

**ON THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY – ISRAEL, LATIN
AMERICA AND THE UNITED STATES UNDER
A PERIPHERAL-REALIST PERSPECTIVE, 1949-2012***

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Resumen

Este trabajo aplica la teoría del realismo periférico (desarrollada en Carlos Escudé, *Foreign Policy Theory in Menem's Argentina*, 1997) al caso de las relaciones inter-estatales de larga data entre Israel y los países latinoamericanos. Procura comprender el cambio en estas relaciones, comenzadas con el total apoyo latinoamericano al establecimiento del Estado de Israel, y deterioradas tras el establecimiento de la alianza EE.UU.-Israel. Interpreta el triángulo EE.UU.-Israel-América Latina como una estructura inter-estatal jerárquica no-waltziana, y sugiere que la involución en las relaciones Israel-América Latina puede ser explicada, en gran medida, en términos de por lo menos cinco variables: la vulnerabilidad de Israel; la especial relación entre EE.UU. e Israel después de 1967; el establecimiento de democracias electorales plenas en América Latina después de 1983; las estructuras sociales de la región, y la identidad de clase de los judíos latinoamericanos.

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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 this perspective, 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 approach, because the atomic weapons were acquired before the hierarchical non-proliferation regime was born. Dimona was developed 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 its opposition was not equivalent to a forceful veto.

It is not simply that peripheral states lack the possibility of challenging the rules set by the central states, but rather that such challenges usually result in ruinous consequences for these countries and their citizens. The cost of the challenge is too high for most societal structures-of-preferences, and this is what generates an incipiently hierarchical world order.

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 the *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 as rulers of 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.

On the other hand, in some ways Israel was and continues to be more bound to limits placed on its sovereignty set by the United States than Latin America is. Under the Obama administration this has become patently clear. Simply because of its size, Israel would not be able to survive nuclear proliferation in the Middle East without the protection of a greater 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.¹

This is not the only factor frequently overlooked by studies of Israeli-Latin American relations. It is important to consider the fact that Israel has not always had a security alliance with the United States. This is well-known but is at times understated in the classics in this limited field. Indeed, for a long time after Israel's independence, US policy was conducted evenhandedly toward Israel and the Arab states. In the mid-fifties, Israel's requests for US arms were rebuffed.² The first major sale of US weapons, which consisted of Hawk anti-aircraft missiles, took place as late as 1963.³ 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 have been able to survive. Indeed, in the research on Israeli-Latin American relations it is hard to find recognition of Israel's dependent and peripheral status. There

- 1 For example, Arie Kacowicz, "Israel, the Latin American Jewry and the Latin American countries in a Changing International Context 1967-2007" (unpublished 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. [Editors' note: the paper has recently been published in Spanish: Arie Kacowicz, "Israel, las comunidades judías y América Latina en un escenario internacional cambiante", *Pertenencia y alteridad – Judíos en América Latina: cuarenta años de cambios*, Haim Avni et al. (coords.), Madrid/México 2011, pp. 251-270.]
- 2 See Zach Levy, "Israel's Quest for a Security Guarantee from the United States, 1954-1956", *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 22, 1-2 (1995): 43-63.
- 3 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, 4 (1993).

is an unconscious tendency to think of Israel as an advanced, “First World” power which on its own assists needy developing countries. This approach, however, undermines both explicatory analysis and ethical evaluations of Israeli foreign policy. Albeit in a different way, Israel is much needier and more dependent than most Latin American countries.

In this paper I argue 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 exist, but rather because it seems sociologically plausible to assume that even without them Israel would not be popular there. Last but not least, it must be emphasized that this paper’s orientation is not normative. There is no pretext to blame or to provide normative advice for foreign policy. Rather, the purpose is to explain.

The Latin American state/society complexes

The positive beginning that characterized the first decades of Israel’s relations with Latin America slowly deteriorated approximately three decades ago. In order to understand this development we must examine crucial political and structural characteristics of Latin American states.

This is necessary step from the a long-term perspective, 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.⁴

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

4 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.

from other states. A sequence of actions and reactions transforms society, and in doing so, sometimes modifies the state itself or the options open to it. 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 must be taken into account when we attempt to explain why Israeli-Latin American relations worsened:

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 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 the regime that emerges normally reestablishes relative submissiveness.
- 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 long period. One does not need to have studied Israeli archives to suggest this. A careful reading of the classic Kaufman *et al* volume on Israeli-Latin American relations is sufficient. Indeed, this 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—has 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.⁵

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.”⁶

In doing business with the Latin American military, Israel not only promoted its own 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. As long as this order lasted, the relations between Israel and most governments continuously improved, at least if we measure them in terms of the proceeds of Israel’s arms exports.

5 Edy Kaufman, Yoram Shapira, Joel Barromi, *Israel –Latin American Relations*, New Brunswick, NJ 1979, p. 50.

6 *Ibid*, p. 48.

From an Israeli standpoint this outcome was heaven sent, inasmuch as the young nation state, surrounded by mortal enemies, had developed extraordinary military expertise, a modern arms industry, and with it a dependence on the export of arms. An asymmetrical strategic alliance with the United States and a massive sale of arms to governments in the backyard of the United States were among the few available survival options open to this beleaguered peripheral state.

The alliance became even more advantageous when President Jimmy Carter chastised the Argentine and Chilean military regimes for violations of human rights. This US policy was always extremely ambivalent. While the State Department imposed severe limits on cooperation, the US Treasury trusted the neoliberal economic administration 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.⁷

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.⁸ By the middle 1980s, 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.⁹ Moreover, Latin America differed qualitatively from other markets because its purchases included jet aircraft, large armaments, missile systems, and communications and electronic equipment.¹⁰ During the crucial 1972-1984 period, arms sales were by far

7 See Carlos Escudé, "Argentina: The Costs of Contradiction", in Abraham F. Lowenthal (ed.), *Exporting Democracy: The United States and Latin America*, Baltimore 1989.

8 "Arms are a crucial export for Israel", *The New York Times*, 24 August 1981.

9 Bishara Bahbah, *Israel and Latin America: The Military Connection*, New York 1986, p. 6 and 61; Kacowicz, op. cit., p. 4.

10 Kaufman et al., *Israel-Latin American Relations*, p. 105.

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.¹¹

In the particularly significant case of Argentina, from 1978 to 1983 Israel exported more than one billion dollars in military equipment.¹² Given the fact that Israel was the most important recipient of US military aid, this would have been impossible without Washington's silent acquiescence, especially considering that Israel included US-made weapons in its sales. Indeed, Washington applied sanctions against the Argentine government primarily for its own domestic purposes, leaving to Israel and others the dirty work of supplying arms to an allied anti-Communist dictatorship.¹³

Thus, the United States sacrificed some arms export income for the sake of prestige, but without a strategic loss, insofar as Israel's balance of payments made it necessary to sacrifice principle, narrowly understood, to arms exports that were quite substantial in terms of its limited resources.

11 Bahbah, *Israel and Latin America*, p. 70.

12 Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, the United States and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984*, Athens, Ohio, 1997, pp. 153-4.

13 Sometimes Washington may have applied a veto. This may have been the case with the reported sale of US-made A-4 Skyhawks, which according to some accounts were paid for but never delivered. Scholars report this purchase with ambiguity and sloppiness. In a table, Bishara Bahbah lists the purchase of twenty-four A-4 Skyhawks for US\$ 70 million (see Bahbah, *op.cit.*, Table 8, p. 72). In a similar table listing Argentine Navy purchases of Israeli arms, Hernán Dobry reports that fourteen such aircrafts were bought in 1982 for US\$ 86 million. A footnote to the itemization of this operation states that US\$ 86 million was the sum actually taken to Israel by one Captain Horacio Estrada. In a second footnote referring to the same line of his table, Dobry informs that the operation was perpetrated by Sygma Sales International, of Panama, and that Normal Skolnik (*sic*) acted as an intermediary. Notwithstanding, in two other footnotes which are unrelated to the Skyhawks themselves, Dobry states that these warplanes were never delivered. Yet the 86 million US dollars are nevertheless included in the sum total of Argentine Navy purchases from Israel during the period. Dobry's book is unintelligibly-referenced throughout. According to his personal opinion, the hypothetical US veto was related to the Falkland/Malvinas War. See Hernán Dobry, *Operación Israel – el rearme argentino durante la dictadura (1976-1983)*, Buenos Aires: Lumière, 2011, Anexo VIII, "Armamentos comprados a Israel por la Armada (1976-1983)", p. 429.

For different reasons, it was a good deal for both, as well as for the tyrants of Argentina.¹⁴

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 1970s and 1980s seems entirely fair. This role was part of a survival strategy that helps us understand the causes for the decline of Israel’s prestige in Latin America when the United States eventually reviewed its policy toward 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 for survival did not generate visible political costs for Israel in Latin America.¹⁵ But

- 14 Complementary evidence points in the same direction. According to Armony and to apparently reliable court testimonies, the Mossad shared intelligence with the Argentine army on Montonero combatants training at PLO camps in Lebanon (see Comisión Argentina de Derechos Humanos, CADHU, affidavit of Rodolfo Peregrino Fernández, Madrid, 26 April 1983; and Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, the United States and the Anti-Communist Crusade*.) 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”. Armony reports a contract signed by José María Patetta, Transporte Aéreo Rioplatense (TAR), and Stuart J. McCafferty, Miami, 7 July 1981. See *ibid.*, pp. 153-7.
- 15 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 the “ethnic general-Jewish goal” that constitutes part of its unique predicament as a Jew-

everything changed with the 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 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 beyond the military to satisfy their class interests.

A dramatic democratization of Latin American politics followed. Professional politicians ascribed to populist parties took charge. Their parties were fated to dominate Latin American politics, 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 low income groups worldwide. Although there are poorer regions, poverty in Latin America is very substantial. According to the Andean Development Corporation, in 2005 the proportion of the population living on less than two dollars a

ish 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).

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 have usually represented elites who benefitted from the concentration of income. And in part, due to the socially-polarizing consequences of those past policies, 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, the level of education is low, electoral democracy under conditions of massive poverty often leads to uncritical support of 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 democratization, restoring its soft power. But such will not be the case for the proxy, from which the 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 democratization. This situation

makes Israel different from other Western countries who also supplied arms and security services to Latin American tyrants.¹⁶

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 a 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 continued to unfold through diverse protagonists and means.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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, the Histadrut had been efficient in courting the labour movement. But support had begun to erode as early as 1969, when Argentina's General Confederation of Labour (CGT) issued a statement siding with the Palestinians and Arabs.¹⁹

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."²⁰ While some indicators may have pointed in that direction even then, the fact was that while Israel courted a military elite that was soon to be demonized and trashed, the Arabs courted popular organizations that increasingly antagonized the local tyrants, who were soon to be the electoral backbone of the political parties and would dominate the political scene after the wave of democratization, with full US support.

16 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 out. It is mere propaganda to brush away anti-Israel feelings in Latin America on the grounds that anti-Zionism is a new version of anti-Semitism.

17 Kaufman et al., *Israel–Latin American Relations*, p. 21-2.

18 Bruce Hoffman, *The PLO and Israel in Central America: The Geopolitical Dimension*, Santa Monica, 1988; Kacowicz, op. cit., p. 4.

19 Kaufman et al., *Israel–Latin American Relations*, p. 57.

20 *Ibid*, loc. cit.

Moreover, militant Arab organisations made further inroads into Latin America because of the immigration of those 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 Iguacu add up to some 18.000 inhabitants, of which 90% are Lebanese, with small percentages of Syrians, Egyptians, Palestinians and Jordanians.²¹

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.²²

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 19th and early 20th 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

21 Silvia Montenegro, and Verónica Giménez Béliveau, *La Triple Frontera: Globalización y construcción social del espacio*, Buenos Aires, 2006, p. 24.

22 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/tr/frd/pdf-files/TerrOrgCrime_TBA.pdf>

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 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. 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.²³

The Jewish-Latin American 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.²⁴ Paradoxically, the two Kirchner administrations are to be credited with comparatively courageous actions, such as exposing Iran during six consecutive inaugurations of the United Nations General Assembly: in 2007, under Néstor, and in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 under

23 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.

24 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 *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina* (EIAL), 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.

Cristina.²⁵ These high profile criticisms of Iran, made personally by two presidents, were the sequel to 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 appointed as 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.

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 when Caracas pushes for closer ties with Tehran, and when it comes to sensitive nuclear technology, which they do not transfer to Venezuela.²⁶

Despite this, the central institutions of Argentina's Jewish community have been reluctant to acknowledge these gestures, because for many influential members of the community, class identity seems to take precedence over Jewish identity.²⁷ The Kirchners are part of a populist order that Argentina's

- 25 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 US presidents 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.
- 26 Pres. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's much criticized 2012 decision of holding conversations with Iran regarding the AMIA bombing does not seem to the present author as tantamount to backtracking. Many Western governments hold official and unofficial conversations with the Teheran regime which does not mean that they have sold out to it. Indeed, on 20 October 2012, *The New York Times* published a report entitled "U.S. Officials Say Iran Has Agreed to Nuclear Talks". In my view, to suppose that it is acceptable for the United States to hold talks with Iran, but that it is unacceptable for Argentina, is to carry the hierarchical interstate premise of peripheral realism too far.
- 27 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.

bourgeoisie repudiates and has unsuccessfully attempted to bring down. And the most influential leaders of Argentina's Jewish community are, above all, mainstream members of Argentina's bourgeoisie.

This was clearly demonstrated in an article published in *The New York Times* on August 7, 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 to the Simon Wiesenthal Center. The interviewee and the reporter seemed to ignore the fact that what makes Venezuela dangerously rich are, precisely, US oil imports. Indeed, Buenos Aires' policy towards Chávez 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, until recently, was demanded in the name of the Argentine Jewry was that Argentina be more anti-Chávez than the United States.

Such double standards and exaggerated anti-Chávez 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 political opposition has the right to voice its objections, whether or not they are fair. But civil society leaders who were quoted by *The New York Times* lobbied as Jews, and that is how they were presented to the US public. The implication was that the Kirchner's relations with Chávez were dangerous for Argentina's Jews. This is a very perilous attitude that can be very damaging both to Jewish and Israeli interests, as it has been in the past. Since Chávez's illness, the trend has tended to fade.

The manipulation of the fear of anti-Semitism

The manipulation of the fear of Judeo-phobia for the sake of non-Jewish causes is indeed dangerous and counterproductive. An example rarely remembered today is the 1983 framing of the Sandinista government of Nicaragua by the White House, as a means to mobilize US Jewry in favor of Washington's so-called "Contra policy", 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, Ambassador Anthony Quainton, the US envoy to Managua, stated that "the evidence fails to demonstrate that the Sandinistas have followed a policy of anti-Semitism."

Many other testimonies point in the same direction. Among them is that of Sergio Nudelstejer, who headed the American Jewish Committee's Mexico office. He said that the reasons that 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.²⁸

Indeed, as reported by the World Jewish Congress, Panama City Rabbi Heszal Klepfisz (a recognized leader of Central American Jewry) stated 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."²⁹

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.³⁰

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

29 Ibid, loc. cit.

30 Ibid, loc. cit.

These concepts are as valid for today as they were for 1987. Indeed, the Latin American bloc's vote of 29 November 2012, in favor of Palestine's admission to the United Nations' General Assembly as an observer state, can only cause outrage to a propagandist. It is the present-day consequence of the long process initiated after 1967, when Israel was put on the "wrong side" of history vis-à-vis Latin America due to its asymmetrical alliance with the United States, and to the latter's former alliance with the right-wing tyrants of the region.

This regrettable configuration did not help local Jews, nor did it mitigate the Latin American military's anti-Jewish attitudes.³¹ 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 among 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 have been smeared with direct or indirect accusations of anti-Semitism. The *New York Times* article cited is but the tip of the iceberg. Let us examine a few additional examples.

31 During the last Argentine military dictatorship there was an asymmetric persecution of so-called "subversives". Jews were not singled out for persecution, 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 Barromi, "Were the Jews of Argentina Abandoned?," in *Gesher – Journal of Jewish Affairs*, 42, 133 (Summer 1996, in Hebrew); Edy Kaufman, "Jewish Victims of Repression in Argentina under Military Rule," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, (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*, 2 (2000).

One such case is a YouTube video I received in 2009 from a distinguished member of the Argentine Jewish community, with the enthusiastic caption “view it before it’s banned!” It is an excerpt from Oliver Hirschbiegel’s film “The Fall”. The script, spoken in German by Bruno Ganz, who impersonates Hitler, has 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 Néstor.

Until the 2011 electoral success of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, such material was commonplace and very widely circulated. Those who engage in such practices seem to be indifferent to the fact that a skeptic who does not accept this propaganda might wonder if there is as little truth to Hitler’s association with the Jewish Holocaust as there is to the analogy between the Nazis and the Kirchners. Indeed, the piece described above, and others like it, are in themselves an insult to Holocaust victims and breed Holocaust denial. Yet they have been circulated, among others, by anti-Kirchner Jews who apparently were more interested in smearing the President and the late 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 important example is the slander used against Venezuela’s Chávez, 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, purportedly written by him, which I received on January 31, 2009 through an e-mail from the leader of an important Argentine Masorti institution, read:

Nosotros, los chavistas, despreciamos a los judíos y no reconocemos al Estado de Israel así como tampoco ninguna organización judía nacional e internacional. No podemos tolerar que una parte importante del relato canónico de la deportación y de la muerte de los judíos bajo el sistema nazi haya sido arreglada en forma de mito por estos judíos animales apátridas, y que se utilice el sionismo hoy en día para preservar la existencia de una empresa colonial dotada de una ideología religiosa (monoteísta y místico-satánica) con el objetivo de lograr que la Israel Demoníaca se poseione de la Palestina Árabe Santa.

The e-mail was headed by a caption that read: “¡Increíble. Por favor circular urgentemente. Aterrador. Nuestra Presidenta es amiga de este gorila!”

I consulted with a member of Venezuela’s Jewish community on the plausibility of Chávez’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 (Minister of the Interior and Justice from 2008 to 2012, and now governor of Aragua), 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 Sephardi synagogue in Caracas.

Although Chávez’s present illness has mitigated both his radicalism and the diatribes hurled against him, this is a phenomenon that merits concern because of the radicalization that can conceivably be produced by the numerous frauds such as the text quoted above, which in certain historical circumstances can easily become a self-fulfilling prophesy. And as in the case of the White House’s false 1983 accusations against the Sandinistas, some people, both local and foreign, would be delighted if such texts could demonstrably be attributed to Chávez, to the Kirchners, or to other populist leaders and regimes, because that would make attacks on them all the more legitimate.

This attitude, which exists, is quite at odds with the opposite point of view, 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 in Buenos Aires, considers it 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 sectors that would have been delighted to undo the World Jewish Congress's good work and slander Chávez, for the sake of antisocialist politics. Furthermore, one cannot ignore the fact 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 today. After all, at least until recently, their priority in Venezuela has been the downfall of Chávez through formally democratic means. They do not refrain from buying his oil massively, but they encourage the Argentine opposition to criticize the Kirchners for doing the same in much smaller amounts, 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. This state-of-affairs, which is much more costly to Latin America than to the United States, is complemented by the fact that, because of non-Jewish class interests, the leaders of Latin America's Jewish communities tend to side with the right-wing and against the left-of-center governments. Thus, the sad predicament that befell Jewish causes as a consequence of Israel's status as a US proxy in the 1970s and 1980s, tends to perpetuate itself in the new set of circumstances.

This problem was foreseeable and can be inferred from the prophetic words of caution published as early as 1972 by Haim Avni, before Israel became a proxy and prior 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."³²

Avni's prophetic words unfortunately came to pass. And given the amount of poverty in Latin American, the populist tide is there to stay. To oppose this tide is the legitimate right of all citizens, no matter how fruitless the effort might be. But for Jewish organizations to oppose this tide is to invite greater dangers.

32 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.

**“The strong do what they can;
the weak suffer what they must” (Thucydides)**

Currently, as a consequence of the processes reviewed, Latin American public opinion tends to regard Israel as the culprit whenever violence involving the Jewish State flares up in the Middle East. This was noticeable in the case of the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Operation Cast Lead of 2008-2009, and the 2012 Israeli responses to rocket attacks from Gaza. Invariably, such events further alienate populist governments like those of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador.

Moreover, Israel is a political liability even to 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 important segments of the Latin American left were friendly to Jewish and Israeli causes, and the defenders of Arab causes were mainly in the far-right.³³

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 many enemies to attack it and hardly any friends to support it in a visible way. This is why it took nearly five years to ratify the MERCOSUR-Israel treaty, which finally became effective in March 2011.

It is not surprising that, as a countermeasure that pleased the enemies of Israel, all four MERCOSUR countries recognized the Palestinian state soon after signing the Israel-MERCOSUR Treaty. Brazil and Argentina did so in 2010, acknowledging the 1967 borders, in line with Palestinian claims. So did Paraguay in 2011. Uruguay's recognition also came in 2011, but with no mention of borders.

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

To this, of course, we must add the Latin American bloc's vote of 29 November 2012, already mentioned above, in favor of Palestine's admission as an observer state to the United Nations' General Assembly. Only Panama voted against the resolution. Colombia, Paraguay and Guatemala abstained. Beginning in 2009-2010, Brazil, a cosigner of the 2007 Israel-MERCOSUR Treaty, lobbied strongly for the recognition of Palestine. It seems no coincidence.

The situation, in terms of the sympathy generated by the Jewish state, is quite the opposite of the one prevailing in 1949, when eighteen Latin American countries voted for Israeli membership in the United Nations, with only two abstaining.

Indeed, in 1949 Israel was an admirable symbol of the struggle against British imperialism. From 1967 it became quite the opposite: an obnoxious symbol of US imperialism. We are now witnessing the consequences.

To make things worse, as a result of the work in Latin America of Israel's Arab enemies, who stigmatized Israel as an accomplice of tyrants, the Israeli case is different from that of European states which also supplied arms to the Latin American dictatorships but did not suffer a lasting stigma. Similarly, for the United States, the partial recovery of soft power was easier than for Israel. No matter how stigmatized, a hegemonic power with overwhelming might recovers much more easily from the loss of local influence and prestige, than its peripheral surrogate. For such a hegemon, alliances with local villains are less costly, especially if the superpower eventually becomes a champion of democracy, as in this case.

Instead, Israel suffers the typical, Thucydidean predicament of a peripheral state left in the lurch by a hegemonic power, without even a moral right to complain about its senior partner's betrayal. Indeed, US support of Latin American military dictatorships put Israel on the "wrong side" of history in that region of the world. In contrast, with its 1983 policy change, the United States put itself back on the "right side". But its peripheral proxy would not be so easily forgiven.

Conclusions

This paper has explored long-term Israeli-Latin American relations with a special focus on the United States as a conditioning factor. Three phases in these relations are identified: 1949-67, 1967-83 and 1983-present.

During the first phase, relations between Israel, the Latin American states, and the Latin American left-of-center were good. Israel was born as a symbol of the struggle against British imperialism and was applauded as such. This phase, characterized by the absence of an 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,³⁴ 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 for Israel, at a time when it was still economically weak.

These relations took a turn for the worse when the United States ceased to support Latin American military dictatorships and placed a virtual veto on them. During the 1970s and early 1980s Israel had largely become a proxy of the United States in the region and provoked strong antipathy of the leftist and populist sectors of the Latin American political spectrum. When the United States abandoned its former military allies in Latin America, Israel was placed on the “wrong side” of history, because Latin American

34 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 Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA) meeting, Tel Aviv, July 2009. [Editors’ note: See also Judit Bokser Liwerant, “Fuentes de legitimación de la presencia judía en México: El voto positivo de México a la ecuación Sionismo=Racismo y su impacto sobre la comunidad judía”, *Judaica Latinoamericana III*, AMILAT (ed.), Jerusalem 1997, pp. 319-349]. 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 is in itself insufficient to explain the policy outcome.

politics came to be dominated largely by the left-of-center and populist sectors whose good will it had 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 unevenly distributed. It is thus relevant for the further development of peripheral realist theory.

Indeed, contrary to the claims of Waltzian theory, which posits that despite power differentials, states are all functionally equivalent, what we find here is an interaction between three functionally-differentiated types of states: a rule-setting hegemon, its dependent peripheral proxy, and seventeen dependent peripheral units under the influence of the hegemon, whose state-society complexes changed considerably during the period under study. The case shows the limitations of both the rational-actor model and Waltzian neorealism.

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 Israel was stigmatized, as other arms suppliers like Germany, Norway or Spain would never be, thus enhancing 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 leadership, belong to the privileged classes of their societies. Their interests in domestic politics usually coincide with those of non-Jewish segments of the local bourgeoisies. And since public opinion usually identifies Jewish leadership with the State of Israel, their unpopular politics contributed to their alienation, ever since full electoral democracy was established in Latin America.

Furthermore, their leadership's complementary sub-identities as

bourgeois and Jews are often confused. Their Jewish identity 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 US government has at times manipulated these delicate sensitivities. The complexities and asymmetries of these quadrangular relations (Latin America, its Jews, Israel and the United States) offer interesting opportunities for theory-building, relevant beyond this case study.

Last but not least, a word must be said about anti-Semitism. It has been shown that Latin American societies were largely pro-Israel in 1949, when the Jewish State was accepted in the United Nations. Therefore, inasmuch as anti-Semitism was not an obstacle to a positive public image between 1949 and 1967, it does not seem warranted to assert (as some do) that present-day Latin American anti-Zionism is the product of anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, once Israel was stigmatized as a consequence of its less-than-holy alliance with the United States, ancestral Judeo-phobia, bred by the Catholic Church during centuries, was probably to some extent reignited, and this too is a variable that must be considered when analyzing the poor state of present-day Israeli-Latin American relations.