism; religion was the opium for the people. Thus, its elimination was necessary to liberate the people from ignorance. On the other hand, Islamism understood that communism was an attack to religion and its basic principles, communism was seen as a "godless ideology" (Karagiannis & Mccauley, 2013).

In spite of their historical hostility, since the 90s there is an emerging trend in the formation of an alliance between political Islam and the radical Left, encompassing both state-level actors and non-state actors, such as various groups and movements within Latin American society (Karagiannis & Mccauley, 2013). Remarkably, as it has already been explained, the Iranian leadership has shown significant efforts in fostering connections with leftist regimes in the region.

Despite the inherent differences in their worldviews, perspectives on human nature, political and cultural interpretations, both Shia Islamists and leftist revolutionaries have demonstrated a prevailing pragmatism in their interactions. They have managed to

adapt to each other, placing the points they have in common at the center of their relationship and acting accordingly, while setting aside those aspects in which they differ more significantly.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Communist parties lost their standard bearer. To maintain their political relevance, many Communists shifted their focus from class struggle to cultural and identity issues giving rise to the so-called identity politics. As Eastern European countries have fully embraced Western integration and China has embraced state capitalism, radical left-wing groups have rallied around anti-globalization and anti-imperialism causes. Simultaneously, many Islamists have criticized the market economy as an imperialist imposition and blamed Western powers for the challenges faced by the Ummah (Karagiannis & Mccauley, 2013). While this alliance between Islamists and revolutionaries on the left may seem like a tactical “marriage of convenience” between two inherently different political ideologies opposing the West, the convergence of political Islam and the radical Left has deeper roots (Karagiannis & Mccauley, 2013).

As Karagiannis and Mccauley explain in their article “The Emerging Red-Green Alliance: Where Political Islam Meets the Radical Left” (2013), there are some elements in the Islamic and communist doctrines that are very comparable, namely:

- Both Islam and communism (as well as identity politics nowadays) emphasize group goals over individual interests as individualism is fought by both parties.
- Both claim to be universal and seek to convert unbelievers through preaching, education, or social campaigns.
- Radical leftist and Islamist ideologies are based on sacred texts, with a strict interpretation: the Qur’an for the Islamists and Marx’s *Das Kapital* for leftists.
- Radical political Islam and Marxism claim to represent an absolute truth that would lead to the salvation of mankind. They present a vision of an equitable society that can be materialized: the Marxist utopian ideal of a society without social classes can be comparable to the utopian aspiration of a revived Caliphate.
- Both have an eschatological view of history with the inevitability of a final battle between good seen as the socialist progress or *Dar al-Islam* (the house of Islam) and evil seen as the capitalist aspirations or *Dar al-Harb* (the house of war), and both can justify violence to achieve this goal. In the Marxist philosophy, the overthrow of the capitalist class can be achieved through a proletarian revolution. For Islamists, military or violent jihad is the only way to advance Islam in the world.

Another significant convergence between radical political Islam and the radical Left is their shared stance on anti-imperialism. Their views on globalization are the same. They see globalization as the pinnacle of contemporary cultural, economic, and political imperialism and colonialism. Within this framework, global powers (such as the U.S. and

its Western allies) are seen as engaging in a struggle to conquer the resources from the developing world.

“The United States is portrayed as the foremost imperialist power oppressing working and Muslim masses. This kind of framing resonates well among both radical Leftists and Islamists. For Leftists, the U.S. involvement in the greater Middle East can be understood primarily on economic terms [...] For the Islamists, American wars in the Middle East are just another episode in a long line of Western interventions to grab resources and land from the ummah” (Karagiannis & Mccauley, 2013, pp. 176-177).

Furthermore, both red and green narratives and ideas commonly embrace the notion of anticapitalism and strongly oppose American neoliberalism.

“The anti-globalization/anti-capitalism frame has certain components (e.g., fight against social injustice and exploitation, North-South divide, dominance of Western multinationals) which can be appealing both to adherents of political Islam and revolutionary Marxism. It focuses on capitalism’s “inherently unjust” nature which serves the interests of Western powers to the detriment of (working and Muslim) masses” (Karagiannis & Mccauley, 2013, p. 174).

This anti-globalization and anti-capitalism frame expose and present some components like the fight against social injustice and exploitation, the North-South divide, the notion of dominance of Western multinational corporations that are appealing to political Islam as well as to revolutionary Marxism (Karagiannis & Mccauley, 2013).

Underlying all the above is another rhetoric of dialectical nature: the oppressor-oppressed rhetoric, which aligns with the classic Marxist theory of infrastructure-superstructure, and in the case of Islam, is embraced in the narrative of an oppressive collective West towards Muslim peoples. Both leftists and Islamists argue that Western economic structures oppress the working class and Muslims, respectively. They contend that the secular West has systematically oppressed Muslims in their own territories. This narrative is especially used in the defense of the Palestinian cause by the Iranian regime and leftist and anti-Israeli movements.

Another connection between the revolutionary left and Iran in Latin America is the emphasize on their common enemies. Therefore, the primary connection is the identification of the United States as the “Great Satan”. The Great Satan is seen as the imperialist oppressor par excellence. The second common enemy is the State of Israel, although Israel is more hated by Iran than by the Latin American revolutionary left.

This hate against Israel is expressed through anti-Zionist movements and narratives shared by leftists and Iranians. To ensure the influence of anti-Zionism and support for the cause against Israel within the leftist political and social movements of Latin America, Ahmadinejad made the Palestinian cause one of his ideological cornerstones. He knew that for the radical left from Latin America “the Palestinians are the new Cubans—the new Vietnamese who need international solidarity. Palestine is the last colony to be

liberated from Western oppression. By extension, befriending Iran is a logical thing to do for anyone who supports the Palestinian cause” (Karagiannis & Mccauley, 2013, p. 178).

As an example of nexus with Iran and this anti-Zionism in Latin America, in 2005 Hugo Chávez, with his common anti-Spanish rhetoric, gave a speech about Christopher Columbus and Spain comparing the oppression suffered by Venezuela’s indigenous population under Spanish rule to the sufferings of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation (Perdue, 2014). Most of the recurring topics mixed in one same speech: anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, or the oppressor-oppressed dialectic rhetoric.

This ideological relationship and connections between Islamists and leftists, this red-green nexus, is what allows to understand how everything explained in section 4 takes shape. Only by understanding this union around anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, around the rejection of globalization, hatred towards the United States and Israel, only through these common points of union it can be understood how Iran managed to penetrate Latin America in the 80s and 90s and how it has been able to influence and forge alliances with regional and local governments, social movements, or power networks in the region. This red-green nexus, these ideological connections, is what has facilitated alliances and a good understanding between such disparate figures like Hugo Chávez, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Evo Morales, Hassan Rouhani, the Castro brothers, or Ebrahim Raisi.

The emblematic case that serves as a perfect example of the red-green nexus is the so-called Palestinian cause. The narrative surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a case where the essential points of convergence between leftists and Islamists are evident. In the narrative about the Palestinian cause, key elements such as anti-imperialism, hatred towards Israel and its number one ally, the United States, are emphasized. It denounces colonialism and the oppression of the Palestinian people, highlighting that in a globalized world, the plight of the most vulnerable and oppressed, such as the Palestinians, goes unnoticed. Regardless of the veracity of the claims regarding the Palestinian issue, it is a reality that Iran uses the Palestinian cause as a unifying factor with left-wing governments and movements in Latin America, exploiting the cause of the Palestinian people for its own benefit.

Iranian Means of Influence and Propaganda

Having examined the reasons, motives, and interests behind the penetration and presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Latin America, as well as the ideological connections and common objectives between the radical left and radical political Islam in LATAM that have facilitated it, it is now necessary to analyze the means employed by Iran to exert influence in the Latin American region.

The means to be analyzed are the following: (1) official State visits, (2) embassies and attachés, (3) religious and cultural centers, religious scholars and clerics, as well as

universities, and (4) media outlets, social media, and online platforms.

Official State Visits

Official visits are an essential element in the political and diplomatic relations between Iran and the different Latin American States where the Persian regime has interests. These official visits occur at all levels and range from visits by heads of State to visits of lower rank through their ministers or special envoys. Senior officials from different public institutions or high-ranking officials from the armed forces and security services (on official mission and publicly disclosed) are common.

These official visits occur in both directions. Senior officials from Iran officially visit Latin America and are invited and received by Latin American governments, and vice versa in Tehran. Official visits have taken place over the years and continue to occur to this day.

These visits serve to conclude agreements, advocate for their interests, advance their agendas, or enhance commercial and economic relations, intelligence and military cooperation, and other international relations matters.

From his rise to power in 2005 until 2012, Ahmadinejad conducted over 5 visits to the region, visiting countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, engaging in meetings and working encounters with Hugo Chávez, Daniel Ortega, and Rafael Correa. These meetings have provided Iran with opportunities to sign numerous agreements and pacts. For instance, between Iran and Venezuela, from 2006 to 2012, over 300 cooperation agreements were signed between the two states (BBC Mundo, 2012).

Hugo Chávez made his first visit to Tehran in 2001, and subsequent visits to the Iranian capital followed. Between 2001 and 2007, Chávez traveled to Iran on six occasions. In 2009, he made a return visit to Iran.¹² Maduro has continued the tradition and has also visited Iran, with one of the most recent visits taking place in 2022.¹³ The Venezuelan president was welcomed at Mehrabad International Airport in Tehran by Iranian Minister of Defense, Brigadier General Mohamad Reza Qarai Ashtiani (TeleSurTV, 2022).^{14,15}

Many ministers and senior officials have visited Venezuela or Iran in recent decades. One of the latest visits is one of the Iran's Minister of Petroleum in 2022, who aimed to establish new routes against US sanctions (France24, 2022).

As for revolutionary Cuba, diplomatic relations with Iran were established in 1979, the year of the Islamic Revolution. In May 2001, Fidel Castro made his first visit to Iran, expressing a sense of being at home and praising Iran's anti-imperialist struggle.

12 See <https://www.publico.es/actualidad/chavez-inicia-visita-oficial-tres.html>

13 See https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/ir%C3%A1n-venezuela_maduro-llega-a-ir%C3%A1n-en-una-visita-oficial-a-invitaci%C3%B3n-del-presidente-iran%C3%AD/47663914

14 See also <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/politica/545102/iran-venezuela-maduro-visita>

15 See also <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/politica/545102/iran-venezuela-maduro-visita>

Additional visits ensued (Malamud & García Encina, 2007). Following in his brother Fidel's footsteps, Raúl Castro also developed a fondness for official visits with Iran.¹⁶

Brazil, on the other hand, also received Ahmadinejad during the time of Lula da Silva's presidency in 2009 (Pérez, 2020).

Also, Ecuador has been visited by many Iranian officials. "Frequent high-level official visits between the two countries have yielded numerous deals to inject Iranian funds into the U.S. and European financial systems via Latin America" as an "illicit financial relationship between Iran and ALBA has been years in the making, originating in Venezuela through a "nesting" scheme [...], and which subsequently morphed into a state-sponsored trade-based money-laundering scheme using public and private banks in Ecuador" (Pérez, 2014).

Bolivia has also maintained close relations, particularly during the times of Evo Morales and Ahmadinejad. During those years, there were official state visits to Bolivia in 2007, 2009, and 2012, and there were official state visits to Iran in 2008, 2010, and 2013 (BBC Mundo, 2012).¹⁷ In 2011, a surprising visit to Bolivia by the then Iranian Minister of Defense, Ahmad Vahidi, sparked a diplomatic conflict between Argentina and Bolivia and led to disputes within the government of Evo Morales. The Iranian official was expelled by Bolivia due to his involvement in the 1994 AMIA bombing in Argentina (América Economía, 2011).¹⁸

While Ahmadinejad was the one who visited Latin America the most, his successors Rouhani and Raisi have also continued the policy of official visits to the American continent with much success.

In addition to official State visits, it must be added that, as stated by many analysts, there have been numerous unofficial and covert visits by senior officials and advisors in the fields of intelligence and military training throughout these decades. Iran has invested, not only with money but also with advisors and operatives in paramilitary structures in the region, most prominently, helping to establish and subsequently administer the "regional defense school" of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), headquartered in eastern Bolivia (Berman, 2014): "Iran is known to have provided at least some of the seed money for the school's construction, and no less senior a figure than Iranian Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi presided over the school's inauguration in May 2011" (Berman, 2014, p. 5).

16 See https://www.larazon.es/historico/5472-raul-castro-y-ahmadinejad-defienden-el-uso-pacifico-de-la-energia-nuclear-OLLA_RAZON_426204/

17 https://www.bbc.com/mundo/ultimas_noticias/2012/06/120618_ulnot_bolivia_iran_visita_ahmadinejad_fp

18 See also <https://www.reuters.com/article/portada-bolivia-argentina-iran-idLTASIE74U1BY20110531>

Embassies and Attachés

Starting from the mid-2000s, Iran has made significant investments in establishing political connections with the Americas at various levels. Diplomatically, its presence in the region has more than doubled in the past decades, with the number of embassies increasing from five in 2005 to eleven at present. Nowadays, Iran maintains official diplomatic missions in Argentina¹⁹, Bolivia²⁰, Brazil²¹, Chile²², Colombia²³, Cuba²⁴, Ecuador²⁵, Mexico²⁶, Nicaragua²⁷, Uruguay²⁸, and Venezuela²⁹.

This proliferation of Iranian embassies has given Iran the opportunity to showcase the Islamic Republic on the world stage as a legitimate nation that is not isolated internationally. Iran has received significant diplomatic support from the ALBA bloc and Iranian embassies have played a special role in gathering support for Iranian international causes (Hirst, 2014).

Furthermore, Iranian embassies use diplomatic representations and cultural, religious, and charity associations to conceal their intelligence activities. In Iran's penetration strategies, embassies empower these activities with diplomatic immunity and cover, backdoor channels, and expanded access to local governments and officials (Obiglio & Naveira, 2014). This is possible because thanks to the prerogatives granted by the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, diplomatic delegations and their members enjoy a series of immunities that exempt them from the jurisdiction of the receiving state (Priego, 2022).

As a result, Iranian diplomatic delegations often include a section belonging to the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (VEVAK) and another section affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In fact, many of the diplomats regularly accredited abroad are also members of the IRGC, which has been a consistent reality in Latin America (Cordesman, 2007; Priego, 2022).

"The Quds has offices or 'sections' in many Iranian embassies, which are closed to most embassy staff. It is not clear whether these are integrated with Iranian intelligence operations or if the ambassador in each embassy has control of, or detailed knowledge of, operations by the Quds staff. However, there are indications that most operations

19 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5330/380/Argentina>

20 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5367/380/Bolivia>

21 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5368/380/Brazil>

22 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5366/380/Chile>

23 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5541/380/Colombia>

24 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5365/380/Cuba>

25 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5369/380/Ecuador>

26 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5364/380/Mexico>

27 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5363/380/Nicaragua>

28 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5370/380/Uruguay>

29 <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/product/5362/380/Venezuela>

are coordinated between the IRGC and offices within the Iranian Foreign Ministry and MOIS" (Cordesman, 2007, p. 9).

The Iranian government established the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), that plays a crucial role in deploying cultural attachés to Iranian embassies worldwide, tasked with promoting Iranian culture and political ideologies. These attachés often engage with influential individuals within the host countries (Jones & Newlee, 2019). Additionally, these cultural attachés can serve as a cover for Iranian intelligence operations.

Iran sometimes accredits an excessive number of diplomats in its missions that does not correspond to the importance of its interests in the country. The most striking case occurred in Bolivia, where Tehran accredited up to 150 diplomats, an excessive number considering its interests in Bolivia, which leads to believe that many of these diplomats were not engaged in their official functions as Iranian diplomatic mission premises are used to carry out propaganda or illegal activities (Priego, 2022). The State Department's Coordinator for Counterterrorism raised concerns about this overstaffing of Iranian embassies in the region, with an excess number of diplomats, some of whom were suspected to be intelligence agents and individuals involved in terrorist activities (Levitt, 2016).

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As Humire (2014) explains, with the emergence of Hugo Chávez and the ALBA bloc in the early 2000s, Iran's previous cultural influence in Latin America underwent this transformation, evolving into a more structured diplomatic and economic engagement. During this period, as seen before, Iran significantly increased the number of its embassies in the region, but as Humire (2014) explains, they also established financial arrangements and lines of credit with several countries. Simultaneously, Iran continued its covert operations, which enabled the establishment of a command-and-control infrastructure across the region. This network utilized both formal embassies (many times as headquarters of the operations) and an informal system comprising regional mosques and Islamic charities.

Religious and cultural centers, religious scholars and clerics and universities.

Among the tools and mechanisms that Iran employs as soft power in Latin America, notable elements include the role of clerics, certain cultural attachés (with diplomatic coverage), and cultural centers often affiliated with university professors or higher

education institutions.

One of the outstanding elements of Iranian soft power is the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization with the aim of centralizing and enhancing Iran's cultural and religious outreach efforts. This organization, similar to other aspects of Iran's soft power strategy, operates under a centralized structure. While officially affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the ICRO receives funding from and reports to the office of the supreme leader. Its primary objective is to strengthen connections with foreign countries and populations through educational, religious, and artistic initiatives such as events and exhibitions (Jones, 2020).

The ICRO strives to promote the ideals of the Islamic revolution, foster unity within the Muslim community, and enhance relations with other Muslim nations. To achieve these goals, it appoints cultural attachés in Iranian embassies abroad who play a crucial role in promoting Iranian culture and political values (Jones, 2020). These attachés frequently engage with influential individuals in host countries. Additionally, they can serve as a cover for intelligence operations (Jones, 2020).

Apart from its official establishments and unofficial cultural centers abroad, the ICRO collaborates with various affiliated groups to fulfill its mission of cultural diplomacy (Jones, 2020). In Latin America the ICRO is present in Venezuela and there are suspicions that they operate covertly in other countries in the region running propaganda operations.

Iran has been establishing an extensive network of social and religious centers to engage with the local population. Iran aims to gain the support of vulnerable or marginalized individuals to use them as a destabilizing weapon when necessary but also Iran aims to recruit agents that could potentially be sent to Iran for indoctrination and training (Priego, 2022). These cultural and religious centers are typically led by Iranian religious leaders or Latin American citizens who have been trained and radicalized in Iran. These leaders disseminate narratives and agendas promoted from Tehran with the aim of gaining followers and social influence in Latin America (Priego, 2022). Clerics like Mohsen Rabbani or Abdul Karim Paz play a special role in these tasks.

As Professor Alberto Priego analyzes in his study "La influencia de Irán (e Hizbulá) en América Latina" (2022), many of these cultural centers that Iran has in Latin America are either part of the premises of its diplomatic mission or located in close proximity to the embassy, indicating a high degree of control exerted by Tehran over these centers to achieve its interests in this region of the world.

Alongside the cultural centers, there are also certain university institutions that serve as propagandistic platforms, promoting agendas and narratives set by Iran. These institutions also recruit agents to send them to Iran for further training and education.

The Al-Mustafa International University³⁰ (MIU) stands out as one of these institutions. It

30 <https://miu.ac.ir/>

was established in 2008 through the merger of Iran's Global Center for Islamic Knowledge and the Organization of Overseas Religious Seminaries and according to Article 9 of the MIU's founding statute, its objectives include promoting "pure Mohammedan Islam" and providing education and training for jurisprudents, clergy, researchers, experts, trainers, propagandists, translators, tutors, and managers. The teachings of MIU reflect its conservative Shia ideology and align with the political objectives of Iran's top leadership (Jones, 2020). Similar to the ICRO, the MIU operates under the direct authority of the Office of the Supreme Leader, who personally appoints and dismisses the president and trustees' committee of the university and holds an advisory position with the authority to dissolve the institution if deemed necessary (Jones, 2020). As an indication of the institution's significance to the Iranian regime, it is worth noting that, for example, in the 2016 Iranian budget, Al-Mustafa received 2,390 billion rials (\$74 million approx.). However, the university institution receives more funding from the office of the Supreme Leader and other conglomerates under the Supreme Leader's command (Cocks & Sharafedin, 2017).

In February 2016, Al Mustafa's then vice President declared: "Export of revolution has always been one of the most important goals for the Islamic Republic. Al Mustafa plays a role in preparing the ground and attain this goal" (Dai, 2016).

Another institution is the Instituto Salam, another academic arm of Iran in Latin America. On their website³¹, they highlight their objective of promoting academic education of Islam and human sciences to both Muslims and non-Muslims, positioning themselves as the leading authority on Islamic learning worldwide. Among their professors Abdul Karim Paz can be found.

The Instituto Samuel Robinson³² is one of the newest intellectual centers in Caracas that enjoys significant funding and has direct connections to the Iranian regime. Founded in October 2020, the institute is named after Simón Rodríguez, also known as Samuel Robinson, who was an influential teacher to Simón Bolívar. The Instituto serves as a prominent platform for Bolivarian leaders and their Iranian counterparts to organize events that present an alternative perspective on the humanitarian and human rights challenges faced by both countries (Farah & Tavarez, 2021). "SRI is the newest and most influential of the think tanks that acts as a convergence center for Iranian/Bolivarian thought and intellectual content" (Farah & Tavarez, 2021, p. 9).

Another important aspect of this network includes quasi-academic institutions that generate books, which are subsequently distributed through various platforms and universities. These institutions also host forums where leaders from the Bolivarian countries, Iran, Russia, and other allies disseminate political and ideological content while networking with one another (Farah & Tavarez, 2021). Well-financed think tanks and research organizations produce policy papers and position papers that skillfully

31 <https://institutosalam.com/>

32 <https://isrobinson.org/>

interweave Bolivarian and Iranian revolutionary rhetoric, creating a compelling anti-U.S. narrative. This narrative resonates with traditional leftist groups and influential populist movements throughout the region, garnering broad support (Farah & Tavarez, 2021).

Media outlets, social media, and online platforms

Iran has developed other means and mechanisms to penetrate and influence Latin America and to disseminate its narratives, agenda, and propaganda. This includes the establishment of Spanish-language television channels, numerous websites in Spanish, and the use of social media platforms. These efforts aim to exert influence over the Spanish-speaking population in Latin America, regardless of their religious affiliation, with the objective of promoting Iranian interests and shaping public opinion.

The activities carried out through all these media and communication channels are organized and structured with an information and communication strategy.

This information and communication strategies use two main types of narratives. The first type focuses on creating goodwill, fostering sympathy, highlighting cultural affinity, and finding common ground. These narratives include stories that showcase Muslims and Iranians spreading goodwill, Iranian embassies participating in local cultural events, accounts of tragedy and conflict in Yemen and Syria, and tales of heroism in overcoming challenges (Farah & Tavarez, 2021).

The second type of narrative comprises political narratives that criticize U.S. imperialism, condemn Israeli actions, and denounce counter-revolutionary efforts against the Iranian and leftists Bolivarian or Cuban revolutions. These narratives argue for radical change in the global order, positioning the United States as the primary obstacle to achieving that change. These narratives are disseminated by consistently publishing stories that resonate with small but expanding echo chambers, attracting like-minded followers, and building networks on social media platforms (Farah & Tavarez, 2021).

There are four main media outlets working or helping Iran, consisting of their respective television channels broadcasting in different countries of the region, their websites, and their channels on various social media platforms. These four outlets are HispanTV, TeleSur, RT en Español and Al Mayadeen Español. Other media outlets such as Cubavisión Internacional, Prensa Latina or Canal Caribe also collaborate, to a greater or lesser extent, in the distribution of content and the propagation of narratives favorable to Iran.

1. HispanTV³³: Launched in 2010, it is owned, directed and operated by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). It is Iran's Spanish-language satellite station broadcasting 24/7 across all the Latin American region with the mission of providing a platform for anti-American and anti-Western narratives for a Latin American audience.

33 <https://www.hispantv.com/>

HispanTV hosts very little programming directly on Islam but rather focusing on spreading different narratives to counter “Western-made order”, “capitalism”, and “American government and culture” (Farah & Tavarez, 2021). HispanTV has more than 35 correspondents in 27 different countries, most of whom are from Venezuela and also report for TeleSur. The outlet also offers free programming on YouTube and Facebook (Farah & Tavarez, 2021).

2. TeleSur³⁴: This is a Venezuelan media outlet launched in 2005 and was intended as a “socialist alternative to CNN”, in Hugo Chávez’s words, to promote the ideology of the Bolivarian Revolution (Farah & Tavarez, 2021). The majority of its costs, approximately 80 percent, have been covered by the Chávez/Maduro regimes, with main studio facilities provided in Caracas. Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Cuba reportedly make smaller financial contributions (Farah & Tavarez, 2021). Initially, Argentina supported TeleSur under the Fernández de Kirchner government, but the transmission to Argentina was later blocked during the Mauricio Macri administration (2015-2019). However, the Argentinian government has resumed TeleSur broadcasting (Farah & Tavarez, 2021). Regarding information about the Middle East, Iran, Israel, and narratives related to anti-imperialism, anti-Americanism, and anti-Zionism, TeleSur follows the same editorial line as HispanTV and the regime of the Ayatollahs.

3. RT en Español³⁵: It is the Spanish branch of Russian state-controlled television. It is very similar to Hispan TV and TeleSur in terms of its editorial stance and approach to news coverage regarding Iran and its activities in Latin America. Since its launch in 2009, RT has expanded its reach in Latin America with bureaus in Managua, Caracas, Havana or Buenos Aires. With its high-quality productions, prompt coverage of breaking news and a wide network of correspondents, RT en Español has emerged as a highly influential media outlet in the region. This has provided Russia with a cost-effective platform to disseminate its narrative and exert its influence in the region (Farah & Tavarez, 2021). Iran and Russia have established a comprehensive collaboration in propagating sensitive topics that are important to Iran (Farah & Tavarez, 2021). This collaboration extends to the realm of propaganda and information dissemination through RT en Español.

4. Al Mayadeen Español³⁶: Al-Mayadeen Media Network is a pan-Arab satellite news channel that was established on June 11, 2012, with its headquarters located in Beirut, Lebanon. The network operates round the clock, delivering over ten news bulletins and approximately 17 diverse programs. Their team of journalists is dispersed across key global capitals and numerous countries, including Moscow, Washington, London, Tehran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, various European nations, as well as across the Arab world. They launched the Spanish channel to target Spanish-speaking audiences. They are linked to Hezbollah and some of the leaderships have also worked for Al Manar³⁷,

34 <https://www.telesurtv.net/>

35 <https://actualidad.rt.com/>

36 <https://espanol.almayadeen.net/>

37 Hezbollah’s Al Manar also launched a site in Spanish: see <https://spanish.almanar.com.lb/>

another Lebanese satellite television station that is owned and operated by Hezbollah. As stated on their website³⁸, some of their values are the following: “The unity of the Arab nation”, “Solidarity of the Islamic world”, “The right of self-determination” or “The right to resist and reject external interference or domination”. This is a clear reference to the narratives surrounding the Palestinian issue³⁹.

Regarding all these media outlets, according to a study conducted by IBI Consultants in 2019, it was observed how frequently this network of media outlets cites one another to create echo chambers. For instance, Prensa Latina, the official news agency of Cuba, and HispanTV referenced each other a total of 8,710 times, averaging around 1,000 times per year or nearly 3 times per day. Similarly, TeleSur and HispanTV quoted each other approximately once a day during the analyzed period (Farah & Tavarez, 2021).

This entire network of channels and media outlets is complemented by social media activity. Each channel has its corresponding accounts on major social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, and even Instagram.

Furthermore, there are key individuals who work for multiple media groups and play an important role in maintaining a highly active presence on these social media platforms, ensuring a widespread dissemination of content, even if there is minimal engagement with the content.

These key individuals are called “super spreaders” by Farah and Tavarez:

“A key feature of the echo chambers is cultural interpreters—super spreaders—working across multiple platforms. Several individuals who work for at least two of the three outlets in the study appear on the main Web sites in the echo chamber and repeat each other’s reporting on an ongoing basis, including anti-U.S. and anti-Israel attacks, defenses of Iran, and praises of the Maduro regime and its allies” (2021, p. 11).

Through data-mining some individuals were identified by analyzing and extracting data from journalism reports that include their bylines. Among them, Farah and Tavarez (2021) include and highlight the following: Pablo Jofré Leal, Chile, working for HispanTV, TeleSur, RT en Español, Sputnik News, IslamOriente, and multiple websites; the Spanish communist politician Pablo Iglesias, working for HispanTV, TeleSur and other media and programs such as La Tuerka (Público TV); Carlos Aznarez, Argentina, engaging with HispanTV, TeleSur, RT en Español; Leonardo del Grosso, Argentina, for HispanTV, TeleSur; Marcelo Colussi, also Argentinian working for HispanTV, TeleSur and RT en Español.

Research conducted by the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (Paredes Esteban, 2022) also identified some of these “super spreaders”. Abdul Karim Paz, Suhail Assad, Wafica Ibrahim, Kamel Gómez (Argentinian Shiite Muslim that studied in Qom, Iran. He is a disciple of Abdul Karim Paz both in Argentina and in Iran), Ángel

38 See <https://english.almayadeen.net/aboutus>

39 See page 33.

Horacio Molina (also studied in Al-Mustafa Open University, in Qom), Nicola Hadwa or Susana Khalil. Carlos Aznarez was also identified. Many of them collaborate with different websites like Resumen Latinoamericano⁴⁰ (directed by Carlos Aznarez) and they participate in different programs of Al Mayadeen (Wafica Ibrahim is a Lebanese journalist working as Al Mayadeen director for Latin America).

Abdul Karim Paz and Suhail Assad (both are disciples of Mohsen Rabbani) actively engage in various YouTube channels, websites, and social media accounts. They also collaborate with each other, as seen in their involvement with AnnurTV⁴¹. This news website in Spanish covers topics such as Islam, global politics, and society, with a specific focus on Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iran and Yemen. AnnurTV features additional sections like AnnurLIFE⁴² and IslamZONE⁴³, which offer articles on culture and Islam. The opinion section of the website includes contributions written by Abdul Karim Paz. AnnurTV maintains Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube accounts. According to the website, Annur TV is affiliated with the Argentinian Islamic Organization (Organización Islámica Argentina).

These super spreaders in Latin America are also very active in a left-wing radio station in Argentina named Radio Popular Che Guevara.⁴⁴

Regarding social media platforms, many of these companies are trying to counter the infiltration of pro-Iranian subversive materials online. As the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab found, on October 2019 Facebook took down Iranian assets targeting Latin American audiences on this platform. Facebook removed pages and different groups that were being operated from Iran to specifically target Latin Americans (Brooking & Kianpour, 2020).

Iran maintains a vast network of online personas and propaganda outlets, most of which conceal their association with the Iranian government. The initial recognition of Iran's efforts to exert foreign influence came in August 2018 from the cybersecurity firm FireEye. Over the following eighteen months, social media platforms and journalists have revealed operations that date back as early as 2008. These operations have targeted numerous countries, disseminating tens of millions of content pieces that vary in their messaging and purpose (Brooking & Kianpour, 2020). Latin American countries were among the targets.

"It is useful to review the social media assets that have been definitively attributed to Iran. As of January 2020, Facebook has publicly identified: 766 pages followed by 5.4 million users; fifty-five groups joined by 143,000 users; 1,114 Facebook accounts; and 344 Instagram accounts followed by 439,000 users. Facebook has further attributed

40 <https://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/>

41 <https://www.annurtv.com/>

42 <https://www.annurtv.com/annurlife>

43 <https://www.annurtv.com/islamzone>

44 <https://radiocheguevara.org.ar/>

forty-three Facebook events and \$57,000 in advertising to Iranian actors. Twitter has identified 7,896 accounts responsible for approximately 8.5 million messages. Reddit has identified forty-three accounts” (Brooking & Kianpour, 2020, p. 15).

This numbers show the importance that Iran gives to soft power and technological means to carry out propaganda operations and the dissemination of its narratives in the West, including Latin America.

Hezbollah

As seen above, since the 1980s, the Islamic Republic has demonstrated engagement and activity in Latin America. During this time, it supported its primary terrorist proxy, the Lebanese militia Hezbollah in establishing in the Triple Frontier region (Berman, 2014). The extent of Hezbollah’s regional influence and capabilities became evident in subsequent years. In March 1992, a suicide bombing orchestrated by Hezbollah targeted Israel’s embassy in Buenos Aires, resulting in the death of 29 individuals and the injury of 242 others. Two years later, in July 1994, the group struck again by bombing the Argentine-Israel Mutual Association (AMIA) in Buenos Aires.

Iran has utilized its association with ALBA to strengthen the presence of its Revolutionary Guard Corps in the region, but also the presence of Hezbollah as its proxy. Additionally, they have sought to establish cells affiliated with the Lebanese Shia militia (Hirst, 2014). This presence serves two main purposes. Firstly, Hezbollah leverages its expanded presence in Latin America to generate funds for its ongoing global operations. Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil, with sizable Syrian and Lebanese diaspora communities, serve as important sources of revenue and support for both Iran and Hezbollah. Regions like the Tri-Border Area as well as Venezuela’s Margarita Island have served as significant operating bases for Iranian and Iranian-linked militants due to the permissive environment and limited oversight. Similar situations can be found in various free trade zones throughout the Americas (Hirst, 2014).

Secondly, by recruiting, indoctrinating, and proselytizing among Latin American citizens, Iran is enhancing its ability to swiftly respond in the event of a military contingency or political crisis, such as a potential strike on its nuclear facilities by the United States or Israel. Recent years have seen several foiled attempts of Iranian-sponsored attacks organized and planned within Latin America (Hirst, 2014).

As Levitt (2016) explains, Hezbollah’s illicit activities, including fundraising and smuggling, are not limited to the tri-border area and other well-known regions with free trade zones. The group has expanded its operations beyond these areas and is involved in logistics, financing, and even terrorist operational planning.

During the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 to 1990, a significant influx of Lebanese immigrants arrived in South America, primarily concentrated in the Tri-Border Area

(TBA), as well as cities such as Curitiba, Rio de Janeiro, and Sao Paulo in Brazil, and Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and Venezuela. Smaller communities can also be found in Ecuador, Guyana, El Salvador, and Panama (AEI Working Group on Transnational Organized Crime in the Americas, 2017). Hezbollah and Iran capitalized on this migration by infiltrating agents and recruiting sympathizers among Arab and Muslim immigrants in the continent. These efforts resulted in the establishment of formal terrorist cells throughout the region (Levitt, 2016), as Hezbollah and Iran also utilize their extensive social-religious infrastructure, which includes mosques, schools, and cultural centers, to facilitate travel and secure residence permits through the support of loyal clerics and emissaries (AEI Working Group on Transnational Organized Crime in the Americas, 2017).

Hezbollah, acting as an Iranian proxy, has a significant presence in the illicit drug trade within the region. The Tri-Border Area serves as a prominent hub for Hezbollah's commercial operations in the drug trade. Numerous cases have revealed connections between Hezbollah and major drug trafficking organizations operating in the region (Hirst, 2014). One prominent example is Ayman Joumaa, a Lebanese-Colombian individual who established an extensive money-laundering network to transport large quantities of cocaine from Mexico and Colombia to the Middle East. This operation generated tens of millions of dollars in proceeds, which were funneled to Hezbollah (Hirst, 2014).

In addition to its involvement in illicit activities and smuggling in the tri-border area and other free trade zones, Hezbollah has expanded its activities to encompass more than just logistics, financing, and illicit business. The group is also engaged in planning and carrying out terrorist operations in various locations within the region (Levitt, 2016), but also in intelligence collection operations for Iran. In fact, Hezbollah's position as Iran's proxy in Latin America is primarily based on its function as an operational and logistical network that supports Iranian covert endeavors in the region (Constanza, 2017).

In addition, in places like Argentina or Ecuador, as Karmon (2009) explains, the presence of Islamic mosques promoting radical religious beliefs aligned with Hezbollah's ideology, suggests that Hezbollah acknowledges the importance of expanding its ideological support base in the region. By promoting radical religious ideology, Hezbollah aims to enhance its legitimacy and address potential opposition from radical elements within its constituency, particularly as it becomes more involved in Lebanese politics. This connection highlights the strategic significance of diasporas in terrorist operations and poses important policy implications for host nations committed to countering such activities.

Case Study: The Case of Argentina - The Rabbani Network

To concretize the aforementioned sections, the case of Argentina will be analyzed as a case study.

According to the report by prosecutor Alberto Nisman (2013), Iranian penetration in Argentina dates back to 1983. It was in that year when Shiite cleric Mohsen Rabbani arrived in Argentina. Under the guise of a commercial representative involved in the meat industry and serving as the sheikh of the "At-Tauhid" mosque in Buenos Aires, Rabbani played a pivotal role as a cover while being part of Khomeini's intelligence bureau.

Under this cover, Rabbani was the main architect behind the establishment of an extensive espionage network, which evolved into a complex intelligence base. The Iranian regime relied on its embassy, the Cultural Counselor's Office in Buenos Aires, as well as extremist elements frequenting the Shiite mosques "At-Tauhid" (Buenos Aires), "Al Iman" (located in Cañuelas), and "El Martir" (situated in San Miguel de Tucumán), and radicalized members of the Muslim community to form this network (Nisman, 2013).

This clandestine structure installed in Argentina facilitated the acquisition of necessary information and the execution of local logistical operations that paved the way for the attack on the AMIA in 1994.

Iran's infiltration into Argentina was orchestrated by this Shiite cleric Mohsen Rabbani, who not only established a covert intelligence and espionage structure in Argentina, serving the Persian regime, but also played a key role in coordinating and articulating the expansion of networks throughout Latin America.

This is the case of the infiltration of the Iranian regime in Guyana and other Caribbean countries, carried out through the efforts of Rabbani's disciple and close collaborator, Abdul Kadir (Nisman, 2013). Kadir had a significant regional influence, responsible for establishing an intelligence network in Guyana that served the interests of the Islamic Republic, while also extending its effects and influence on neighboring countries. Similar to the intelligence base established in Argentina in connection to the AMIA attack with Rabbani, the one built in Guyana also served as a fundamental support for international terrorism purposes.

The deployment of these espionage structures established by the Iranian regime in different countries follows common patterns, including funding and indoctrination from the Iranian state, the complete fusion of politics and religion in the discourse and activities of regime representatives, intense efforts for recruiting and training individuals aligned with the fundamentalist cause, the creation and dissemination of intelligence reports, the dual use of embassies or diplomatic missions as integral parts of intelligence bases, the exploitation of commercial ventures as cover for illegal activities, and the dual use of cultural centers or mosques that, in addition to promoting Islamic religion and culture, may also serve as platforms for terrorism through supposed study trips, pilgrimages, or financial transactions (Nisman, 2013).

In addition to Rabbani's work in Argentina, it is also important to mention the agencies and institutions that, alongside their specific and legitimate functions, were responsible for the mission of carrying covert operations for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Throughout

his investigation, Prosecutor Nisman found that the following organisms were involved in one way or another: the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (VEVAK), the Ministry of Guidance and Propaganda (Ershad), the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (the Pasdaran) and its Quds Force as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (particularly through its network of embassies and attachés).

Shortly after his arrival in the country in 1983, Rabbani became a prominent figure with significant recognition in the local Muslim community, ensuring control over the most important Shiite religious centers in the country. He gained the trust of many and gradually established a network of friendships and personal contacts. In addition to this, the Iranian agent tirelessly worked to promote the most extreme principles of the Islamic revolution, allowing him to not only conceal the establishment and development of an Iranian intelligence station on Argentine soil but also coordinate and articulate the policy of exporting the revolution in the region (Nisman, 2013).

Mohsen Rabbani was primarily an ardent advocate of the principles outlined by the Islamic Revolution in its most radical sense. The dissemination of the thesis of “exporting the revolution”, which asserts that Islam should project itself worldwide, even through violence, compelled him to build an extensive propaganda apparatus that enabled him to disseminate those precepts. The main avenue he utilized for his objectives was the mosques: the one in Buenos Aires, the one in Cañuelas, and the one located in San Miguel de Tucumán, from which he had the opportunity to address the faithful, either personally or through trusted individuals.

Broadcasting radio programs, publishing periodicals, and organizing events or activities sponsored by affiliated organizations completed the framework of fundamentalist ideological reproduction he established in the country. For these activities and tasks, he employed many of his disciples such as Abdul Karim Paz and Suhail Assad, who still today continue operating in these types of propaganda and “cultural” activities (Paredes Esteban, 2022).

Despite presenting himself in Argentina as a religious leader, behind that facade, Rabbani deployed his radical activities driven by the government in Tehran, with the capacity and willingness to respond to the demands of exporting the revolution in terms of ideological-religious penetration and the establishment of an intelligence base, even resorting to violence as a possible alternative.

Thus, shortly after his arrival in the country, he began to perform the political-religious tasks demanded by the expansion of the Iranian revolution. In fact, as the Nisman investigations (2013) show, he was identified as the founder of the Argentine branch of the “Muslim Brotherhood” which acted as an organization dedicated to the reproduction of the most radicalized aspects and surrounded himself with a series of politically-oriented organizations and relationships, religious or not, that shared a confrontational stance against the enemies of the “Islamic cause”.

Furthermore, Mohsen Rabbani, aware of the importance of media as channels for mass

dissemination, also introduced these radical concepts through periodic publications and radio broadcasts. Additionally, the strategy of ideological penetration designed based on various variables of propaganda activities was strengthened by the economic settlement of the Iranian religious figure.

In Buenos Aires, he assumed the role of leading congregational prayers in the At-Tauhid mosque, allowing him to communicate with the faithful and quickly establish himself as a prominent and trustworthy figure within the local Shiite community. His primary objective revolved around spreading Shia Islam, advancing the ideals of the Iranian theocratic revolution, and consequently, recruiting followers to support his cause. Concurrently, Rabbani actively engaged in promoting and disseminating the fundamentalist doctrines of the Iranian regime through regular publications, aligned radio broadcasts, and primarily through his speeches and activities centered around the mosques in Floresta, Cañuelas, and San Miguel de Tucumán, effectively attracting individuals who aligned with his principles.

At the At-Tauhid mosque, classes on Islam and the Quran were offered to men, women, and children, as well as Arabic language classes and access to literature. Students who sought to pursue Islamic studies were selected with the possibility of continuing their indoctrination in the city of Qom, Iran, with facilitated accommodations (Nisman, 2013). His disciple Abdul Karim Paz, who is Argentinian, followed this path and went to Qom to study.

In this recruitment effort, Rabbani leveraged the power of media as channels for mass dissemination and reproduced his fundamentalist concepts through periodic publications and aligned radio broadcasts. Notably, Rabbani had a direct relationship with the radio station "Armonía"⁴⁵, which continues to broadcast to this day. Some programs are hosted by Gabriel Mohsen Ali⁴⁶, with Santiago Abdul Karim Paz participating. These programs addressed the global Arab-Islamic issue, including the specific context of Argentina. The editorial stance was clearly opposed to the United States and Zionism, which Rabbani regarded as the greatest terrorists in the world.

On his part, Mohsen Ali operates a personal website known as "Casa para la Difusión del Islam"⁴⁷, where he actively propagates Shia Islam. The website also features advertisement for the radio station Armonia AM 1600, which Rabbani promoted in the 1990s. Additionally, Mohsen Ali maintains a Facebook profile⁴⁸ and appears in various YouTube channels, where he shares content related to Iranian and Shia narratives. On these YouTube channels, interviews with Abdul Karim Paz can be found.

It is also worth mentioning the quarterly magazine "El Mensaje del Islam" dedicated

45 <https://am1600armonia.com/>

46 In its YouTube channel, videos and programs with Mohsen Ali can be found: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQ8vaNf6CLWH0KN979JSnNg>

47 <http://casaparaladifusiondelislam.blogspot.com/>

48 <https://www.facebook.com/sheijmohsen.ali.7/>

to Islamic thought and Hispanic-American culture, of which Rabbani was the editor and owner, as well as the monthly newsletter "Al Iman" published by the Argentine Islamic Society of Cañuelas.

Even today, Mohsen Rabbani, who has a national and international arrest warrant for his involvement in the AMIA attack and a "red notice" issued by Interpol, indicating the highest priority for his capture, continues operating from Qom, Iran, under the protection of the Iranian regime.

The ideological dissemination carried out through the propaganda apparatus deployed by Rabbani required economic support, and this matter was not overlooked by the Iranian government. Between the late 1980s and mid-1990s, according to Argentinian investigations (Nisman, 2013), the Islamic Republic provided the necessary funds to the person in charge of "exporting the revolution" in South America.

Religious education, cultural dissemination, diplomatic support, commercial relations, economic power, and ideological influence were the tools that Mohsen Rabbani organized, manipulated, and directed to establish an intelligence structure capable of collecting useful and necessary information in case the policy of "exporting the revolution" demanded resorting to violent methods (Nisman, 2013). All this apparatus was used for other covert operations and illicit activities regarding Hezbollah, as explained in the sections above.

Among the individuals close to Rabbani, one stood out: Abdul Karim Paz, who studied in Qom, returned to Buenos Aires, and was appointed as the sheikh of the At-Tauhid mosque in Buenos Aires, replacing Mohsen Rabbani.

Over time, Rabbani expanded his intelligence operations from Argentina to Chile, Uruguay, and Colombia, and from there to other parts of the region.

Rabbani wove a network of assets, some linked to Hezbollah, while others were local agents recruited in Argentina, sent to Qom, and brought back to Argentina to operate, such as Abdul Karim Paz.

Among Rabbani's disciples, Abdul Karim Paz and his brother-in-law Suhail Assad are particularly notable. In recent years, both Abdul Karim Paz and Suhail Assad have expanded their territory and have also been operating in Chile.

On the other hand, Abdul Karim Paz has followed in his teacher Rabbani's footsteps and has recruited his own agents, also sent to Iran and returned to Argentina. Among them are Kamel Gómez and Ángel Horacio Molina.

Kamel Gómez intervenes in various YouTube channels and webpages like "Con otros ojos"⁴⁹, in some of them with Abdul Karim Paz.

49 <https://oidislam.blogspot.com/search?q=kamel+gomez>

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Abdul Karim Paz and Suhail Assad, as well as Kamel Gomez and Ángel Horacio Molina actively participate in Hispan TV activities and programs as well as in media outlets TeleSur or Al Mayadeen en Español.

This entire network of assets dedicated to disseminate narratives hand in hand with the Latin American left is a prime example of what has been discussed in this work. It is a clear illustration of the relationship between Islamism and radical anti-imperialist, anti-globalization leftism, characterized by anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric.

Some individuals within this network, such as the ringleader Mohsen Rabbani, have been involved in covert activities for Iran, have connections with Hezbollah, and have engaged in criminal and terrorist acts, including the AMIA bombing in 1994.

Conclusion

As analyzed throughout this study, Iran’s penetration and influence in Latin America are relevant not only from the perspective of international politics but also in terms of security, defense, regional stability, and, for certain actors like the United States, it is a matter that affects their national security.

Since the mid-1980s, it has been observed that Iran’s initial and limited informal presence not only increased over the years but also expanded from cultural and religious activities to covert intelligence operations or the promotion and facilitation of terrorist attacks such as the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires in 1994.

By leveraging available literature and bibliography, combined with the investigation of open sources including news from various journalistic media, websites, social media profiles, and information from official documents, the raw content has been shaped and now analyzed and distilled.

Regarding the questions about why Iran is present in Latin America, the doubt about Iran’s decision to penetrate, remain, and expand its influence has been clarified and answered. As seen:

- Latin America is for Iran a privileged area from which to operate against its main international enemy: the United States.

⁵⁰ <https://radiocheguevara.org.ar/programacion/desde-los-margenes/>

⁵¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqpWZG9X2vg&list=PL_yM5pgzKoHvtke9vTKQiuLhxjOerk5i&pp=iAQB

- Latin America is also a geographical and political area from which Iran has attacked strategic targets of its other bitter enemy: the State of Israel.
- Latin America serves as a platform for Iran's international projection, to promote its foreign policy and find strategic allies.
- Latin America is a preferred area for the expansion of Iranian rhetoric, narratives, and propaganda, as well as for the dissemination of revolutionary ideology and the penetration and propagation of Shia Islam.
- Latin America is a rich continent in natural resources wanted and needed by Iran.
- For Iran, Latin America represents an opportunity to pursue new military development projects.
- Iran has found sources of financing through illicit activities in Latin America.

Furthermore, the ideological baggage that enables and facilitates Iranian penetration, its influence, the dissemination of its narratives, and its alliance with radical leftist governments, social, and cultural movements has been thoroughly analyzed. The study of the red-green nexus has delved into and explained how Marxism and Islamism share pseudo-theological or ideological points that foster understanding and friendship. As observed, emphasis is placed on anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, the glorification of anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric, the promotion of opposition to globalization, and the championing of causes such as the Palestinian issue.

Once the more theoretical aspects of the Ayatollah regime's relationship with the Latin American region have been explained, the specific mechanisms, tools, and means used by Iran in its influence strategies are analyzed individually. These include the utilization of official state visits by heads of state or government, as well as ministers and senior officials; the role of embassies and the involvement of diplomatic attachés in intelligence activities; the use of mosques and cultural centers for the dissemination of Shia Islam and Iranian narratives on cultural and moral issues, with figures like Mohsen Rabbani, Abdul Karim Paz, and Suhail Assad playing significant roles. Additionally, this section examines the media, including the use of social networks, websites, and television channels for propaganda dissemination and indoctrination.

As seen, the role of Hezbollah is also crucial. It was pivotal in carrying out the AMIA bombing in 1994, but it continues to engage in illicit activities today, such as acquiring financial resources, trafficking, document forgery, and smuggling various materials. It can be said that where Iran is present, so is Hezbollah, and this certainly holds true in the case of Latin America.

Lastly, the Rabbani network analyzed by Prosecutor Nisman in Argentina clearly demonstrates Iran's capabilities, including its intelligence services, while also highlighting the role played by clerics and recruits sent to study in Iran, such as the studied cases of

Kamel Gómez or Ángel Horacio Molina.

Overall, this work sheds light on a real and current issue that requires academic study and practical solutions from those responsible for regional stability and state security.

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