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**ISRAEL, LATIN AMERICA AND THE UNITED  
STATES: A PERIPHERAL-REALIST PERSPECTIVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This document is the paper-format version of the keynote address delivered by its author on August 2, 2009, to the opening session of the Latin American section (AMILAT) of the 15<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Jewish Studies, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It attempts to understand the long-term shift towards the worse of Israeli-Latin American relations, which started with an almost unqualified support for the establishment of the State of Israel on the side of both Latin American right-wing governments and left-wing parties and popular organizations, but have been deteriorating ever since. It suggests that this involution can be largely explained in terms of at least four intervening variables: Israel's vulnerability, its special relationship with the United States after 1967, Latin American social structure, and the class identity of the leadership of the Latin American Jewry. It argues that overlooking the peripheral character of Israel in the interstate system has led to distortions in the understanding of Israeli-Latin American relations.

## **RESUMEN**

Este documento es la versión académica de la conferencia magistral impartida por su autor el 2 de agosto de 2009, en ocasión de la inauguración de las sesiones de la sección latinoamericana (AMILAT) del 15º Congreso Mundial de Estudios Judíos, llevado a cabo en la Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalén. Intenta descifrar el giro negativo de las relaciones israelí-latinoamericanas, que se iniciaron con un casi pleno apoyo latinoamericano al establecimiento del Estado de Israel (por parte tanto de gobiernos frecuentemente de derecha, como de partidos y organizaciones populares de izquierda) y ha sufrido un continuo deterioro desde entonces. Sugiere que este deterioro se explica principalmente en términos de cuatro variables: la vulnerabilidad de Israel, su relación especial con los Estados Unidos a partir de 1967, la estructura social latinoamericana y la identidad de clase de la dirigencia de las comunidades judías de la región. Sostiene que el olvido del status periférico de Israel en el sistema interestatal ha conducido a distorsiones en la conceptualización de las relaciones israelíes-latinoamericanas.

# Israel, Latin America and the United States: a peripheral-realist perspective\*

Carlos Escudé\*\*

## Introduction

This paper applies peripheral realist theory to the case of the long-term interstate relations between Israel and the Latin American countries.\* It attempts to understand the shift towards the worse in these relations, which started with the full-fledged Latin American support for the establishment of the State of Israel and have been deteriorating ever since. It suggests that this involution can largely be explained in terms of at least four intervening variables: Israel's vulnerability, its special relationship with the United States after 1967, Latin American social structure, and the class identity of the leadership of the Latin American Jewry.

## The theoretical framework

Peripheral realism argues that the so-called structure of the international system is not what Stephen Waltz and other neorealists call 'anarchy', which is to say an order in which the states are 'like units' all of which have the same functions. It is rather an 'incipient hierarchy' with three different types of states with different functions: rule-makers, rule-takers and rogue states (the latter being countries that lack the power needed for rule-making yet refuse to accept the formal and informal rules established by the great powers).

From the point of view of this conception, both the Latin American states and Israel are peripheral states. They are all rule-takers. The fact that Israel has atomic weaponry does not contradict this diagnosis, because it acquired it before the hierarchical non-proliferation regime was born. Dimona was uncovered in 1960 and the NPT was only open for signature in 1968. The United States did not approve of Israel's acquisition of atomic weapons, but their opposition was not the equivalent of a forceful veto.

It must be understood that the issue is not that peripheral states lack the possibility of challenging the rules set by the central states, but rather that such challenges usually entail ruinous consequences for these countries and their citizens. The cost of the

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challenge is too high for most societal structures-of-preferences, and this is what generates an incipiently hierarchical world order.

That said, it must also be noted that dependence and peripherality work in very different ways for Latin America and Israel. On the one hand, until the 1980s Latin American societies had been hostage to a de facto veto power of their military elites vis-à-vis civilian governments. This led to cycles in which the military and the professional politicians alternated ruling these countries. This peculiar political system in turn conditioned the relations between the Latin American states and hegemonic powers in a way totally unknown to Israeli political life.

But on the other hand, in some ways Israel was and continues to be more bound than Latin America to limits to its sovereignty set by the United States. Under the Obama administration this has become patently clear. Simply because of its size, Israel will not be able to survive nuclear proliferation in the Middle East without the protection of a great power. It is surrounded by mortal enemies and lacks strategic depth. It depends existentially on its alliance with the United States as no Latin American country does. Yet curiously, Israel's status as a peripheral country tends to be understated by studies on Israeli-Latin American relations.<sup>†</sup>

This is not the only characteristic frequently overlooked by studies of Israeli-Latin American relations. The same occurs with a related issue: Israel has not always had a security alliance with the United States. This is well-known to the informed public but is at times understated by classics of the field. Indeed, for a long time after Israel's independence, US policy was equidistant between Israel and the Arab states. In the mid-fifties, Israel's requests for US arms were rebuffed.<sup>‡</sup> The first major sale of US weapons, which consisted of Hawk anti-aircraft missiles, took place as late as 1963.<sup>§</sup> But the real strategic alliance was forged only after the Six-Day War, when Israel's unlikely success convinced Washington that it could help them win the Cold War in the Middle East.

Notwithstanding, most studies of Israeli-Latin American relations seem to take the US-Israeli alliance for granted, as if it were analogous to the US-UK alliance. There seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge that the forging of this alliance was one of the greatest strategic successes in the history of Israel, one without which it probably would not be able to survive. Indeed, in the bibliography on Israeli-Latin American relations it is hard to find recognition of Israel's dependent and peripheral status. There is an unconscious tendency to think of Israel as an advanced, "First World" power dealing with needy developing countries. This not only undermines explicatory analysis but also ethical evaluations of Israeli foreign policies. Albeit in a different way, Israel is much needier and more dependent than most Latin American countries.

In this paper it is argued that as a consequence of the peripheral character of two of the three parties involved, the US-Israeli-Latin American triangle has functioned in such a way as to put Israel on the wrong side of history vis-à-vis Latin America. This happened as a paradoxical consequence of Israel's success in securing its alliance with the United States. Thus, in making my case I will explain the present-day unpopularity

of Israel in Latin America without recourse to variables such as anti-Semitism or Judeophobia. This is not because such variables do not intervene, but rather because it seems sociologically plausible to assume that even if they did not intervene, Israel would now be unpopular there. Needless to say, the fact that anti-Semitic feelings linger on makes the problem more acute. Last but not least, it must be emphasized that this paper's orientation is not normative. It does not pretend to lay blames or to provide normative advice for foreign policy. Rather, it seeks to explain.

### **The Latin American state/society complexes**

As stated before, the good start that characterized the first decades of Israel's relations with Latin America slowly turned for the worse some twenty-five years ago. In order to understand why things worked out this way we must delve into a couple of crucial political and structural characteristics of Latin American states.

This is a necessary step because, from the perspective of the long-term, states are not the real protagonists of the interstate system, as the rational actor model of international relations theory would have us suppose. Rather, putting it in the Gramscian terms of theoretician Robert Cox, the real long-term actors of international relations are state/society complexes.\*\*

Indeed, a state's foreign policy decisions not only affect other states but their own society as well, as do the reactions to the said decisions stemming from other states. A sequence of actions and reactions transforms society, and by so doing, conditions and sometimes modifies the state itself. For this reason, relations between states cannot be fully understood without studying the domestic orders of their societies.

Two societal factors of a very different nature that must be taken into account when we attempt to explain why Israeli-Latin American relations worsened are:

1. The post-1983 establishment of full electoral democracies in the region, which put an end to the military's former de facto veto power, and
2. Latin America's extreme concentration of income.

The first of these factors is directly related to the souring of Israeli-Latin American relations, while the second is indirectly related to the reasons why it is unlikely that these relations will return to their former harmony within the foreseeable future. I will begin with the consequences of the shift from the military-veto system to full electoral democracy.

### **Proxy paradise: Latin America before democratization**

A naïve reading of Israeli-Latin American relations after the consolidation of the Israeli alliance with the United States would have run something like:

- a) Israel now has an asymmetric strategic alliance with the United States.
- b) Since its founding, Israel has had excellent relations with most of Latin America.

- c) The United States is hegemonic in Latin America, and most of its countries are subject to Department of State policy guidelines.
- d) When they are not, their governments are usually overthrown and a regime is established that normally returns to the fold.
- e) Hence, when opportunity affords, it is in Israel's interest to cooperate with the United States in Latin America.

This reading appears to have guided Israeli policy towards Latin America for a lengthy period. One does not need to study Israeli archives to posit this idea. Suffice it to make a careful reading of the classic Kaufman *et al*/ volume on Israeli-Latin American relations. Indeed, that book is not only a useful scholarly work but also an invaluable period piece that unwittingly documents some perceptions that guided policy at the time of its publication (1979). Its authors state:

The Latin American military are a governing elite. Often characterized by anticommunist fervor, the military –either in government or ‘close’ to it—have seen Israel as a Western outpost standing in the way of the Soviet Union and revolutionary leftist governments. (...) Thus, Israel's triumph in the Six-Day war was seen by the more conservative and pro-Western establishments as a victory over a common enemy. (...) On the whole, the ‘military factor’ as an ‘independent variable’ seems to have worked toward intensification of relations between Israel and several Latin American nations.<sup>++</sup>

In other words, the bilateral relations between Israel and the Latin American states were good because there was a strong rapport between Israel and the Latin American military. To this, Kaufman, Shapira and Barromi add unambiguously: ‘In addition to being a professional elite, several Latin American military establishments are unmistakably modernizing elites.’<sup>++</sup>

In other words, in doing business with the Latin American military, Israel not only promoted its self-interest but also that of Latin American societies that supposedly benefited from their ‘modernizing elites’. The authors not only understood the reasons why relations were good; they also suggested that engaging in these lucrative relations was the right thing to do.

The state-of-affairs praised by Kaufman *et al* continued while the United States and the Latin American military cooperated in what was usually their common interest: the vetoing of leftist and nationalist civilian governments in the region. While this order lasted, the relations between Israel and most governments improved constantly, at least if we measure them in terms of the proceeds of Israel's arms exports.

From an Israeli standpoint this outcome was heaven sent, inasmuch as the young nation state, surrounded by mortal enemies, had developed an extraordinary military expertise, a modern arms industry, and with it a dependence on the exportation of arms. An asymmetrical strategic alliance with the United States and a massive sale of arms to governments in the latter's back yard were parts of what, in those days, was

perhaps one of the few available survival paths open to this beleaguered peripheral state.

The alliance became even more advantageous when President Jimmy Carter chastised the Argentine and Chilean military regimes due to violations of human rights. This US policy was always extremely contradictory. While the State Department imposed apparently severe limits to cooperation, the US Treasury trusted the neoliberal economic administrations of both dictatorships and discretely gave them financial support.

For example, visible aid in the form of credits was replaced by less visible aid through guarantee programs. US missions to multilateral credit institutions voted against Argentina, but did not lobby among allies to block the credits, which were awarded in record amounts.<sup>§§</sup> Concomitantly, in the sensitive field of military cooperation, the place of the United States was partly occupied by its surrogate, Israel.

Indeed, towards 1981 arms exports helped to control Israeli balance of payments problems.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> By the middle '80s, Israel had become the world's largest per capita arms exporter. Its arms trade approximated 16% of its total exports and close to one-third of its total industrial exports. Sales to Latin America amounted to one-third of its total arms exports, making the region Israel's most important arms market.<sup>+++</sup> Moreover, Latin America differed qualitatively from other markets because its purchases included jet aircraft, large armaments, missile systems, and communications and electronic equipment.<sup>+++</sup> And during the crucial 1972-1984 period, arms sales were by far the most important component of Israeli-Latin American trade. On a yearly basis, the average Latin American share of non-military Israeli exports was a puny 2.15% of total exports.<sup>§§§</sup>

In the especially significant case of Argentina, from 1978 to 1983 Israel exported more than one billion dollars worth in military equipment, including US made A-4 Skyhawks.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Given the fact that Israel was the most important recipient of US military aid, this would have been impossible without at least Washington's silent acquiescence. Indeed, the latter applied sanctions against the Argentine government due mainly to a public relations rationale, leaving to Israel and others the dirty work of supplying arms to an allied anti-Communist dictatorship.

There is considerable evidence pointing in the same direction. According to Armony as well as to apparently reliable court testimonies,<sup>++++</sup> Mossad shared intelligence with the Argentine army on Montonero combatants training at PLO camps in Lebanon, as well as with the infamous Batallion 601 of the Argentine army, active in Operation Cóndor. Armony also reports that:

the Argentine regime played a role in the US program for the covert sale of arms to Iran with the help of Israel. (...) In 1981, Israel and Argentina took part in a secret deal between the Israelis and the Khomeini regime involving the provision of 360 tons of US-made spare parts for tanks and ammunition for the



revolutionary forces in Iran. Argentina provided the air-cargo facilities for the operation.<sup>††††</sup>

Thus, the United States sacrificed some income for the sake of prestige, but without a strategic loss, insofar as Israel's balance of payments situation made it necessary to sacrifice principle, narrowly understood, for an income that was quite substantial in terms of its limited resources. For different reasons, it was a good deal for both, as well as for the tyrants of Argentina.

For Israel, the political costs would become visible only in the long term. The case illustrates the characteristics of asymmetrical alliances and the relevance of peripheral realism as a tool for their analysis, inasmuch as the US-Israeli-Latin American triangle was (and is) a non-Waltzian hierarchical interstate structure.

The use of the term "proxy" to characterize the Israeli role in Latin America during the '70s and '80s seems entirely fair. This role was part of a survival strategy that helps to understand the causes for the decline of Israel's prestige in Latin America when the United States eventually reviewed its policy for the region, practically outlawing military regimes. This shift generated political benefits for the superpower and considerable political costs to its proxy, exposing one of several mechanisms through which costs and benefits are unevenly distributed in a hierarchical state structure.

### **Washington's shift**

As stated, for a decade and a half the sacrifice of principle to survival goals did not generate visible political costs for Israel in Latin America.<sup>§§§§</sup> But everything changed with the 180° shift in US policy. This was mainly the result of Argentina's invasion of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands in 1982. The event generated a dramatic change even in the most conservative US perceptions regarding Latin American affairs. Military governments came to be considered more a liability than an asset for the United States. It was reasoned that in the Latin American region, which was and remains far away from the main axes of competition for world power, a rogue military regime could potentially produce more damage to US interests than the most anti-US of democratically-elected populist governments, which would always be subject to a greater measure of citizen control.

From then on, an implicit but powerful alliance was established between the State Department and the professional political classes of Latin America. This made military coups a very risky enterprise for would-be perpetrators, as the case of Honduras vividly demonstrated in 2009. It crowned the mostly populist professional politicians as masters of the local power games. The local bourgeoisies, which had traditionally pushed for coups, were forced to look elsewhere than the military for the pursuit of their class interests.

A dramatic democratisation of Latin American politics followed. Professional politicians ascribed to the populist parties that were fated to dominate politics took charge, and the image of Israel became tainted, apparently beyond repair.

### **The structural constraints of Latin American foreign policies under full electoral democracy**

This is where our structural variable comes in. Latin America enjoys the dubious honor of having the greatest concentration of income worldwide. Although there are poorer regions, poverty is very substantial. According to the Andean Development Corporation, in 2005 the proportion of the population living on less than two dollars a day amounted to 37 percent in Brazil, 39 percent in Mexico, 45 percent in Argentina, 48 percent in Venezuela, 50 percent in Colombia, 54 percent in Peru and 62 percent in Bolivia. These levels of poverty come together with very deficient educational systems.

Military governments usually represented elites that benefitted from the concentration of income. And due partially to the socially-polarizing consequences of those policies of the past, Latin American societies were caught in a populist trap. As was to be expected, once full electoral democracy was in place, power drifted away from the previously dominant elites. Societies where the vast majority of the population is poor seldom elect right-of-center governments. If, in addition, education is deficient, electoral democracy under conditions of massive poverty often leads to populist governments. Normally, these regimes will not be inclined to adopt a foreign policy that runs counter to popular clichés.

In such circumstances both the hegemonic power and its proxy will tend to be unpopular with the new democratic regimes. But there is a huge difference between the two, because Latin American dependence on the hegemonic power will remain strong, but such will not be the case vis-à-vis the proxy. The superpower's support is often needed, and it is preferable to avoid its ill-will. Moreover, some local political sectors will recognize that despite its past complicity with the region's bad guys, the superpower has now become an active agent of democratisation, restoring its soft power. But such will not be the case for the proxy, whose stigma will not be easily removed.

### **The Arabs vis-à-vis Israel in the Latin American context today**

In principle, the case made above is valid for any proxy. But Israel is not any proxy, because it has more enemies than most. Indeed, while Israel's fate in Latin America was jeopardized by its alliance with the United States (paradoxically its most important asset), its enemies in the Middle East sought the favor of popular organizations in the region. This would eventually put them in a more favorable position vis-à-vis the populist governments that were to emerge after democratisation. This is what makes Israel different from other Western countries that also supplied arms and security services to Latin American tyrants.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>

Indeed, as early as 1952 the Arab League established itself in Latin America. It is no coincidence that its activity was intensified after the Six-Day War, insofar as the establishment of an US-Israeli alliance provided a great opportunity to erode the image of Israel among the working classes and leftist political groups. Despite tactical Arab

mistakes such as siding with pro-Nazi circles in Argentina, this was a significant development that unfolded incessantly through diverse protagonists and means.<sup>++++</sup> Indeed, in the early 1970s the PLO was already establishing strong links with various guerrilla groups in Latin America, such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.<sup>++++</sup>

However, in those days it did not yet seem that this trend would represent a serious challenge, because most progressive social and political forces in Latin America still supported Israel. For a long time, Histadrut had been efficient courting the labor movement. But support had begun to erode as early as 1969, when Argentina's General Confederation of Labor (CGT) issued a statement siding with the Palestinians and Arabs.<sup>§§§§§</sup>

Notwithstanding, in 1979 Kaufman *et al* were still optimistic, stating that with regard to influence on trade unions, students and intellectuals, 'the balance tends to be positive for Israel.'<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> While some indicators may have pointed in that direction even then, the crude fact was that while Israel courted a military elite that was soon to be demonized and trashed, the Arabs courted popular organizations that antagonized increasingly with the local tyrants, and which were soon to be the electoral backbone of the political parties that would dominate the political scene after the wave of democratisation, with full US support.

Moreover, militant Arab organisations made further inroads into Latin America because of the establishment of immigrants who fled southern Lebanon during the Israeli occupation. These people are enemies of Israel, and the so-called Tri Border region of Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina has an important concentration of such immigrants. According to a recent study, the Arab colonies in Ciudad del Este and Foz do Iguaçu add up to some 18.000 inhabitants, of which 90% are Lebanese, with small percentages of Syrians, Egyptians, Palestinians and Jordans.<sup>+++++</sup>

The consequences are serious. According to reputable reports based on open-source intelligence,

There is ample evidence that various Islamic terrorist groups have used the Tri-Border area (TBA) as a haven for fund-raising, recruiting, and plotting terrorist attacks elsewhere in the Tri Border countries or the Americas in general. Terrorist groups with a presence in the Tri Border area reportedly include Egypt's Islamic Group and Islamic Jihad, al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and al-Moqawama, which is a pro-Iran wing of Hezbollah. Islamic terrorist groups have used the TBA for fund-raising, drug trafficking, money laundering, plotting, and other activities in support of their organizations. The large Arab community in the TBA is highly conducive to the establishment of sleeper cells of Islamic terrorists, including Hezbollah and Al Qaeda. Nevertheless, as many as 11.000 members of the Islamic community in the TBA may have moved since late 2001 to other less closely watched Arab population centers in South America.<sup>+++++</sup>

It must be borne in mind that even before the 1982 Lebanon War, this new wave of Arab immigrants that arrived in Latin America starting in the late '60s was very

different from the 'old' Arab immigration of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Unlike their predecessors, they are predominantly Muslims and tend to conserve the Arabic tongue for use at home, at work and in commercial transactions. They establish strong associations and networks based on religious loyalties, including Muslim schools, Islamic centers, and mosques. As has been observed by sociologist Beatriz Gurevich, they behave like an ethnic community whose diasporic identity overshadows their national identity as Argentines, Brazilians or Paraguayans.

This is especially true of the Shiites in Argentina, who underwent a limited identity shift after seven former Iranian officials and a Hezbollah operative were accused, by Argentine authorities, of a direct involvement in the 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA). Although mainly of Lebanese origin, these Shiites took sides with Iran, against the Argentine judiciary.

In this and other issues, their attitudes are increasingly those of a diasporic community with several layers of identity components. When their ethnic and Argentine identities come into conflict, it seems that they tend to Tehran, more than to Buenos Aires, as a source of inspiration. And they have links with politically significant Argentine protest organizations, where they actively proselytize.<sup>§§§§§§</sup>

### **The Jewish side of the quadrangle**

As is well-known, the history of the investigation of the AMIA bombing is one of continuous frustrations, largely stemming from the obstruction of justice undertaken by the Menem, De la Rúa and Duhalde administrations.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> Paradoxically, the two Kirchner administrations are to be credited with comparatively courageous actions, such as exposing Iran during three consecutive inaugurations of the United Nations General Assembly: in 2007, under Nestor, and in 2008 and 2009, under Cristina.<sup>+++++</sup> These high profile criticisms of Iran, made personally by two presidents, were the sequel of the government's request for arrest warrants against the aforementioned Iranians, which was issued to Interpol in 2007. Moreover, when Ahmad Vahidi, one of the officials indicted by the Argentine judiciary, was anointed Iran's minister of defense and security in August 2009, both the Argentine foreign ministry and the chief of the national cabinet issued stern official condemnations of the Tehran regime's appointment.

Such attitudes are very rare in the populist context of today's Latin American politics, of which the Kirchners are clearly a part. True, they are financial allies of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, who is Iran's ally, but they draw the line eloquently when Caracas pushes for closer ties with Tehran. And they also draw the line when it comes to sensitive nuclear technology, which they do not transfer to Venezuela.

Yet the central institutions of Argentina's Jewish community seem reluctant to acknowledge these gestures because for many influential members of the community, class identity seems to take precedence over Jewish identity.<sup>+++++</sup> The Kirchners are part of a populist order that Argentina's bourgeoisie repudiates and wants brought

down. And the most influential leaders of Argentina's Jewish community are, above all, mainstream members of Argentina's bourgeoisie.

This was clearly demonstrated by an article published in *The New York Times* on 7 August 2007. It bore the title "Jews in Argentina Wary of Nation's Ties to Chavez", and it documented concerns over energy-related bilateral deals. The main source cited was the Latin American representative of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. The interviewee and the reporter seemed to be impervious to fact that what makes Venezuela dangerously rich are, precisely, US oil imports. Indeed, Buenos Aires' policy towards Chavez is not all that different from Washington's, insofar as both are pragmatic when it comes to oil and money, and both draw the line with respect to Caracas' links with Iran. Apparently, what is demanded in the name of the Argentine Jewry is that Argentina be more anti-Chavez than the United States.

Such double standards and exaggerated anti-Chavez advocacy are typical of right-of-center political sectors in Buenos Aires, Caracas, Miami and elsewhere in Latin America, regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation. The common denominator is class affiliation. It is true that a political opposition has the right to voice its objections, whether they be fair or unfair. But the civil society leaders who were quoted lobbied as Jews, and thus were they presented to the US public. The implication is that the Kirchner's relations with Chavez are dangerous to Argentina's Jews. This is a very perilous trend that could do a lot of damage to Jewish and Israeli interests, as it has in the past.

### **The manipulation of anti-Semitism**

Indeed, few people remember today that in 1983 the White House framed the Sandinista government of Nicaragua with false charges of anti-Semitism, as a means to mobilize the US Jewry in favor of Washington's so-called 'Contra policy' of arming the subversive opponents of the leftist government. This episode was an attempt to neutralize a leak that had exposed Israel's activities in support of right-wing combatants in Central America.

Research undertaken by scholars, journalists and the US government later traced the maneuver to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In a secret cable following a White House briefing of 1983 in which President Ronald Reagan and the director of the Anti-Defamation League's Latin American Division, Rabbi Morton Rosenthal, had accused the Sandinistas of anti-Semitism, Amb. Anthony Quainton, the US envoy to Managua, stated that 'the evidence fails to demonstrate that the Sandinistas have followed a policy of anti-Semitism.'

Among many other testimonies we can cite Sergio Nudelstejer, who headed the American Jewish Committee's Mexico office. He said that the reasons why many members of Nicaragua's tiny Jewish community had left the country were related to "factors other than anti-Semitism, including their belonging to the propertied classes." Following the fall of Anastasio Somoza in 1979, many who had enjoyed his favors fled and suffered confiscations, whether Jews or Gentiles. <sup>§§§§§§</sup>

Indeed, as reported by the World Jewish Congress, Panama City Rabbi Heszel Klepfisz (a recognized leader of Central American Jewry) informed that he had been to Nicaragua in September 1983 and found no traces of anti-Semitism, although there was an anti-Israel feeling. Wrote Klepfisz: "The statements of Rabbi Rosenthal are not based on fact and do damage to the Jewish cause in Central America and, in my opinion, also to Israel'.\*\*\*\*\*

Furthermore, the Council of Hemispheric Studies (COHA) of Washington DC concluded that:

While anti-Zionism sometimes spills over into anti-Semitism, there is little evidence that this has transpired in contemporary Nicaragua. (Its foreign policy is determined by) the sort of sympathy with the Palestinian cause that is *de rigueur* among left-leaning Third World regimes. This sentiment, coupled with the role Israel has played in arming rightist regimes throughout Latin America, has prompted the Sandinistas to adopt an avowedly anti-Zionist foreign policy.\*\*\*\*\*

These concepts are as valid for 2009 as they were for 1987. In those bygone days, Israel had been put on the wrong side of history vis-à-vis Latin America due to its asymmetrical alliance with the United States, and to the US's alliance with the right-wing tyrants of the region. This configuration did not help local Jews, nor did it mitigate the Latin American military's anti-Jewish attitudes.\*\*\*\*\* Furthermore, making things worse, the struggle against anti-Semitism was manipulated by the United States government.

Presently, it is the Latin American Jewish leaderships which, because of their mainstream status in Latin American bourgeoisies, could put the local Jewish communities on the wrong side of history once again, reinforcing the prejudices generated by the unfortunate circumstances of the past.

Once again, political opponents on the other side of the class-divide are being smeared with direct or indirect accusations of anti-Semitism. The *New York Times* article cited is but the tip of the iceberg. Let us delve on a couple of additional examples.

One such case is a U-Tube video I recently received from a distinguished member of the Argentine Jewish community, with the enthusiastic caption 'view it before it is banned!' It is an excerpt from Oliver Hirschbiegel's film "The Fall". The script, spoken in German by Bruno Ganz, who impersonates Hitler, is translated in the Spanish subtitles as if it were Kirchner's terrifying speech. He refers to his wife Cristina, the current president, in offensive terms, and his interlocutors call him Nestor.

The people who circulate such material seem to be indifferent to the fact that a skeptical beholder who does not buy this propaganda might wonder if there is as little truth to Hitler's association with a Jewish Holocaust as there is to the analogy between the Nazis and the Kirchners. Indeed, the piece is in itself an insult to Holocaust victims and breeds Holocaust denial. Yet it has been circulated, among others, by anti-Kirchner

Jews who seem to be more interested in smearing the President and former President than in protecting the Jewish cause, partly because there is no clear and present danger. So they manipulate Hitler and the Holocaust to tender to non-Jewish class interests.

Another telling example is the slander used against Venezuela's Chavez, who may indeed be an anti-Semite, but who has been smeared with apocryphal speeches often circulated by leading members of Latin America's Jewish communities. One such text, purported to be of his authorship, which I received on January 31, 2009 through an e-mail from the leader of an important Argentine Masorti institution, read:

We the Chavistas despise the Jews and do not recognize the State of Israel or any national or international Jewish organization. We deem it intolerable that an important part of the canonical narration about the deportation and death of Jews under the Nazi system should have been coined in mythological form by treacherous Jewish animals, and that Zionism be used today to preserve the existence of a colonial enterprise endowed with a monotheistic religious ideology (which is mystically-Satanic) and which has the objective of having Demonic Israel possess Holy Arab Palestine.

The e-mail was headed by a caption saying: 'Incredible. Please circulate urgently. Terrifying. Our President is a friend of this gorilla!' I consulted with a member of Venezuela's Jewish community on the plausibility of Chavez's authorship, and she replied that although the *Comandante* was not an innocent child, he has not yet coined this type of discourse. She added that there are people in his government who could conceivably say such things, especially Tarek El Aissami, the Minister of the Interior and Justice, who has family ties to the organizers of Hezbollah cells in the state of Zulia, in northern Venezuela. And she sadly informed me that on that very night, fifteen armed thugs had profaned the Sephardite synagogue in Caracas.

The situation indeed merits concern, not so much because of Chavez's ideology but because of the radicalization that can conceivably be produced by the multiplication of frauds like the quoted text, which can easily become self-fulfilling prophecies. And as in the case of the White House's 1983 false accusations against the Sandinistas, some people, both local and foreign, would be delighted if such texts could demonstrably be attributed to Chavez, because that would make an attack on the regime all the more legitimate.

This attitude, which exists, is quite at odds with its opposite, that also exists, and which is exemplified by the statement issued by the World Jewish Congress when Venezuela's ambassador to Argentina visited the Museum of the Holocaust in Buenos Aires, in October 2008. Jack Terpins, president of the Latin American Jewish Congress, then stated: 'The Jewish community in South America, especially the one in Buenos Aires, appreciates it as an encouraging sign that the Venezuelan Government sees fit to acknowledge the tragedy of the Holocaust.' And World Jewish Congress secretary-general Michael Schneider added:

Following our visit to Caracas in August, it is gratifying to see this sign of recognition by the Venezuelan Government of the dark tragedy that befell the Jewish people, something that President Hugo Chavez himself acknowledged during our meeting with him.

Notwithstanding, there are people who want to undo the World Jewish Congress's good work and slander Chavez for the sake of antisocialist, pro-capitalist politics. Indeed, if you declare a cold war on Chavez's '21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism', you will not be prone to the World Jewish Congress's civilized encouragement for Chavez to do the right thing regarding Jewish causes, and might even prefer that he become an outright Holocaust denier.

Furthermore, it is not to be discarded that this sort of campaign is encouraged by American "public diplomacy", through which the State Department discreetly appeals to various special interest groups to support its own interests. If they did it in 1983, they can do it in 2009. After all, their priority in Venezuela is the downfall of Chavez through formally democratic means. They will not refrain from buying his oil, but they will encourage the Argentine opposition to criticize the Kirchners for doing the same, and even present it as dangerous to the Jewish cause, as did the Wiesenthal Center in *The New York Times*.

The bottom line is that in Latin America, Washington continues to side covertly with the right-wing and against the left-of-center governments that the impoverished masses are likely to elect, given the full-fledged electoral democracy that, starting in 1983, was virtually imposed upon the region, paradoxically by Washington itself.

This state-of-affairs, which is very costly to Latin America but carries few costs to the United States, is complemented by the fact that, because of non-Jewish class interests, the leaders of Latin America's Jewish communities will tend to side with the right-wing and against the left-of-center governments. Thus, the sad predicament that befell upon Jewish causes as a consequence of Israel's status as an US proxy in the 70s and 80s, tends to perpetuate itself in the new set of circumstances.

This problem was foreseeable and can be inferred from the anticipatory words of caution published as early as 1972 by Haim Avni, before Israel became a proxy and previous also to the final spate of military dictatorships:

The economic and social stratification of Latin American Jews is not, of course, conducive to lessening left-wing hostility. <sup>§§§§§§§§</sup>

Avni's insight was unfortunately fulfilled. And given the Latin American levels of poverty, the populist tide is there to stay. To oppose it is the legitimate right of all citizens, no matter how fruitless the effort might be. But to oppose it in the name of Jewish organizations is to call for greater evils.

**'The strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must'**



In the present day, as a consequence of the processes reviewed, Israel is a liability to even the best disposed of Latin American governments. This became patently clear in 2007, when the leaders of the MERCOSUR countries, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, signed an unprecedented free trade agreement with Israel. The accord showed official good will, inasmuch as the MERCOSUR bloc usually relates to other blocs but not to individual states. But what was really significant was the strong leftist opposition triggered by the treaty, quite the opposite of what would have happened before Israel became a proxy of the United States, when the leftists were friendly to Jewish and Israeli causes, and only small contingents of rightists were friendly to Arab causes.\*\*\*\*\*

Indeed, the case of the MERCOSUR agreement illustrates the present-day consequences of Israel's past role as a proxy of the United States. As things stand, every official transaction with Israel has plenty of enemies to attack it and hardly any friends to support it in a visible way. This is why, of the members of the MERCOSUR bloc, so far only Uruguay has been able to ratify the agreement.

In contrast, no matter how stigmatized, a hegemonic state with overwhelming might recovers more easily from the loss of local influence and prestige stemming from alliances with local villains, especially if it becomes the champion of democracy. Israel suffers the typical, Thucydidean predicament of a peripheral state left in the lurch by a hegemonic power and without even a moral right to complain about its senior partner's betrayal.

This brings us to a more general reflection on the consequences, both for peripheral allies and peripheral adversaries of the United States, of superpower policy failure, which is in itself a largely neglected but intriguing field of study. Take a couple of analogous cases:

- 1) Hilary Clinton admitted recently that American policy towards Cuba had failed and would change. The cost, for the United States, was slight, but in Cuban terms it meant the sacrifice of entire generations of citizens.
- 2) Under the illusion that democratizing Iraq was the right thing to do, the United States destroyed Saddam Hussein's state machinery. But the only real achievement has been to advance the interests of Iraq's first minority, the Shiites, and in so doing advance the interests of Iran. Now the United States must withdraw to make troops available in Afghanistan, and the more dramatic costs of its blunders in Iraq will be paid by Middle Eastern allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, whose security has been needlessly put at risk. The cost for the United States is much lower.

Likewise, US support of Latin American military dictatorships put Israel on the "wrong side" of history in that region of the world, and the American 1983 policy change had much more serious local consequences for Israel than for the United States.

## **Conclusions**

This paper explored long-term Israeli-Latin American relations with a special focus on the United States as a conditioning factor. It identified three phases: 1948-67, 1967-83 and 1983-present.

During the first phase, relations between Israel, the Latin American states and the Latin American leftist and populist sectors were excellent. This phase, characterized by the absence of a US-Israeli alliance, lasted from the creation of the State of Israel until shortly after the Six-Day War. Once an alliance between Israel and the United States was established and consolidated, however, relations with the Latin American left rapidly deteriorated. Notwithstanding, allowing for some notable exceptions,<sup>+++++</sup> while the region was mostly under the influence of its military establishments the relations between Israel and the Latin American states remained excellent. Furthermore, they were profitable relations at a time when Israel was still economically weak.

These relations took a turn for the worse, however, when the United States ceased to support Latin American military dictatorships and placed a virtual veto on them. Because during the 1970s and early 1980s Israel had largely become a proxy of the United States in the region, it lost the support of the leftist and populist sectors of the Latin American political spectrum. And when the United States abandoned its former military allies in Latin America, it put Israel on the “wrong side” of history, because Latin American politics came to be dominated largely by the left-of-center and populist sectors whose good will it had previously lost.

This is a case in which the asymmetry typical of center-periphery relations worked in such a way as to destroy Israel’s soft power in the region. To preserve its interests, the stronger party (the United States) did what its might allowed it to do, reversing its previous endorsement of Latin American military dictatorships. In turn, the weaker party (Israel) suffered its inevitable Thucydidean predicament. The case illustrates one of several mechanisms through which the costs and benefits of asymmetrical alliances in non-Waltzian hierarchical interstate structures are distributed. It is thus relevant for the further development of peripheral realist theory.

On the other hand, Israel’s Thucydidean predicament was especially damaging because of the Jewish state’s unique vulnerability. Peripheral realism applies to its case as it would not apply to other Western suppliers of arms and security services to Latin American rightist regimes, because Israel was (and remains) a beleaguered state whose enemies in the Middle East have constantly campaigned against it among populist and leftist organizations all over the world. These enemies made sure that it be stigmatized as other arms suppliers like Germany, Norway or Spain would never be, enhancing the negative consequences of Israel’s structural subordination.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that most members of the Jewish communities of Latin America, and indeed their entire leaderships, belong to the privileged segments of their societal class-divides. Their interests in domestic politics usually coincide with those of other segments of the local bourgeoisies. Since they are usually identified with the State of Israel, their unpopular politics contribute to the

alienation suffered by the latter ever since full electoral democracy was established in Latin America.

Moreover, these leaderships' complementary sub-identities as bourgeois and Jews are often confused. Their Jewish condition is sometimes invoked to defend unpopular non-Jewish class interests, and this in turn feeds back into the negative public images of both Israel and the Jews.

Indeed, even the United States government has been known to manipulate these delicate sensitivities. In turn, this observation opens a new field of inquiry related to the impact of center-periphery relations on diasporic behavior and its local consequences. The complexity of these quadrangular relations offers interesting opportunities for theory-building that might be relevant beyond this case study.

Needless to say, all of these factors, but most especially the anti-Israeli preaching of Israel's enemies, activated the ancestral Judeophobia cultivated by the Catholic Church during many centuries, making the problem even more acute. But the fact remains that, due to Israel's peculiar position in the interstate system, the primary cause of today's anti-Israeli feelings in the Latin American region is not anti-Semitism. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain the region's overwhelmingly pro-Israeli attitudes during the first two decades of the Jewish state's existence, not only on the side of governments but also of left-wing parties and organizations. It is hence a grave error to assume that, in Latin America, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism amount to the same thing.

## NOTES

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\* As developed in Carlos Escudé, *Foreign Policy Theory in Menem's Argentina*, Gainesville 1997.

† For example, Arie Kacowicz, "Israel, the Latin American Jewry and the Latin American countries in a Changing International Context 1967-2007" (unpubl. paper presented for delivery at the International Conference "Latin American Jewry in a Changing Context: The Last Forty Years," Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 26-28 February 2008, Jerusalem), which underlines the peripheral status of the Latin American states, but not of Israel.

‡ See Zach Levy, "Israel's Quest for a Security Guarantee from the United States, 1954-1956", *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 22, no. 1-2 (1995), pp. 43-63.

§ See Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the US-Israeli Alliance*, New York, 2003; Abraham Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance*, New York, 1998; and Douglas Little, "The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957-68", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 4 (1993).

\*\* See Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory", in Keohane, Robert O., *Neorealism and its Critics*, New York, 1986.

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- <sup>††</sup> Edy Kaufman, Yoram Shapira, Joel Barromi, *Israel –Latin American Relations*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1979, p. 50.
- <sup>††</sup> *Ibid.* p. 48.
- <sup>§§</sup> See Carlos Escudé, “Argentina: The Costs of Contradiction”, in Abraham F. Lowenthal (ed.), *Exporting Democracy: The United States and Latin America*, Baltimore, 1989.
- <sup>\*\*\*</sup> “Arms are a crucial export for Israel”, *The New York Times*, 24 August 1981.
- <sup>†††</sup> Bishara Bahbah, 1986, *Israel and Latin America: The Military Connection*, New York, p. 6 and 61; Kacowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- <sup>†††</sup> Kaufman et al., *Israel –Latin American Relations*, p. 105.
- <sup>§§§</sup> Bahbah, *Israel and Latin America*, p. 70.
- <sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, the United States and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984*, Athens, Ohio, 1997, pp. 153-4.
- <sup>††††</sup> Comisión Argentina de Derechos Humanos (CADHU), affidavit of Rodolfo Peregrino Fernández. Madrid, April 26, 1983; Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, the United States and the Anti-Communist Crusade*.
- <sup>††††</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-7. Armony reports a contract signed by José María Patetta, Transporte Aéreo Rioplatense (TAR), and Stuart J. McCafferty, Miami, July 7, 1981.
- <sup>§§§§</sup> Normatively it does not seem unreasonable to argue, as does Yitzhak Mualem, that given Israel’s beleaguered condition, its “existential-state goal”, based on political and economic needs, is paramount and must take priority over other goals, including its “ethnic general-Jewish goal” that constitutes part of its unique predicament as a Jewish state. But such normative reflection is beyond the scope of the present paper. See Y. Mualem, “Between a Jewish and an Israeli Foreign Policy: Israel-Argentina Relations and the Issue of Jewish Disappeared Persons and Detainees under the Military Junta, 1976-1983”, *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 16:1-2 (2004).
- <sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> Needless to say, traditional anti-Semitism also plays an important role, but I contend that the worsening of Israeli-Latin American relations can be explained without bringing this factor in, so for the analytical purposes of this paper I leave this valid cliché out. To brush away anti-Israel feelings in Latin America on the grounds that anti-Zionism is a new version of anti-Semitism is not to understand anything at all.
- <sup>†††††</sup> Kaufman et al., *Israel –Latin American Relations*, p. 21-2.
- <sup>†††††</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *The PLO and Israel in Central America: The Geopolitical Dimension*, Santa Monica, 1988; Kacowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- <sup>§§§§§</sup> Kaufman et al., *Israel –Latin American Relations*, p. 57.
- <sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.
- <sup>††††††</sup> Silvia Montenegro, and Verónica Giménez Béliveau, *La Triple Frontera: Globalización y construcción social del espacio*, Buenos Aires, 2006, p. 24.
- <sup>††††††</sup> Rex Hudson, “Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America”, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 2003, p. 1.  
[http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/pdf-files/TerrOrgCrime\\_TBA.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/pdf-files/TerrOrgCrime_TBA.pdf)
- <sup>§§§§§§</sup> See Beatriz Gurevich, “Las relaciones entre judíos y árabes de Buenos Aires después del atentado contra la Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina” in Raanan Rein (ed.), *Árabes y Judíos en Iberoamérica: Similitudes, diferencias y tensiones*, Sevilla, 2008.
- <sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> See Carlos Escudé and Beatriz Gurevich, “Limits to Governability, Corruption and Transnational Terrorism: The Case of the 1992 and 1994 Attacks in Buenos Aires”, in

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*Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina* (EIAL), Vol. 14:2 (2003), and Beatriz Gurevich, "After the AMIA Bombing: A Critical Analysis of Two Parallel Discourses", in Kristin Ruggiero (comp.) - *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean-Fragments of Memory*, London 2005.

+++++ It seems unlikely that the Kirchners' attitude on these issues is due to an attempt to "wag the dog", i.e., to improve relations with the United States through the maintenance of good relations with Israel and appropriate conduct vis-à-vis Jewish causes. In the first place, their often impolite behavior vis-à-vis the US president rules out obsequiousness. More importantly, and especially in the case of Cristina, there is a clear record of support for Jewish causes and of denunciation of obstruction of justice vis-à-vis the AMIA investigation while she was an opposition legislator, long before she had a vested interest in good relations with the United States. Right-wing anti-Semites have attributed both to Nestor and Cristina Kirchner an unsubstantiated Jewish ancestry, as explanation for this "unexplainable" behaviour.

+++++ The issue of the often divergent interests between Latin American Jews and the State of Israel was treated, among other works, by Raanan Rein in his *Argentina, Israel y los Judíos*. This excellent 2001 study focuses on the 1947-62 period.

§§§§§ Edward Cody, *The Washington Post*, "Managua's Jews Reject Anti-Semitism Charge", 29 August 1983; Hudson, op. cit., pp. 170-1.

\*\*\*\*\* Ibid, loc. cit.

+++++ Ibid, loc. cit.

+++++ During the last Argentine military dictatorship there was an asymmetric persecution of so-called 'subversives'. Jews were not persecuted as such, but Jewish "subversives" were systematically treated much more harshly than non-Jewish ones. For the ongoing debate on whether or not Argentine Jews were abandoned to the repression of the dictatorship by both Israel and the central organizations of Argentina's Jewish community, see among others Mualem, "Between a Jewish and an Israeli Foreign Policy"; Haim Avni, "Anti-Semitism in Argentina: Borders of Danger," in Tzvi Medin and Raanan Rein (eds.), *Society and Identity in Argentina: The European Context* (Tel Aviv, in Hebrew); Joel Barroni, "Were the Jews of Argentina Abandoned?" in *Gesher – Journal of Jewish Affairs*, vol. 42, no. 133 (Summer 1996, in Hebrew); Edy Kaufman, "Jewish Victims of Repression in Argentina under Military Rule," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 4 (1989); Leonardo Senkman, "The Rescue of Jews in Argentina during the Military Regime, 1976-1983," in Dafna Sharfman, *A Light Unto the Nations? Israel's Foreign Policy and Human Rights*, Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad (1999, in Hebrew); Jacobo Timmerman, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981; Efraim Zadoff, "The Crisis in Argentina's Jewish Community," *Kivunim Chadashim*, no. 2 (2000).

§§§§§ Haim Avni, "Latin America", in Louis Henki (ed.), *World politics and the Jewish condition: Essays prepared for a Task Force on the World of the 1970s of the American Jewish Committee*, New York, 1972, p. 274.

\*\*\*\*\* Kaufman et al., *Israel –Latin American Relations*, p. 55-9.

+++++ Especially noteworthy was the turn of events in Israeli relations with Brazil and Mexico as a consequence of the 1975 "Zionism equals racism vote" at the United Nations. See Jeffrey Lesser, "Brazil, Israel and the United Nations 'Zionism Equals Racism' Vote (1975)", unpublished paper presented to the annual Latin American

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Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA) meeting, Tel Aviv, July 2009. In the case of Brazil, this multilateral policy appears to have been mainly the product of President General Ernesto Geisel's well-documented anti-Semitism. It is a case in which Israel's historically-explainable stigma alone does not seem to explain the policy outcome.