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# Iran's Latin Policies Post-Nuclear Deal

## Opportunities for restoring influence in a changing environment

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**A**S compared to the framework of its long-term cold war with the United States, which has existed since the 1979 revolution, Iran has a marked openness with Latin America. Moreover, that interprets Iran's uprising in the countries of South America during the Iranian nuclear file crisis and international isolation as well as economic sanctions that have been imposed on Tehran. After several years of Iranian-American conflict, in July 2015 the P5+1 reached a nuclear deal in which disabled international sanctions on Iran in exchange for the imposing of restrictions on Iran's nuclear program. This impacted Iran-Latin relations, which seemed to be affected in a manner unlike the tone of the United States-Iran relationship.

After Donald Trump assumed the presidency in January 2017, United States-Iran relations became tenser and Iran had to restore its effect on the Latin arena. On August 2, 2017, Trump endorsed the Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act, which includes steps to be taken against the Iranian nuclear program, IRGC and other affiliated groups. Congress also endorsed the imposing of new sanctions, which Tehran cited as a violation of the terms of the nuclear deal and promised to react as appropriate.<sup>(1)</sup>

Speaking before the Iranian Parliament in August 2017, Hassan Rouhani stressed that the government would not stop defending the nuclear deal and resisting its enemies – the United States of America – and added that no economic progress or drop in unemployment would be achieved through international isolation. In other words, Iran had to avoid isolation and seek new US economic sanctions by becoming friendly with more nations, especially if they were in the same geographic area as the United States. Latin America would be an appropriate tool to break Iran's isolation and jeopardize the United States' national security.

In this context, this study discusses the reality of Iran-Latin relations and its implications, as well as Iranian targets and mechanisms for strengthening its relations with Latin America and the future of these relations in light of status quo changes both regionally and internationally.

### **First: The reality and direction of Iran-Latin relations**

Throughout the last two decades, Iran-Latin relations progressed noticeably in the Ahmadinejad era and at times reached an alliance level; however, concomitant with the arrival of leftist currents to most Latin countries' presidencies, these relations gradually began to decline. The first sign of decline was in 2011, when the president of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, left the chair to Dilma Rousseff, who approved the UN resolution to send a human rights mission to Iran; da Silva had rejected this *in 2010*.

In addition, circumstances such as the Iranian presence "God Father" in Latin America, former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (who died in 2013), the relapse of leftist currents allied with Tehran after several political changes, recent election results and anti-leftist demonstrations affected the Iranian presence in Latin America. The development of mutual relations (Iran-Latin) can be indicated as follows:

#### **1- Top Iran-Latin coordination phase**

In 1979, Iran-Latin relations began with Fidel Castro's Cuba despite the ideological incompatibility between Iran and Cuba. In 1988-1989, Iran executed 2,000 leftist politicians, though that did not affect Iran's consolidation of mutual relations with the leftist governments in Latin America in the early third millennium.<sup>(2)</sup> Despite

the ideological disharmony, Iran-Latin relations were based on the same premise of mutual enmity toward the United States.

The most prominent turning point in these relations occurred when the leftist Hugo Chávez *became President of Venezuela in 1998*. This was a sign of the future ascendancy of the leftist current in Latin America. In the late 1990s, the consensus between Iran and Venezuela, who both regarded the United States as an enemy, established a state of corporation and coordination.

After that, the real qualitative shift occurred at the beginning of the Ahmadinejad era in 2005, which coincided with the successive leftist transformations in Latin America. Thus, Iran-Latin relations took more rapid steps toward expansion, growth and coordination at the political, economic, military and cultural levels.

Between 2006 and 2013, Ahmadinejad made eight trips to Latin America, notably the ALBA countries, which include Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua and six other small states in Central America. There have also been frequent visits to major Latin countries, like Brazil and Argentina, under the leftist governments of Lula and Krischner in both countries. Successive visits attempted to prove that Iran was not internationally isolated and that it maintains international relations even with countries geographically close to the United States.<sup>(3)</sup>

## **2- Status quo between retreat and progress in relations**

After Ahmadinejad's departure and Chavez's death in 2013, a decline began affecting Iran-Latin relations. "The current president Hassan Rouhani, who took office in August 2013, made his first trip to Latin America in September 2016, three years after taking office."<sup>(4)</sup> Perhaps this retreat in mutual relations coincided with the agreement on the Iranian nuclear file in 2015, the relaxation in the US-Iran conflict and the move toward lifting sanctions from Tehran.

The signs of a new US-Iranian conflict and new sanctions led Iran to revive its influence in Latin America. Iran has not entirely lost its presence or influence in South America. Iran's foreign policy has tended to build on its gains on the continent. In 2016, Latin America witnessed two important Iranian visits. In August 2016, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited six Latin American countries: Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela and Chile. The following month, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani paid a visit to Cuba. One of the most critical factors drawing attention to these tours and meetings was that they targeted the leftists who maintained radical and resistance thoughts against American hegemony in Latin America.<sup>(5)</sup>

## **3- Iran and Venezuela, extraordinary relations**

Since Chavez came to power, Caracas has been the official gateway for Tehran to strengthen its relations and establish its presence in Latin American countries,

especially in the Venezuela- and Cuba-founded ALBA. The idea of a bloc was primarily about creating a political entity against the United States' economic and political system in South America.<sup>(6)</sup>

Since 2005, Iranian-Venezuelan relations have shifted from cooperation to what could be considered a strategic alliance in which Ahmadinejad and Chavez found in each other what they were missing. Chavez had adopted a strong anti-American bias, and the hostility increased with the US government's prominent role in coordinating with Venezuelan military leaders to carry out a military coup against him in 2002. Millions of citizens thwarted this coup on its second day. Chavez then began strengthening his relations with countries hostile to American foreign policy, both within the Latin continent and in any region of the world. This explains Venezuela's strong relations with the Assad regime in Syria and with Gaddafi in Libya. In addition, Ahmadinejad's attendance of President Chavez's funeral in 2013 and the extent of influence are evidence of the deep relationship between the two presidents. In a memorial message, Ahmadinejad described Chavez as follows: "he [Chavez] is going to come back with Jesus Christ and Mahdi."<sup>(7)</sup>

From 2005 through 2013, the two sides signed various trade, agricultural, scientific, security and military cooperation agreements, reaching some 270 agreements by 2011. Iran provided military assistance to Venezuela in terms of armaments and training. Some reports indicated that Iranian-Venezuelan military coordination led to the establishment of a military base on Venezuelan territory run by Iranian military experts and Venezuelan officers.<sup>(8)</sup>

The two countries have set up several joint ventures and investments in both the public and private sectors. Tehran also obtained the right to prospect for gold in the Bolivar mines, as well as the rights and privileges to the vast oil reserves in the Orinoco region of Anzoategui State. Despite Iran's economic isolation, which the United States imposed on Tehran, Iran was permitted to open branches of the Iranian World Bank for Development in Venezuela, an issue Washington considered to be Iran's means of circumventing international economic sanctions and serving as a route for Iran to become involved in the global economy.<sup>(9)</sup>

#### **4- The decline of leftists and the constraints of Iranian influence in Latin countries**

A direct relationship exists between the empowerment of the leftist movement in Latin America, anti-American positions and the extension of Iranian influence within the region. For example, in Ecuador, until 2006 the United States had a military base approved by the rightist government at that time. This led former Venezuelan President Chavez announce from Tehran, with his Iranian counterpart, the formation of an axis of unity against the United States and Ecuador. However, when leftist

President Rafael Correa had the chair in 2006, he announced in a television interview that he would accept the existence of the US military base in Ecuadorian territory only if then-US-President George W. Bush approved the establishment of a military base for Ecuador in the state of Miami – an expected enemy that became a friend.

In the past two years, successive events in Latin America indicated the decline of the leftist movement and the transformation of governments to the right, a matter that has had a direct negative impact on Iran-Latin relations and Iranian influence in the region. At the end of 2015, the presidential election in Argentina ended with the victory of the rightist candidate *Mauricio Macri* after 12 years of successive leftists Nestor and Christina Kirchner. Thus, rightist-leftist conflict in Brazil also ended with the Brazilian Senate's decision to dismiss leftist President Dilma Rousseff and to hand over the post to her rightist deputy, Michel Tamer, to complete the rest of her term until 2018.

The Venezuelan leftist Chavez movement also faced two defeats – one at the ballot box, for the first time in 16 years, and one on the streets, with escalating protests demanding early presidential elections in response to the rapidly deteriorating economic and security conditions of the last few years. This was a strong reason for the Rightist Opposition Parties Union to call for early presidential elections to end the presidency of Nicolas Maduro, thus ending the populist leftist policies founded by the Chávez government over 18 years, spending the budget surplus resulting from oil on cash social benefits to poor Venezuelans on the one hand, and spending generously on its foreign policy to strengthen its foreign relations with anti-American countries – in both the Latin region and on the other side of the ocean – on the other. These included the Gaddafi government in Libya, the Assad government in Syria and the Iranian regime in Tehran.

*Map (1) clarifies the rightist and leftist governments in Latin America from 2009-2016*



Prepared by the researcher according to the political affiliations of Latin countries' governments, 2009-2016

No doubt the decline of leftist movement has negatively affected Iran's interests and its strong relations and deep presence in Latin America. This explains the two successive visits of Zarif and Rouhani to the leftist countries on the continent in 2016 without passing through Brazil and Argentina. With the victory of President Makri, Argentina opened an investigation into the bombing of the Jewish Association (AMIA) in 1994, as the new Argentine president canceled the Argentine-Iranian memorandum of understanding on this issue, which was concluded by leftist government and former President Christina Kirchner; the paper stipulated that Iranian defendants should not be prosecuted.<sup>(10)</sup>

During the era of leftist Argentine President Christina Kirchner, Buenos Aires and Tehran agreed to form a joint Argentine-Iranian fact-finding committee to investigate the bombing file, which had been open for almost 20 years. The integrity of this committee has been questioned since its beginning; accusations against Tehran increased after the killing of Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman immediately after he accused President Kirchner – during her presidency – of hiding the role of the Iranian government and Hezbollah in this issue. Moreover, the issue was raised of the planning and implementation of the AMIA bombing in exchange for a political deal between the leftist government in Argentina and the Iranian government.<sup>(11)</sup>

After the arrival of a rightist in the presidency in Buenos Aires, the position of the Argentine government in this case changed considerably. A strong tendency existed to allow investigations and for the Argentinean judiciary to show evidence of condemnation against Iran. The Argentinean judiciary also demanded extradition of senior Iranian leaders to appear before the Argentine courts in this case. In August 2017, the Argentine Ministry of Justice requested that the Iraqi government extradite Ali Akbar Velayati, the Iranian foreign minister, to the Argentine judiciary in response to an Interpol warrant demanding his arrest for the bombing of the Jewish Association in 1994.<sup>(12)</sup>

## **Second: Iranian objectives in Latin America**

Iran's objectives are to strengthen its influence on the Latin continent, especially in light of international pressure on Tehran. The most important objectives are:

### **1- Resistance to isolation and coalition building**

Since the nuclear file began, Tehran has faced major US-led threats of international isolation. Washington has imposed economic sanctions on Iran several times since 2006, and this policy continues today. It is logical, then, that each side seeks to bring more countries into its camp. To ensure that sanctions are more effective, the United States is seeking to tighten the economic isolation of Tehran. Iran, through its active foreign policy, seeks to counter this isolation by using many different mechanisms.

For Tehran, the issue of attracting new countries to its position against sanctions is a matter of life and death.

Iranian progress towards Latin America can be interpreted as part of a broader Iranian foreign policy aimed at expanding its circle of friendly countries and lowering the number of enemy states, thus gaining more support in international forums, whether in facing further sanctions or in terms of its nuclear file. "When the West tried to isolate Iran, we went to the backyard of the United States, and it came to me that I delivered my strongest speech against the United States in Nicaragua," former president Ahmadinejad said in May 2009.<sup>(13)</sup>

Latin America has significant voting weight in the international community, a fact that is important in terms of supporting Iran's positions, both regionally and internationally. Many Latin countries have adopted almost identical positions on Iranian policy in the Middle East crisis, especially with respect to events relating to the conflict in Syria since 2011. It can be said that Latin America favored supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad, though its opinions have differed in terms of the extent of that support. Some nations have rejected the revolutionary movement in Syria since its inception. In international forums, the Latin vote has supported Iran in its dispute with the United States over its nuclear file.<sup>(14)</sup>

## **2- Approaching US borders**

While the United States has established military bases within Arab states in Iran's vicinity, Iran has stepped up its influence in those strategic and geographic areas of Latin America bordering the United States, thereby gaining leverage in its cold war against Washington. It has achieved some success with the United States preoccupied with the Near East and Middle East region of Afghanistan, Iraq and the rest of the Arab region, both militarily and politically, as well as benefiting from the transformation of Latin American political systems into anti-American leftist democratic regimes, and that was not available during the Cold War period (1946-1991).

For decades, the United States has treated Latin American countries as its backyard. In other words, it has imposed a permanent guardianship over the governments of those countries and continuously followed up to ensure leftist governments will not be antagonists, as is the case with the Cuban model. This is closely related to the exploitation of these countries' wealth and resources, known as "Open Arteries", a term indicating the illegal transfer of the capabilities of these countries to their northern neighbor (the United States). That caused further poverty and deterioration for the southern continent countries, as well as interference in their internal affairs and support for military coups against the existing regimes. It has also created a great deal of hatred and anger, especially among the Latin leftist movement, which has a long tradition of struggle against American policies. Thus, Iran could exploit

the climate created by control of the leftist movement on the Latin political scene, as well as American preoccupation with the Middle East, as noted above, to create a foothold for its influence within the region, not only at the diplomatic and economic levels but also at the intelligence and military levels. An issue arose in the form of the clear existence of Hezbollah and Revolutionary Guards in countries located a few miles from the American border.

### **3- Economic and cultural objectives**

If the Iranian orientation towards Latin America aims to break its isolation, as well as lift the economic siege and sanctions, there is no doubt that the Iranian strategy of moving towards Latin America is not far from the assertion of its economic interests, despite the difference in importance in terms of the level of development of Iranian-American relations. In an earlier phase of economic cooperation, coordination on issues related to oil production, especially with Venezuela, which contains the world's largest oil reserves, was of particular importance. However, for the moment, the crisis of low oil prices and the inability of Venezuela and Iran to direct the decisions of OPEC, in addition to Venezuela's economic crisis, threatens to reach the stage of a failed state. In addition, due to the recession and deflation that major countries in the region have suffered, especially Brazil and Argentina, the level of economic relations and the coordination of oil policies between the two sides declined.

Iran also seeks to deploy the Shiite doctrine as an external ideological objective; however, Latin American countries have few Muslims as compared to Christians of Arab descent, making such a deployment difficult for the Iranian regime. However, it remains a goal and a means of finding allies among Latin citizens of Arab descent, who are likely to be mediators in supporting the expansion of its influence on this continent. An example is Venezuelan Vice President *Tariq Osaimi, of Syrian Shiite origin.*

### **Third: Mechanisms for implementing Iranian policy in Latin America**

To implement its objective of maintaining a presence and influence in Latin American countries, Iran has adopted a number of key mechanisms:

#### **1- Economic assistance**

Iran has made substantial economic progress in its relations with Latin countries. In the first decade of the third millennium, Iran signed more than 300 agreements covering all areas of cooperation, including economic, commercial and financial. It should be noted that this figure exceeds the total agreements signed by the Arab countries combined with the countries of the continent during the same period.<sup>(15)</sup>

To strengthen its presence in Latin America, Tehran depended on the economic aid tool for the region's poorest countries. This trend was one of the reasons for the

criticism of Ahmadinejad inside Iran, as he often resorted to this trend during his presidency, especially in 2007, the year in which a number of leftists took over the presidency of Latin America. For example, following the inauguration of leftist Rafael Correa as president of Ecuador and mutual summit visits between Tehran and Quito, Iran gave Ecuador a loan of \$ 120 million for the development of projects. In the same year, Tehran provided \$ 1.5 billion in aid to infrastructure projects in Bolivia.<sup>(16)</sup>

Iran and Ecuador have also signed financial treaties that would facilitate mutual trade and the transfer of funds. This was an irritation for Washington, especially because Ecuador uses the US dollar as its official currency – a fact that, according to the US, makes it easier for Iran to launder money.<sup>(17)</sup> On the other hand, such financial treaties between Iran and Ecuador and other countries on the continent prevent the United States from tightening its control over the funds involved in Iran's nuclear program, especially banks within the Latin countries – which are, in fact, Iranian banks under other titles, such as Banco Internacional de Desarrollo, a branch of the Iran Bank for Export Development in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. Numerous examples exist of Iranian loans to these countries, as well as significant joint ventures.<sup>(18)</sup>

Iran has built strong ties not only with Latin American countries such as Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Paraguay and Bolivia, but also with areas closer to the borders of the United States, such as small Central American states. In addition to its historical relations with Cuba, Iran has extended its influence to small states such as Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, where Iran financed construction of an airport. In response, the latter refused to vote against Iran at the UN on the issue of human rights violations in 2009.<sup>(19)</sup>

At the end of 2016, Iran also offered to help Nicaragua build a large canal that would compete with the Panama Canal, which remains under US military control despite the transfer of its administration to the government of Panama in 1999. The project's first phase has already been awarded to a Chinese company; Iran has offered to participate in financing this phase.<sup>(20)</sup>

The economic mechanism was apparent in the recent visit of the Iranian president and foreign minister to Latin American countries, especially at the level of banking relations. During the visit, agreements were signed to facilitate a banking exchange between Tehran and almost all the countries the foreign minister visited. Zarif said the visit was an opportunity to strengthen existing economic ties with countries such as Venezuela, as well as to create new opportunities with countries such as Chile. The private sector also had its own share of investments and agreements that accompanied this visit. During his meeting with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, Zarif expressed the Iranian private sector's desire to participate in the New Nicaragua Canal Project.<sup>(21)</sup>

## 2- Culture, media and Shiite doctrine deployment

Iran's foreign policy has an integrated vision to strengthen its relations in South America, from the southern border of the United States at the Mexican-American border to the cone of South America, through the islands of Central America and the Caribbean. Therefore, Tehran has not only made several diplomatic visits, thereby creating economic and commercial interests between the two parties, but has also extended its mechanisms to communicate with the region through the media, using it as a tool for establishing cultural bridges between the Persian and Spanish-speaking countries as well as transferring ideas, knowledge, culture, and even Shiite doctrine.

After Iran created the English-language Press TV and "al-Alam" Arabic-speaking channels in February 2012, it created a Spanish-language channel (HispanTV), the first of its kind in the Middle East. At the inauguration of the channel, Iranian President Ahmadinejad said that the launch of such a channel was a blow to those seeking hegemony (i.e., the United States).

The channel presents Iranian films and drama dubbed in Spanish, as well as newsletters and political analysis programs to convey the news and analyze it from the Iranian point of view directly to the Latin American countries. A case study conducted by IJNet and evaluating the channel's media content found that the channel broadcasts in Iran, the Middle East and the world throughout the day, from an Iranian point of view, and often uses terms common among leftist discourse – particularly Bolivarian – denouncing the "dominance" of American imperialism. In the case of Latin American news, especially the leftist ally of Iran, the government's view is frankly adopted, and the positions of opposition parties are largely ignored.<sup>(22)</sup> At the cultural level, the channel broadcasts Iranian films dubbed in Spanish, thereby conveying a vivid image of "Islamic culture" and society (in its Iranian form); this is new and strange to the Latino community, which over the past decades has received predominantly Arab migrations. In general, the channel is of interest to those Spanish speakers who wish to learn more about Iranian, "Islamic" or Middle Eastern culture. It should be noted that due to the absence of Arabic-speaking Spanish media, this arena remains exclusive to Iran, which transmits its cultural model as an "Islamic model" to citizens of Latin American countries.<sup>(23)</sup>

This brings us to another very important point: the use of Shiite doctrine deployment mechanisms among Muslims in the Latin American region, as well as among those Christians in the region who wish to convert to Islam. Some reports revealed that, across Latin America, Iran has begun building "Shiite cultural centers" that may eventually reach 80 in number. In July 2017, Spain TV covered the speech of Mohsen Araki, secretary-general of the World Forum on the Convergence of Islamic Thought Schools, in the Brazilian capital, in a meeting entitled "Muslims and the fight against extremist terrorism".<sup>(24)</sup>

Indeed, only Saudi Arabia, which faces Iranian extension, provides financial support for the establishment of large Islamic centers and mosques in the capitals of most of the major Latin countries. However, Iran is seeking to bolster its influence in those areas through the Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah and Shiite immigrants of Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi origins. Furthermore, it is establishing, in many parts of Latin America, small but active centers to connect with Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, individual Arab effort and a lack of support for religious activity with a comprehensive political vision must still be reviewed to counter Iranian cultural and sectarian expansion in that region.<sup>(25)</sup>

### **3- Intelligence work**

In addition to the previously mentioned mechanisms, Iran has a more dangerous means of achieving its desired objectives in the geographic area adjacent to the United States. The undeclared role of the Iranian intelligence service is difficult to monitor accurately, but can be traced in Iran-Latin relations. American observers, as well as Latin rightists, do not like the idea of intelligence coordination between Tehran and capitals in the region.

The bombings of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992, followed by the bombings of the Jewish Association (AMIA) in the same city in 1994, leaving 85 dead and hundreds wounded, are the most significant examples of intelligence activities between Hezbollah and Iran on land in Latin America. This is especially the case in light of an Argentine investigation that proved the activities and issued an arrest warrant for the following senior Iranian officials: Ahmad Vahidi (head of the Quds Force at that time and appointed defense minister in 2009), Mohsen Rabbani (a cultural attaché accused of facilitating the bombing; now he is the Personal Representative of the Supreme Leader for Latin American Affairs, which allows him to control independent resources to finance his propaganda campaign for Latin America), Ali Akbar Velayati (foreign minister at the time of the incident who now serves as personal adviser to the Supreme Leader for Diplomatic Affairs; he also played an active role in overseeing the dissemination of the regime's propaganda as secretary-general of the Iranian-sponsored religious bodies the World Islamic Awakening Complex and the Global "Al-Albiat" Assembly), Ali Falahian (intelligence minister at that time) and former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani.<sup>(26)</sup>

In fact, Arab communities have long existed within the countries of the Latin continent, but they have been formed through successive waves, the most important of which was the large Arab migration from Palestine and Syria in 1948. This was followed by other waves, most recently the Iraqi wave after the US invasion in 2003. These Arab migrations were deeply immersed in the new societies both culturally and linguistically, though in some ways they retained their Arab origins and Islamic

heritage. Venezuela has always been accused of being Iran's gateway to the continent; the current vice president, who was the interior and justice minister during Chávez's presidency, has been accused of possessing the key to the Iranian portal and opening it for Iranian intelligence and Hezbollah. Many reports and studies cite the current vice-president, Tariq al-Osaimi, of Syrian origin, as directly contributing to the turning of Venezuela into a Hezbollah cell by extracting Venezuelan passports and identity cards for the elements of Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. These passports allow holders to enter 130 countries without visas, including the United States and the European Schengen region.<sup>(27)</sup>

In 2008 Costa Rica's director of immigration, *Mario Samura*, revealed the transfer of a large number of citizens of Arab origin with Venezuelan passports from his country to other countries, especially the United States. In 2012 the Canadian Border Services Agency reported that, between 2009 and 2011, authorities in Canada monitored travel among citizens of Iranian origin entering the country. The report also noted that the Venezuelan airport was the point of origin for a large number of citizens of Iranian origin using original or forged Venezuelan passports.<sup>(28)</sup>

According to the Canadian report, the Secure Free Society (SFS), which is concerned with security studies in Washington, has drawn up a report stating that the Venezuelan government has already issued passports, visas and documents for extremists seeking entry to the United States. Moreover, *Tariq al-Osaimi had built a bridge from the Middle East to Venezuela, as well as created a money-laundering network for Iranian and Hezbollah groups*, bypassed into countries such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The team relied on documents and visits to countries where such operations took place.<sup>(29)</sup>

Ciudad del Este, the second largest city in Paraguay, located on a triangular border between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, contains 25,000 Arab immigrants who arrived from Lebanon after the "Nakba" and in 1985 during the Lebanese civil war. The city was initially the headquarters of the Sunni Arab migration and, in the 1980s, became a Shiite stronghold. Many reports indicate that the border city offers a safe haven for these elements.

In addition, there are many accusations that these cells participate in Latin America's drug trafficking operations as a means of financing their operations, both within the Middle East and abroad. Reports of these activities come not only from Israel and the US but also from INTERPOL and Latin American countries. For example, Colombia has repeatedly declared its exposure of drug smuggling networks linked to Hezbollah. Also, in 2005 Ecuador announced the dismantling of an international drug gang working for Hezbollah. The head of the Drug Enforcement Office in Mexico considered Hezbollah a major tool in the drugs trade.<sup>(30)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It seems that, for a long time, Iran has been making a great effort to strengthen its relations with Latin countries, and has a comprehensive vision for the sustainability of these relations. This is reflected in the diversity of its mechanisms in terms of the communication between and convergence of countries in the region, as well as the creation of a stable position of influence in the geographical area nearest the United States. The leftist tide that has dominated Latin governments and parliaments over the last 10 years has provided an opportunity for Iran to consolidate its economic, political, military, cultural and intelligence ties with the Latino side. While Iran has built bridges to connect with geographically and ideologically distant countries, Arab states have missed out on many opportunities that leftist Latin governments have offered to strengthen Latin-Arab relations.

While relations between Iran and Latin America declined during the period of Ahmadinejad and Chávez, the effects of Iranian presence still exist; due to doubts about the feasibility of changing the nuclear agreement after Trump's inauguration, Iran is seeking to revive those relations. However, the challenges in the face of Iranian influence in the region remain much more difficult to confront than ever before, especially in light of the new US policy toward the region. After a long absence of American influence in the region (except in Colombia), at the end of the Obama administration American policy began to change through the normalizing of US-Cuban relations, thereby ending the state of conflict and the 50-year economic blockade between Washington and Havana. Rightist transformations in some of the region's countries have also contributed to the improvement of US relations with Latin America. This has allowed the emergence of a consensus between the official position of the United States and Latin countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Peru in terms of political tensions in Venezuela, as official statements coincided to support the Venezuelan opposition against the Chavez government. This helped US President Trump threaten economic sanctions on Venezuela, and even enabled statements on the unacceptability of the situation in Caracas, which was not possible in years past.

In general, the semi-rightist political climate in Latin America, as well as the American role that the Latin region deems acceptable at this time, has prevented Iranian from asserting influence with the same degree of power it previously enjoyed. On the other hand, because the Latin leftist climate remains the region's most powerful and popular, despite its electoral losses, the return of left-wing governments to the presidencies of Latin countries is expected, especially in light of the decline in popularity of right-wing governments and the failure of their policies. Therefore, the arena will be open to the further expansion of Iranian influence in the region, though Iran will have to make a much more substantial effort if it decides to pursue this expansion.

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