

Antisemitism in Latin America: Regional and Global Trends

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Most Latin American countries today are full-fledged democracies, embracing a culture of human rights, diversity, and inclusiveness. Many key Latin American countries, such as Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, have adopted forward-looking anti-racist legislation to curb hate speech and violence against minorities. Jewish communities were able to act as catalysts of these initiatives. Together with other segments of society, they worked to have them introduced and ratified by national legislatures and remain as watchdogs to ensure that they are implemented when warranted. Not long ago, the expression of antisemitism was allowed in public circles. Today, barring Venezuela, not only has antisemitism become “politically incorrect” but also is characterized as a crime sanctioned by law. Unfortunately, cyber antisemitism continues to be a problem in the region with the proliferation of Web sites in Spanish. Because of its global nature, however, this issue requires a global solution.

The Organization of American States (OAS), the main multilateral regional forum, is in the process of adopting an Inter-American Convention against Racism to include antisemitism. This tool will aim to discourage those who insist on using prejudice to sow the seeds of discord among peoples and nations in the hemisphere.

The Latin American Catholic Church, despite its conservative bent, has adopted the conclusions emanating from the Second Vatican Council and slowly but surely has introduced transformation in its teachings regarding attitudes toward Jews and in its relations with local Jewish communities. In addition, interfaith programs that involve outreach to the growing evangelical denominations and are sympathetic in general terms to Jews and to Israel, and more limited to Moslems, have multiplied.

World War II and the Holocaust are hardly perceived as a central chapter in Latin America’s contemporary history, although Bolivia, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic opened their doors to Jewish refugees, and there are even a few cases of Latin American “righteous among the nations.” Holocaust awareness has increased over the last 20 years through institutional activity, the establishment of new memorials and museums, international days of remembrance, and growth in media coverage.

In Argentina and Ecuador, the topic of the Holocaust is being taught in depth in public and private schools. Argentina remains to date the only Latin American country on the UN International Holocaust Task Force,

although there are attempts to expand regional membership. The two terrorist attacks against Jewish targets in 1992 and 1994 in Buenos Aires increased the topic's relevance. The issue of the articulation of memory is seen not only as a Jewish, but also as a national, imperative to recall Argentina's own dark, authoritarian chapters

As part of a global trend, Jews generally seem to be losing their status as a persecuted minority subject to historical discrimination. Paradoxically, there seems to be a diminishing empathy or understanding of the pernicious and ingrained nature of antisemitism concurrently with a generalized recognition of the horror of the Holocaust as a pillar of the Jewish and universal contemporary collective experience. In some extreme cases, the victims become victimizers and Holocaust images and terminology become associated with Israel's alleged treatment of Palestinians as part of ongoing efforts to question Israel's moral compass.

In contrast to other parts of the world, most antisemitic expressions and episodes in Latin America are tied mainly to the Middle East conflict. Chapters of violence in the region have been capitalized by the radical left and marginal groups that espouse rabid anti-American positions and seek to delegitimize Israel. Latin America's historic ambivalence toward the United States—and Israel as its main ally—were strengthened by the Iraq War. During the 2006 Lebanon War and the 2009 Gaza Operation the quantity and intensity of anti-American/anti-Zionist rhetoric significantly increased, more in the published rather than in public opinion.

During these instances, Latin American media was rife with negative anti-Israel coverage and with biased editorial comments reflecting a clear black-and-white attitude and little concern for the nuances of a most complex confrontation. Classic antisemitic stereotypes and prejudices were part of the narrative. Language, cartoons, and images that alluded to the analogy between Nazi behavior under the Holocaust and Israel's were prevalent.

Political parties and groups in civil society reacted according to their traditional positions and alignments. The most disturbing development was the confrontation between members of local Arab and Jewish communities and the ensuing fractures in society as a whole, importing a political conflict alien to regional and national agendas. The growing presence of Iran and its proxies, underestimated by many and heavily supported by Venezuela and its allies, contributed much to this heated climate.

In general terms, though, physical violence is practically absent in the region, although threats of violence and vandalism of Jewish institutions do occur. This was recently the case with the Mariperez synagogue in Caracas, which was sprayed with antisemitic slogans during a demonstration the first week in June 2011 by ultra-leftists and President Húgo Chávez's supporters. Two attacks against Caracas' Hebraica Jewish community center in

2004 and 2007 also took place on the eve of popular referendums. In February 2009, the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas was vandalized as a side effect of Chávez's virulent anti-Israel/antisemitic rhetoric, which nurtured a permissive climate leading to the attack.

Shortly after, at an OAS special session, several countries denounced these troublesome developments and several key countries played an important role in conveying to Chávez that he should refrain from attacking the Jewish community. Lately, Venezuela's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Temir Porras tweeted that "it's alien for revolutionaries to attack religious institutions," editorializing on the vandalism against the Mariperez synagogue and echoing Fidel Castro's comments on antisemitism during an interview with American Jewish journalist Jeffrey Goldberg.

Latin American Jewish communities remain deeply traumatized after the two unresolved attacks in Argentina in 1992 and 1994, sanctioned and executed by Iran and Hezbollah. These feelings of vulnerability and outrage became strengthened after the government of Evo Morales welcomed the current Iranian Minister of Defense Ahmad Vahidi in La Paz at the beginning of June 2011. Vahidi has an Interpol red alert for his capture; he is accused of masterminding the 1994 attack against the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. After protestations from the government of President Cristina Kirchner, Vahidi left the country without being extradited to stand trial in Argentina.

President Húgo Chávez's use of antisemitism/anti-Zionism as a political tool has certainly acted as the prime catalyst for the expression of antisemitism at the regional level. He has also worked systematically to import the Middle East conflict into the region. The attacks in the official media—70% of which is owned by the government—facilitating permanent and systematic channeling of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish diatribes, the mobilization of state and political structures, and vandalism against Jewish institutions as measures of intimidation, and of course his growing alliance with Iran and the latter's expansion in the region, are of grave concern. Venezuela's and Bolivia's severing of relations with Israel in 2009 brought this chapter to new lows. Venezuela remains today one of a few countries worldwide with state-sanctioned antisemitism. Until Chávez's arrival, antisemitism was negligible.

A crucial element that should be front and center in assessing the current state and future trends of antisemitism in Latin America is the growth of Iranian presence and influence, with Húgo Chávez as its chief patron.

In 2005, the Venezuelan president established a strategic alliance with Iran that became an important turning point not only for Israel and for local Jewish communities but for the hemisphere as a whole. For the first time, the Middle East conflict is introduced and positioned as part of the regional

and national agendas and as an indicator of the desire for an independent foreign policy vis-à-vis the United States. Chávez has traveled to Iran many times; Iranian President Ahmanidejad has also visited on several occasions. This partnership and shared world views, including Ahmadinejad's perspective on Israel, have undoubtedly played a role on the state of affairs in the region.

Aided and abetted by Venezuela, Iran has pursued an aggressive policy of outreach to other countries in Latin America, particularly Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador, exploiting anti-American sentiment and offering sorely needed funding. Iran's activities in the region are not confined to economic investment but extend to cooperation in the political, military, and cultural arenas.

In the past several years, the Iranians inaugurated, reestablished, and increased their diplomatic representation in eleven nations. Some of the latter have strengthened their political ties with Iran despite its continued pursuit of nuclear weapons in defiance of the UN Security Council's sanctions and the pleas of the international community, its grim human rights record, and its unequivocal involvement in planning and supporting two terrorist attacks against Latin Americans on Latin American soil. Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile exhibit outstanding regional and international profiles; all of them have positioned the issue of human rights as most relevant on their national agendas.

Finally, in the last few months, Latin America has been on the global and Jewish radar screens more than usual not only due to news coming out from Venezuela and the tense dynamics that have been established between the Chávez administration and the local Jewish community, but also because there has been a spate of unilateral recognitions of an independent Palestinian state by several countries. As mentioned, the Middle East peace process is today very much part of the regional and national agendas and local constituencies are vying for influence. The global campaign is targeted to culminate at the UN General Assembly this coming September, where the Palestinians will ask the world community to accept their membership in this body, a step that will thwart future bilateral peace negotiations in the Middle East. This will probably affect Israel's legitimacy and image significantly and as usual will be reflected in the regional media.

This wave of recognitions was initiated by Brazil, the unquestioned South American leader, who is seeking an increased role as a global player. Several of the countries from the Mercosur trade block followed suit. Bolivia and Ecuador, both members of the Alba block led by Venezuela, made a pronouncement. Guyana, a close ally of President Chávez, joined the crowd.

Chile is the most dramatic example. The media—mostly owned by

local Palestinians—widely reflected the debate. The Chilean Congress, with vocal Palestinian and Jewish legislators, also witnessed this confrontation. There were attacks by an influential Palestinian legislator labeling the president of the Jewish community, Gabriel Zaliasnik, and Chile's Interior Minister Rodrigo Hinzpeter, who happens to be Jewish, as Israeli agents.

Important hemispheric leaders such as Mexico and Colombia, plus most of the Central American countries, have refused to join this group, reaffirming their support for multilateral resolutions at the UN and different agreements upholding direct negotiations as the only realistic road to peace.

Pressure by local Palestinian and Arab communities is also felt strongly in Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, and Central American countries such as El Salvador. This is a new reality the region will increasingly be facing in the coming years—one that can translate into the expression of anti-Zionist themes in Latin America's published and public opinion.

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