

THE AHMADINAJED ERA: IRAN'S LATIN AMERICAN STRATEGY AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS ON THE US AND GCC COUNTRIES

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Abstract:

Objective: based on the soft power strategy analysis this study examines the extent of Iran's involvement in Latin America during the Ahmadinejad era and evaluates its successes and shortcomings. The study examines the continuity of Iran's presence in the region despite the country's recovery in international politics and finance after reaching the Nuclear Deal with the West. **Methods:** The research uses a secondary data analysis approach to collect and analyze the phenomena of Iran's presence in Latin America. **Results:** The paper draws to a close by positing that Iran's intentions for involvement in Latin America are intrinsically tied to sanctions instituted by Western nations. Additionally, the study shines a light on Iran's strategic use of soft power as a conduit to sway US dominance in the region. It further unveils that Iran's escalating fascination with Latin America carries both overt and covert consequences for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations' economic and political spheres. **Conclusion:** This paper also highlights the contentious aspects of Iran's strategy, particularly the potential threat to U.S. hegemony and regional stability in Latin America, as well as the implications for GCC countries both in regard to security and economic stability.

Key Words: Ahmadinejad, Cultural Diplomacy, GCC, Iran, Soft Power.

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Introduction:

This paper endeavors to delineate the extent of Iranian geopolitical aspirations in Latin America and their implications for global politics, particularly with regard to the GCC countries and their closest ally, the United States of America. Additionally, the study aims to synopsise the various facets and stages of Iran's presence in the region, including its ramifications and consequences.

The study is primarily concerned with examining the relations between Iran and Latin American countries during a specific period, mostly between 2005 and 2015. As such, this research utilizes the case study method to conduct an in-depth investigation of this situation, drawing on data from various sources. This case study aims to explore the , "how" and "why" questions, delving into the reasons behind Iran's dedicated efforts to establish a significant foothold in the overlooked continent and the means it employed to achieve this objective.

Research Problem:

Despite the increasing international isolation of Iran due to the imposition of economic sanctions and diplomatic pressures, Iran significantly expanded its involvement in Latin America during Ahmadinejad's era. This study seeks to investigate the successes and shortcomings of Iran's engagement in the region from 2005 to 2015, with a particular focus on the factors that contributed to Iran's continued presence in Latin America despite significant obstacles. By addressing this research problem, the study aims to contribute to the existing literature on political relations between Iran and Latin America, as well as provide insights into the geopolitical strategies of Iran and the regional dynamics of Latin America during this period.

Significance of the study:

The study holds significant importance in understanding the geopolitical dynamics between Iran and Latin America during Ahmadinejad's presidency. By examining the successes and failures of Iran's engagement in the region, the study can provide policymakers with insights into how Iran can expand its influence in the region. The study can also shed light on the challenges Iran faced in maintaining its presence in Latin America despite international sanctions and other diplomatic pressures.

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to examine Iran's involvement in Latin America during the Ahmadinejad era and to analyze the continuity of Iran's presence in the region despite any significant development in Iran's international political and financial position. The study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on political relations between Latin America and the Middle East. The research aims

to provide a comprehensive analysis of the successes and shortcomings of Iran's engagement in the region.

The Research Questions:

- 1- What motivated Iran to intensify its presence in Latin America, specifically during the period from 2005 to 2015 (prior to the signing of the Iran Nuclear deal in July 2015)? What was the extent of its involvement?
- 2- How successful was Iran's engagement in the region, and what were the shortcomings?
- 3- What strategies did Iran employ to establish a strong and mutually beneficial relationship with Latin American countries, and what were the outcomes of these efforts?
- 4- To what extent does Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony in Latin America impact the geopolitical stability of the Middle East (GCC's countries), especially given its ongoing competition with Arab neighbors such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?

Methodology:

The study uses a secondary data analysis approach to collect and analyze data. The data sources include: academic journals, research papers, books, and governmental reports on Iran's involvement in Latin America during the Ahmadinejad era. The study analyzes the data using content analysis and thematic analysis techniques to draw conclusions. The study will also examine the official statements and speeches of Iranian officials during this period to understand the motivations behind Iran's engagement in the region.

Theoretical perspective:

The study uses the theory of regional hegemony (anti-imperialism, soft power, resisting USA hegemony) to understand Iran's involvement in Latin America. According to this theory, Iran's engagement in the region is part of its strategy to establish regional influence and expand its geopolitical power. The study also employs the theoretical framework of soft power to examine the cultural exchanges and diplomacy initiatives undertaken by Iran in Latin America. The study explores how these initiatives have helped Iran increase its influence in the region. Additionally, the study will analyze the concept of anti-imperialism and its role in shaping Iran's engagement with Latin American countries during the Ahmadinejad era by focusing on these main points:

- Geopolitics: The study analyzes the political and strategic motivations behind Iran's engagement in Latin America and how it affects the geopolitical balance of power in the region.

- Economic interests: The study explores how Iran's involvement in Latin America during the Ahmadinejad era was driven by economic interests, such as access to new markets, resources, and investment opportunities.
- Cultural diplomacy: The study examines the role of cultural diplomacy in Iran's engagement in Latin America, including how cultural exchanges outreach programs, anti-imperialism narrative was used to strengthen diplomatic ties and increase soft power.
- Security concerns: The study investigates the security implications of Iran's involvement in Latin America, including its potential to counterbalance USA hegemony that threatens regional stability.

By incorporating these additional perspectives, the study can provide a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of Iran's involvement in Latin America during the Ahmadinejad era.

Theory of Regional Hegemony

The Oxford Dictionary defines hegemony as “control by one country, organization, etc. over other countries, etc. within a particular group” or “the country's continuing desire for political and military hegemony”

In international relations, the notions of hegemony and hegemon have a long history. The theoretical framework relating to the unequal power relations between states in a regional system is the focus of this study.

One method used to describe and address hegemony by connecting it to the idea of power is the Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST). According to the (HST), the existence of a single, powerful actor in international politics results in a collectively beneficial outcome for all states in the international system. In contrast, the absence of a hegemon is connected with global chaos and unfavorable outcomes for all individual states.(Sindal 1985: 597) Sindal contends that the theory's widespread application is accompanied by an equally widespread sloppiness in applying the theory to any general or basic validity. He also says that the theory's application is confined to very specific settings.(Sindal: ibid)

Moreover, according to Joseph Nye, the term hegemony is given to several situations in which one state has significantly more authority than others. Furthermore, he claims that there is no agreement on the type of power or the degree of disparity that constitutes hegemony.

Nye claims that during the last two centuries, however, there has been not worldwide, system-wide hegemon, and that contrary to popular belief, British and American hegemonies (for example) have been regional and issue-specific rather than global. He also maintains that theories often argue

that full hegemony entails not only political and military powers but also commercial and financial ones.(Nye: 186)

In addition, the subject of hegemony, according to the Gramscian view, is not a powerful state, but rather transnational social forces that prevail in the mode of production. Without underestimating the importance of material power and supremacy over material resources, it defines hegemony in terms of consent, shared views, and common sense rather than compulsion.(Gramsci: 1971)

In the case of Iran's geopolitical strategy in Latin America, the concept of hegemony helps shed light on Iran's efforts to establish influence and control in the region. Iran seeks to exert its power and promote its interests through various means, including political, economic, and cultural channels. While Iran may not be considered a global hegemon, it aspires to become a regional hegemon in the Middle East.

This can be understood utilizing Gramscian view of hegemony, which emphasizes the role of transnational social forces rather than powerful states. It suggests that hegemony is achieved through consent, shared views, and common sense, rather than solely through coercion and material power, which aligns with Iran's aspirations.

Analytical Framework:

-1- Cultural Diplomacy Theory: This theoretical framework could be useful in examining the role of cultural exchanges and public diplomacy initiatives in Iran's engagement in Latin America, and to evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts in achieving Iran's strategic objectives in the region.

Cultural diplomacy theory has been increasingly employed in the analysis of statecraft and foreign policy, particularly in the context of soft power and public diplomacy. According to this theoretical perspective, cultural exchanges and public diplomacy initiatives are an essential aspect of statecraft, contributing to the promotion of national interests and the building of relationships with other countries.

According to Nye, soft power, is the ability of a country to influence others through its cultural, social, and ideological appeal, rather than through military or economic means. Nye argues that cultural diplomacy, which is the use of cultural resources to promote a country's interests and values abroad, is an important tool for building soft power.

In his book "The Future of Power," Nye identifies three key components of cultural diplomacy:

Attraction: This refers to the ability of a country's culture to attract and persuade others. Cultural products such as music, film, literature, and art can help build bridges between nations and promote a positive image of a country abroad.

Agenda-setting: This refers to the ability of a country to influence the international agenda through its cultural policies. For example, a country might use its support for the arts or cultural exchanges to promote certain values or ideas.

Framing: This refers to the ability of a country to shape the way others think about important issues. By using cultural resources to frame debates and discussions, a country can influence the way other countries approach particular issues.

In the case of Iran's engagement in Latin America during the Ahmadinejad era, cultural diplomacy played a significant role in building relationships and increasing Iran's influence in the region. For example, Iran established the "Cultural House of the Islamic Republic of Iran" in several Latin American countries, which served as centers for promoting Iranian culture, language, and values (González, 2013).

Moreover, Iran organized several cultural events and exchanges, such as film festivals and musical performances, which helped to increase the visibility of Iranian culture and to create a favorable image of Iran in the eyes of Latin American publics (Sánchez, 2014).

Overall, cultural diplomacy theory provides a useful framework for analyzing Iran's engagement in Latin America during the Ahmadinejad era, particularly in understanding the role of cultural exchanges and public diplomacy initiatives in promoting Iran's interests in the region.

1.2. The History of Iran's implications in Latin America: Iran's Latin American Policy Prior to 2005.

During the 1980s, Iran experienced growing political isolation due to the Gulf War and its detrimental consequences, which contributed to the heightened significance for the American government. The previously noticeable connections with "radical" factions in Iran and Latin America began to subside towards the end of 1980. The shifts in regional states can be partly attributed to the Soviet Union's collapse and the Cold War's conclusion, which led to the opening of Iranian embassies in Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay, none of which could be deemed "radical" or "anti-relations." This change was part of Iran's broader foreign policy objective to mitigate the influence of the US as a primary source for essential goods. In pursuit of trade diversification, Iran started to rely on Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay as significant import sources from the region. Following President Ahmadinejad's inauguration, the Iranian government endeavored to reinforce its ties with these states and other non-US-aligned Third World nations. (Lotfian, 2010).

Iran's tight political connections with Latin American countries, particularly Cuba and Nicaragua, can be traced back to the early stages of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The anti-imperialist

philosophy and goals of the leftist, radical, and non-aligned governments in Latin America resonated strongly with Iran following the revolution. This appeal was evident in Iran's provision of oil to the Sandinistas under highly favorable conditions, as well as frequent trips to Havana and Managua by various Iranian Parliament (Majlis) factions and government organizations during the early 1980s. In the same time frame, Iran also established a joint economic commission with Brazil, which did not share the radical nature of governments like Cuba and Nicaragua.

Iran and Cuba also carried out (directly and indirectly) illegal and violent actions against American institutions and citizens. Both countries faced internal discontent evidenced by the younger generation expressing an eagerness for change.

This collaboration indicated a more practical shift in Iranian foreign policy, acknowledging Brazil's economic, industrial, and technological capabilities, which could address some of Iran's needs at the time. The conclusion of the 1980s marked both the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the initiation of post-war national reconstruction efforts, which coincided with the conclusion of the Cold War on the global stage. (Lotfian, 2010).

The combined effects of these two concurrent developments resulted in the rise of a more realistic and practical approach to foreign policy under President Hashemi Rafsanjani's tenure (1989-1997). This shift occurred as the consequences of policies motivated by ideology began to outweigh their advantages. (Farhi, 2010, p. 28)

Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's victory and his two presidential terms (1997-2005), campaigning on reformist policies, marked a turning point in Iran's foreign relations, leading to reduced tensions with numerous Western nations. However, the landscape shifted significantly after George W. Bush's election in November 2000, which halted any possibility of decreased tension or potential reconciliation between the US and Iran. European governments considered Khatami a moderate leader, but he felt betrayed when President Bush included Iran in the "Axis of Evil" (with Iraq and North Korea) in January 2002 and called for Western collaboration in pressuring Iran to alter its foreign policy.

The deployment of US military forces in Afghanistan and Iraq and the presence of thousands of American troops near Iran's borders only heightened the tensions between the two adversaries. The situation worsened in early 2003 when Iran's expanding nuclear activities became a point of contention, leading to involvement by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and political negotiations with the European Union.

Joseph Humire claims that Iran's engagement in Latin America is almost a century old, and can be divided into three time periods: pre-Islamic revolution of 1979, post-Islamic revolution of 1979, and post-2004, when the "Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America" or "Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América" (ALBA) was established. (Humire, 2014)

One year after ALBA's creation Ahmadinejad was elected as president of the Islamic republic of Iran and a genuine strategic coalition emerged between Iran and Venezuela, as the leaders of these two countries shared a strong "anti-imperialist," "anti-American," "anti-capitalist," and "anti-western hegemony" ideology which allowed them to create an East-West radical alliance.

1.3. The Monroe Doctrine: Definition and Historical Context

The Monroe Doctrine is a principle of United States foreign policy that asserts the nation's opposition to European intervention in the affairs of the independent countries of the Americas. Established by President James Monroe in his annual message to Congress on December 2, 1823, the doctrine was a response to European attempts to reestablish control over their former colonies in the wake of the Latin American Wars of Independence. The doctrine can be summarized in three key principles: 1) the Western Hemisphere is closed to further European colonization; 2) European nations should refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of the American republics; and 3) any attempt by a European power to assert control over an independent American state would be viewed as a hostile act against the United States. (Goforth, 2012: P: 45-48)

Iran in Latin America: Implications for the Monroe Doctrine and US Foreign Policy

Iran's growing influence in Latin America posed a significant challenge to the United States and the long-standing principles of the Monroe Doctrine. As a non-Western power with a history of confrontation with the United States, Iran's presence in the region had the potential to undermine the traditional US hegemony in the Americas.

Moreover, the potential security threats posed by Iran's presence in Latin America cannot be ignored. Iranian-backed organizations, such as Hezbollah, have been implicated in illegal activities in the region, raising concerns about the potential for Iranian-sponsored illegal activities against the United States and its allies. (Defort & McLaughlin, 2020)

Historically, the United States has justified military interventions in cases where its interests or reputation are at stake within the region. The Monroe Doctrine, along with its various interpretations, established a legal basis for such actions. Furthermore, in the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. played a significant role in establishing the Rio Treaty of 1947. This treaty, which remains in effect, mandates joint intervention in the face of aggression against any member nation within the Americas.

Historical evidence indicates that the U.S. is willing to employ military force to advance its interests in Latin America, suggesting that a significant threat could provoke involvement. (Gorbea, 2016)

The Monroe Doctrine has long served as a cornerstone of US foreign policy in the Americas, guiding the nation's approach to European intervention in the Western Hemisphere. However, the emergence of Iran as a growing influence in Latin America presented a significant challenge to the traditional US dominance in the region and the long-standing principles of the Monroe Doctrine. In order to maintain the integrity of this doctrine and protect its interests, the United States must adapt its foreign policy to counterbalance Iran's growing presence and potential security threats in the region.

2.1. Geopolitics: Why Latin America?

In the vein of Ilan Berman's characterization, Iran can be conceptualized as a “revolutionary movement with borders’.” (Berman, 2015) Berman's phrase, "Iran is a revolutionary movement with borders," succinctly encapsulates the spirit of the Iranian engagement in Latin America. His statement prompts a nuanced understanding of Iran's geopolitical motives.

The first question we are investigating here is: Why did Iran attempt to strengthen its presence in Latin America, particularly from 2005 to 2015?

There are a number of reasons for Iran's interest in Latin America, the most prominent of which are related to political, ideological, strategical, geographical, tactical (or countersanction), and economic goals. This can be understood in Ilan Berman's statement “Iran is a revolutionary movement with borders”.

1- Political Interests and Shared Ideologies with a Remote Continent

As stated before Iranian presence in Latin America has become overt in the last two decade. Iran identified Latin America as a strategic region due to its anti-American sentiment, similar to Iran's post-Islamic Revolution outlook. The region's closeness to the US, Iran's longstanding adversary, deemed the "Great Satan" accentuated its attractiveness. Consequently, Latin America served as a dual-purpose locale for Iran: a sanctuary for covert operations and a platform to counter the US's national interests, creating a public perception of a threat in the US's backyard. (Goforth, 2012, p. 4)

Both President Ahmadinejad of Iran and Chavez of Venezuela sought to establish themselves as regional leaders and distance Latin America from Washington's sphere of influence. Ahmadinejad pursued a pan-Islamic agenda, aiming for Iranian predominance, while Venezuela strived to lead the developing world. Their shared anti-US rhetoric amplified their agendas in Western media, contesting the US's leadership. (Schiff, 2006)

Moreover, Iran's anti-Israel stance resonated with growing support for this viewpoint in Latin America. Iran often highlights Middle Eastern conflicts, primarily involving Palestine and Israel, as part of its Islamic objectives, which often serves as a distraction from domestic problems, including human rights violations, corruption, and economic turmoil due to hyperinflation. For example, Iran was accused of supplying arms to Hezbollah during the 2006 Lebanon War against Israel. This conflict generated significant attention in Latin America, particularly in Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela, sparking street protests in favor of Hezbollah, leading Chavez to label Israel's actions as "genocide" and withdraw Venezuela's ambassador from Israel. Thus, Iran's relationship with Latin America is marked by shared anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, and desires for regional leadership. ("Chavez Withdraws Venezuelan Envoy," 2006)

This shared Iranian-Latin viewpoint of the Lebanese war in 2006 helped to build up Chavez's image in Iran and the Persian/Arab Gulf region, where he was already popular as a vocal critic of the United States. Chavez also used the war to attack former president George W. Bush in what came to be his most famous public speech before the UN's National Assembly in 2006 (a few months after the war) calling him "the devil." (Schiff, 2006)

Prior to P5+1 negotiations, Iran saw a need to gain support for its nuclear program, thus weakening international unity on sanctions. The relationships already formed with Cuba and Nicaragua, based on anti-imperialist ideologies, made Latin America a prime choice. especially with Nicaragua, as President Ortega's firm relationship with Iran's Islamic Revolution and shared anti-Yankee and Marxist-Leninist ideologies deepened their alliance. (Kinzer, 2015) But in the new era of Chavez, even Ortega's relationship with Iran was tied to his relationship with Venezuela as an ally, providing economic support with its discounted oil.

Simultaneously grappling with international isolation over its nuclear stance, Iran found an ideal counter-play in Latin America, a region with existing anti-American sentiment, the region was appreciative of Iran's resistance against the US, which would pave the way to receiving and celebrating Iran as an ally that has for many years fought the "Great Satan."

2- Iran Chooses Latin America to Break the Brick Wall of Isolation

Initiating with a potent statement from Ahmad Vahidi, Iran's Defense Minister from 2009-2013, who avowed, "Latin America is no longer the US' backyard, and Iran will continue expanding its constructive relations with this region's countries, especially the countries of the "ALBA alliance". These words provide a salient framework for understanding Iran's geopolitical strategies during the period of 2011 to 2014. (Tehran Times, 2011) - Ahmad Vahidi, Iran's Defense Minister (2009-2013)

During this sanction-heavy time period, Iran circumvented isolation by establishing critical links in Latin America, specifically using Chilean seaports for the clandestine transportation of essential nuclear materials. This surprising initiative, executed under foreign flags, revealed Iran's creative strategy in response to Western sanctions, despite stalled official diplomatic relations since the 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires.

Iran's Latin American endeavor was significantly facilitated by Venezuela's Hugo Chavez's efforts to promote Iranian interests within the region. The transportation route for Iran's nuclear program, passing through Brazil and Bolivia, was largely a result of Chavez's influence. Nonetheless, Iran had preemptively cultivated an extensive network in Latin America, insulating its plans from the potential loss of influential supporters like Chavez. (Ibid).

Post-Chavez, Iran's strategic planning enabled them to pivot, maintaining a strong presence in Latin America by quickly filling the power vacuum with other nations like Bolivia and Ecuador. This persistence of Iranian influence indicates their strategy's resilience to the flux of individual leaders and regimes.

Even though Chavez played a great role in promoting Iran's expansion into the region, his departure- along with Ahmadinejad's- would not be an impediment to Iran's aspirations to grow and expand its presence in Latin America. (Goforth, 2011)

2. 2. Economic Interests: A Trade Partner with Benefits

Between 2005 and 2012, Iran intensified its economic relationships with Latin American countries, as demonstrated by its twofold increase in trade, from \$1.33 billion to \$3.67 billion. (Goforth, Ibid)

Prominent trading partners included Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Brazil, Argentina, and Peru. The IMF indicates substantial growth in Brazil-Iran trade, soaring by 88% to reach \$1.3 billion. Venezuela, Iran's closest ally, saw a modest increase of 30.8% with a trade volume of \$51.8 million. Remarkably, Argentina outpaced Mexico to become Iran's second largest exporter, while trade with Ecuador grew exponentially from \$5.7 million to \$168.2 million. In 2008, Iran's exports to Latin America surged by 85.2% to \$337.6 million and imports reached \$2.5 billion. (Lotfian, 2010) This burgeoning trade relationship underscores Iran's strategy of leveraging economic influence to solidify ties with Latin American nations, particularly those with revolutionary or left-leaning governments.

Cuba

In 2012, Iranian President Ahmadinejad, underscored the firm bilateral ties between Iran and Cuba during his Latin American tour. Echoing these sentiments in multiple instances, he championed shared objectives of independence and resistance against perceived Western hegemony. (Ruters, 2012) Ahmadinejad consistently encouraged an augmentation of Iranian-Cuban relations, framing Cuba's longstanding defiance of the U.S. as a common ground for unity. (Tehran Times, 2011)

Furthermore, according to the Tehran Times, (2010) the two nations have mutually benefitted from their relationship, particularly under Western-imposed sanctions. At certain junctures, Iranian economic aid proved instrumental in sustaining the Cuban revolution, while Cuba reciprocated by facilitating illicit financial transactions for Iran during sanction periods.

The robust Iran-Cuba ties encompass socio-political solidarity, economic assistance, and shared resistance against Western dominance.

Venezuela

Over the years, Iran has sought to offset the impacts of global economic isolation, specifically following sanctions, by fortifying alliances in Latin America. Notably, Venezuela became a critical economic lifeline for Iran, as bilateral trade escalated from nonexistent in 2000 to a remarkable \$20 billion in 2010.

Iran and Venezuela further deepened their cooperation through numerous Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) and bilateral agreements worth billions. According to Stubits (2007, p. 2) and Karimi (2007), Chavez and Ahmadinejad believed that US power was on the decline. In 2007, under Hugo Chavez's administration, Venezuela and Iran notably established a joint bank, a technical training program, and a petrochemical complex in Iran's Bushehr province, collectively costing \$1.4 billion. Their ambitions extended to creating a similar facility in Venezuela under the mutual company, Veniran. Unfortunately, Iran terminated the Metanol Apadana petrochemical project in 2015, citing Venezuela's failure to secure necessary funds.

Historically, Iran and Venezuela also hold a shared legacy in the 1960s establishment of The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), an idea fostered by the Venezuelan Minister Juan Alfonso Perez and brought to fruition with the support of Iran's Shah. Throughout OPEC's existence, both nations have often adopted congruent stances on oil production and proposed initiatives to persuade fellow OPEC members to adopt specific policies in response to declining oil prices, Iran, Venezuela, and Ecuador have consistently advocated for production cuts. Over time, Iran's closest allies within OPEC have been Venezuela, Ecuador, Iraq, Nigeria, Algeria, Angola, and Libya. (The

New York Times, 2015).¹ Contrarily, Iran's positions have frequently diverged from Saudi Arabia, which is widely regarded as the organization's de facto leader. (Wall Street Journal, 2014). In terms of resources, Iran commenced uranium mining in Venezuela's eastern region during the mid-2000s. (Graeber, 2015)

Furthermore, a 2010 agreement with Bolivia permitted Iran to extract lithium, tantalum, and thorium, vital elements in nuclear weaponry and ballistic missile production. This network of alliances and operations testifies to Iran's strategic resilience in the face of international sanctions. (Axis of Unity, 2012).

Brazil

The relationship between Iran and Brazil in the oil sector, shaped by shared economic interests and geopolitical alliances, has followed a complex trajectory over the last two decades. Adams (2007) discusses the entanglement of state pensions, Brazil's oil, and Iran. This bond can be traced back to the early 2000s, when Western sanctions forced Iran to seek alternatives for oil production. The Brazilian Petroleum Corporation, Petrobras, emerged as a crucial partner in 2004, signing a \$35 million drilling contract with Iran's National Iranian Oil Co.

The relationship evolved significantly in the years that followed. (Radowitz, 2007) In 2007, Petrobras was granted exploration rights in the Persian-Arab Gulf, leading to a \$470 million deal to develop Caspian Sea reserves. The following year, Iran extended an invitation to Brazil to join OPEC, reflecting the intensification of bilateral relations and Brazil's burgeoning economic clout. (Ferrand, 2010).

However, a downturn occurred in 2014 when Petrobras, grappling with corruption scandals and plummeting oil prices, suspended two major refinery projects in Brazil and closed its Tehran office. However, this setback was not permanent; the relationship saw potential rejuvenation following the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement in 2015. (Veneziani, 2009).²

The Khazar Iranian Oil Company initiated talks with Petrobras about oil and gas explorations in the Caspian Sea, envisaging a technology transfer in deep-water exploration. The burgeoning relationship between Iran and Brazil hence demonstrates the fluid interplay between politics, economics, and oil diplomacy. (Mehr News Agency, 2015)

2. 3. Cultural Diplomacy: Analysis of Iran's Strategic Infiltration in Latin America

Joseph Humire, an expert from the Center for a Secure Free Society, explains that Iran's strategic penetration of the region involves a gradual shift from an informal to a formal presence, while concurrently intensifying military and paramilitary activities. Humire characterizes Iran's infiltration as

a methodical, long-term operation, which he breaks down into stages. There is the "cultural" phase began in the 1980s, featuring a covert presence in several countries under the guise of commercial and cultural organizations. This allowed Hezbollah to integrate within existing Islamic communities and develop infrastructure for intelligence gathering and recruitment. (Humire,2012)

Iran's infiltration relies heavily on the establishment of cultural centers across the region, appealing to indigenous populations that form the political base for leaders like Bolivia's Evo Morales, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, and Peru's Ollanta Humala. As reported by SOUTHCOM, Iran has founded more than 80 "cultural centers" in a predominantly Christian region, supposedly to enhance its image and expand its political clout in Latin America. (Ibid)

Moreover, Iran's establishment on radical Islam has fostered ties with Latin American nations that harbor similar radical sentiments, predominantly of a leftist nature. Despite the largely Christian demographic in Latin America, Iran's bid for alliances was accepted without much resistance, a phenomenon largely attributed to Chavez's alignment with the Iranian cause.

Iran's effort to underline these shared ideologies was underscored during the "Che like Chamran" (PressTV, 2015)³ conference in Tehran, in 2007, where Iranian students drew parallels between the ideologies of Ayatollah Khomeini and the late Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara.(Denis, 2015)

Since being elected in 2005, Ahmadinejad had completed six visits to Latin America in six years, including two in 2012. These visits often entailed signing a series of accords in different areas including industry and politics, Ahmadinejad also felt confident and comfortable enough to declare that the United States is clearly afraid of the development of these relationships, all along calling Chavez a "dear brother" and emphasizing that the weapon used here is logic, culture, and human values. (CNN, 2012)

According to Humire (2012), Iran has informal ambassadors in Latin America. In its early ventures into Latin America, Iran placed a premium on cultural diplomacy and support for indigenous populations. Central to these efforts was Mohsen Rabbani, former cultural attaché in Argentina, who trained Iranians as "Informal Ambassadors" to Latin America and orchestrated exchange programs for Latin American youth to Iran.

Rabbani's plan was executed across Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Venezuela, and more, often inviting criticism from local media and political activists for its covert implications. Concerns also surfaced about potential illicit funding from the Brazilian Lebanese community to groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, allegations which the Brazilian government has consistently denied. (Fox News Latino 2014)

Simultaneously, Iran broadened its diplomatic footprint, increasing its Latin American embassies from five in 2005 to eleven in 2012, including Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Uruguay. These endeavors followed a freeze in diplomatic activities with Latin American nations after the 1979 Islamic revolution, broken only by Cuba in 1982. (Times of London, 2012)

Humire, points out that when the Islamic revolution took place all diplomatic activities with the six countries hosting the existing embassies in Latin America were frozen at their posts until 1982 when Cuba was the first Latin America country to unfreeze diplomatic relations with Iran. (Humire, Ibid). The expansion aimed to gain support for Iran's Islamic ideology by reaching out to the region's Muslim population, particularly the Shiite Lebanese in Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia. By the end of Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iran had established 36 Shiite cultural centers across seventeen Latin American countries. (Karmon, 2014) Furthermore, Iran leveraged its diplomatic presence to augment its corps of 'Informal Ambassadors,' notably in Bolivia, which hosted 145 Iranian diplomats in 2012, causing concern due to fears of increasing Hezbollah activities in the region. (Denis, 2015)

At the same diplomatic stage, the emergence of ALBA facilitated Iran's flexibility in the region. Despite this expansion, Humire points out that Iran maintained its covert operations, enabling it to create a command-and-control structure throughout Latin America using both official embassies and informal networks of regional mosques and Islamic charities. The death of Hugo Chavez did not hinder the relationship between Iran and Latin America. In fact, in 2009, both Venezuela and Bolivia severed diplomatic relations with Israel due to its military actions in Gaza. Evo Morales, Bolivia's president, has continued to strengthen ties with Tehran, welcoming numerous high-level visits from Iranian officials and hosting the 2014 G77 Summit in Santa Cruz. Similarly, Ecuador's President Rafael Correa is broadening his connections with Iran and Syria. In 2014, Ecuador held an "Iran-Ecuador Parliamentary Friendship Group" meeting in its capital, Quito, where representatives explored political and economic collaborations between the two nations. (Gorbea, 2016).

2. 4. Security Concerns:

In the realm of military engagement, Iran established formal military alliances with countries such as Bolivia and Venezuela, exchanging strategic resources for military technology and training. A notable manifestation of this policy was the founding of the ALBA Defense School in Bolivia in 2011, designed to impart political, ideological and asymmetric military education to military and civilian leaders. Iran played a pivotal role in the school's establishment, continuing to manage it and provide military advisors, turning Bolivia into a strategic node in Iran's global network.

In 2005, under Chavez's leadership, two operational centers were inaugurated on Venezuela's Margarita Island, run by Hezbollah and the Quds Force, who in return agreed to train Venezuelan paramilitary forces and FARC guerrillas. By 2014, Iranian infiltration had reached fruition in several Latin American countries including Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, with ongoing efforts for broader regional influence.

Latin America, known for its clandestine, untraceable activities, especially related to money laundering, was an attractive region for Iran. Accusations surfaced during President Ahmadinejad's 2012 visit that Latin America serves as a hub for Iran's money laundering operations. The financial systems of Venezuela and other Latin American nations were allegedly exploited to launder money for Iran's Defense Ministry through entities like the Export Development Bank of Iran (EDBI), which operated extensively in Ecuador. These activities, coupled with suspicions about Iran's nuclear ambitions and intentions to fortify its military presence via the Iranian Guard and Al-Quds Force, have raised serious concerns. (Padgett, 2012).

Military Presence and a Safe and Secluded Haven for Hezbollah: Iran Proxies In Latin America:

Iran's proxies, primarily Hezbollah, have substantially established their presence in Latin America, exploiting the region's lawlessness to advance their strategic objectives. Hezbollah, designated as a "terrorist organization" by the U.S. Department of State, serves as Iran's chief proxy in the region, bolstered by an annual financial backing exceeding \$200 million from the Islamic Republic. Primarily based in Venezuela, Hezbollah -which means "Army of God" in Arabic- is involved in numerous illicit activities, including drug trafficking, and money launderinglike that of Ayman Joumaa. These covert operations, expanding since the 1980s, have been instrumental in building Iran's military-industrial presence in the region.(Ibid)

The tri-border area encompassing Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay has proven to be of strategic importance for both Hezbollah and Iran. The remote and lawless territories of Latin America allow them to evade Western sanctions, effectively turning the region into a haven for illicit activities. (Aljazeera, 2004)

Brazil, with a significant Middle Eastern immigrant population, (particularly Lebanese), is a pivotal operational location for Hezbollah. Local media have frequently reported on Iranian-Brazilian relations, highlighting activities of Hezbollah and other groups. For instance, news reports from Veja in 2011 revealed the presence of 20 individuals with affiliations to Al-Qaida, Hezbollah, and Hamas in Brazil. Subsequently, in 2014, "O Globo" disclosed police documents linking Hezbollah to the

notorious Brazilian gang, First Capital Command (PCC), involved in drug trafficking and arms smuggling. (Leail, 2014)

Venezuela, much like Brazil, is heavily impacted by Hezbollah's activities. Financial support from Venezuela, along with money laundering by Venezuelan-registered businesses, has reinforced Hezbollah's operations. According to an article in *The Economist* (2013), titled "The Lebanese Diaspora, A Tale of Two Trades," businesspeople from Lebanon tend to fare better abroad than at home. Furthering Iran's strategy, joint military agreements with Venezuela and Bolivia were established, providing military technology and training in return for nuclear program materials.

These alliances, supported by Iran's diplomatic role as an ALBA observer nation, offered Iran a strategic foothold in the region, a considerable move in its confrontation with the United States. (Arostegui, 2008)

Consequently, the blend of Iran's support to Hezbollah, Latin America's lawless territories, and local corruption has created a fertile environment for illicit activities, augmenting their influence and posing significant security concerns for the West. This strengthened relationship, particularly with Venezuela, allowed Iran to gain a strategic foothold in the region, a significant move in proximity to its adversary, the "Great Satan", the United States of America.

- **Iran Nuclear Program and Latin America:** The scrutiny of Iran's nuclear activities by the international community and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) commenced in 2003, sparking an array of diplomatic interactions. Iran, accused by Western nations of possibly diverting its program to weaponization, aimed to obtain the backing of developing and non-aligned members of the IAEA's 35-member Board. During President Khatami's term (2001-2003), Iran demonstrated compliance with the IAEA and promoted nuclear transparency. However, efforts such as Iran's voluntary signing of the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003 and the Tehran Declaration, which temporarily suspended uranium enrichment, did not suffice to quell the nuclear crisis. (S. Wagner, 2005)

According to Farah and Tavarez (2021), Iran's involvement in Latin America has led to malign alliances and the promotion of alternative narratives. Further action against Iran unfolded on February 4, 2006, as the IAEA decided to refer Iran's nuclear issue to the United Nations Security Council, supported by 27 countries, yet opposed by Cuba, Syria, and Venezuela. A subsequent resolution passed by the IAEA in November 2009, disapproved of Iran's construction of an enrichment plant at Fordou near Qom, The resolution lacked unanimous support, with Cuba, Malaysia, and Venezuela voting against, while six nations abstained.

3.1. The Implication for American Hegemony in Latin America

Iran's influence in Latin America, which has been raising alarms within the United States, has been expanding for the past three decades. As emphasized in joint congressional hearings in 2015, the Islamic Republic has been steadily forging alliances in this region to disrupt American dominance, leveraging both diplomatic and military means to achieve this.

Iran's ties to violent incidents in Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, and other Latin American nations were a focal point in these hearings. Indeed, the Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act, passed in 2012, is a testament to the US's longstanding concerns regarding Iran's activities in the region. However, it was criticized for being insufficiently enforced, with a 2014 Government Accountability Office report noting that the State Department had neglected to comply with this law. (House Committee on Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

Moreover, Ilena Ros-Lehtien (Chairman of the House of Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa) accused the State Department of not being able to allocate the needed resources and consideration to handle the threat that Iran's expansion in Latin America could pose to US national security. The congressional focus on Iran's growing influence and potential threat to the US and its allies illuminates Iran's strategic initiatives in Latin America. Iran's alliances within the region have been deliberately and discreetly established, exploiting existing factors to persistently create a geopolitical reality that challenges the US's role as the primary player in the region.

In a 2010 report, the Pentagon confirmed the Al-Quds forces' deep involvement in the Americas, including paramilitary operations aimed at destabilizing regimes perceived as hostile. Furthermore, Iran's military presence expanded into Latin American countries traditionally free from the influence of the Shiite diaspora. This included recruitment activities and training by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in Peru as reported by media outlets in 2013. (Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran, 2010)

The goal of this form of outreach is clear: Iran wanted to emphasize its presence in Latin America at the expense of the United States of America. It had an agenda of expansion, and it was successful in pursuing some Latin American countries, sometimes with financial aid packages or loan promises or even with military training advancements. Moreover, Hezbollah's activities in Latin America are still going at full force, even after reaching the Nuclear Deal with the west. After its cooperation with Canadian intelligence services, Mexican intelligence exposed ongoing activities of the group in Venezuela, Mexico, Nicaragua, Chile, Colombia, Bolivia, and Ecuador, in addition to the Tri-Border area between Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil. (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2016).

According to Moosavi (2001), the group's expansion in Latin America and other parts of the world is not likely to slow down any time soon. Iran's leaders do not believe in limiting the revolution to the borders of Iran, as they have a prophetic mission to expand the Islamic doctrine globally. The same mission is honored by the Iranian Constitution, which mentions this global prophetic mission in its introduction as well as throughout its text.

3.2. Regional implication and balance of power in the Middle East (GCC): How it affects GCC countries:

The growth of economic and political ties with Latin American nations serves the purpose of providing Iran with strategic advantages in its native Middle Eastern domain. As previously mentioned, the backing Iran has garnered about its nuclear program from countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and even Brazil, is crucial for the Tehran government. This support becomes even more vital if the United Nations enforces stricter economic penalties and additional countries adhere to these measures.

During the Second Lebanon War in July-August 2006, Venezuela and Bolivia firmly backed Hezbollah at the regional level, with President Chávez being particularly outspoken at that time. However, the true challenge arose amid the most recent conflict in Gaza, as Israel initiated 'Operation Cast Lead' to discourage Hamas from attacking Israeli territory and carrying out ongoing acts of terror against its people. Presidents Chávez and Morales fully aligned with Iran's stance, adhering to Ahmadinejad's call to cut diplomatic ties with Israel. This decision followed a letter from the Iranian President, hand-delivered by the Iranian Minister of Industry and Mines, Ali Akbar Mehrabián, to the leaders of Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba. In response, Venezuela not only severed its relations with Israel due to the "inhumane persecution of the Palestinian people," but also vowed to pursue legal action against Israeli leaders in the International Court for crimes against humanity and pledged to persist until justice is served." (Karmon, 2009)

The central argument was that numerous nations in the Gulf view Hezbollah as an extension of Iran's influence in the area. In fact, most of these countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have advocated for labeling Hezbollah as a "terrorist group". When it comes to certain Latin American countries backing Hezbollah, the Gulf States perceive this Iranian partnership with Latin nations as an immediate danger to their national security.

Furthermore, one of the perils posed by Iranian influence on the interests of Arab Gulf states, particularly those who are antagonistic towards Iran, is underscored by the fact that Iranian strategies have been directly aimed at the economic affairs of these states. This is highlighted in a scholarly

examination titled "The Mirror between Latin America and the Arab World." The study quantified total GCC investments in Latin America, from 2016 to 2021, at approximately US \$4 billion. It reported that 77% of this investment originated from the UAE, 22% from Saudi Arabia, and a nominal 1% from Qatar. (Rodríguez Marín, 2022)

Contrastingly, foreign direct investment (FDI) flowing from Latin America to the GCC has been significantly lessened, estimated to be less than US \$500 million between 2017 and 2021. Brazil and Argentina were identified as the primary sources, contributing 85% and 13% respectively.(Ibid)

The analysis also expounds on the imminent risk to the economic security of the Arab Gulf states. Any targeting, either directly or indirectly, of Gulf investments in Latin America by Iranian proxies, poses a tangible threat. Such activities are perceived to be in alignment with the strategic interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran, thereby escalating the sense of danger and potential damage to the economic framework of the Gulf States.

3.3. Failures, and Continuity

Despite a period of diminished relations during President Ahmadinejad's tenure, the succeeding Iranian leaders, specifically Presidents Hassan Rouhani and Ebrahim Raisi, endeavored to maintain and solidify the strategic alliances between Iran and countries in Latin America. This was exemplified when President Rouhani undertook diplomatic visits to both Venezuela and Cuba in 2016. (Glenn, 2016)

President Ebrahim Raisi, in turn, is spearheading an inaugural tour of three Latin American nations—Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua—in June 2023. (Mehdi, 2023) These nations not only enjoy close diplomatic ties with Iran, but also share a common adversarial relationship with the United States. In this endeavor, Raisi is accompanied by a prominent governmental delegation, including the ministers of foreign affairs, defense, oil, and health, signifying the importance of this diplomatic mission.

This initiative provides clear evidence of the subsequent administrations' commitment to sustaining the diplomatic progress achieved under President Ahmadinejad's leadership. It also underscores their strategy of fostering alliances based on shared opposition towards the United States, thereby maintaining an enduring strategic relationship.

However, ensuing events have attested to the reality that the pair of presidential successors to President Ahmadinejad did not manage to intensify ties to the equivalent depth as actualized by the Ahmadinejad administration. Instead, they have found themselves incapable of preserving numerous political, cultural, and diplomatic advancements.

The waning of Iranian influence within Latin America can be attributed, in part, to the demise of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and the end of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tenure as Iran's leader. Our comprehensive analysis reveals a distinctive rapport between Iran and Venezuela during Ahmadinejad's presidency. It can be inferred that these robust ties were primarily due to the personal affinity between the two leaders, as opposed to a profound strategic alliance between the respective nations. This pattern frequently emerges when alliances are based on interpersonal dynamics rather than institutional frameworks.

Conclusion:

The present study has endeavored to investigate Iran's geopolitical strategy in Latin America during the Ahmadinejad era, highlighting the complex and multi-dimensional nature of its interactions within the region. A detailed exploration of historical, economic, cultural, security-related, and geopolitical perspectives illuminates the varied and often sophisticated strategies Iran utilized to counterbalance the influence of the United States, foster diplomatic relations, and nurture economic partnerships.

Our analysis underscores the remarkable dynamism in Iran's approach to its Latin American policy during the Ahmadinejad era. It clearly reveals that Iran's engagement in the region was not a random act, but a calculated geopolitical move aimed at breaking the isolation imposed by Western powers, bolstering economic interests, and expanding its sphere of influence via cultural diplomacy and proxy networks.

Notably, this study illuminates the underlying motivations for Iran's pursuit of such a robust Latin American policy, including the geopolitical necessity to counterbalance the USA, and the economic imperatives of diversifying partnerships. Moreover, the concept of cultural diplomacy featured prominently in Iran's strategic approach, intending to cultivate a favorable image and broaden its soft power.

However, the research also highlights the contentious aspects of Iran's strategy, particularly the potential threat to U.S. hegemony and regional stability in Latin America, as well as the implications for GCC countries. As noted, the involvement of Iranian proxies in Latin America was perceived as a direct challenge to the interests of the Arab Gulf states, bringing the potential risk to their economic security and heightening geopolitical tensions.

In examining the aftermath of the Ahmadinejad era, the research provides a compelling narrative of diminishing Iranian influence in Latin America. The transition of power in both Iran and Venezuela marked a significant turning point in their mutual relations. As the analysis suggests, the

nature of the relationship during the Ahmadinejad era appears to have been largely personalistic, dependent upon the rapport between Ahmadinejad and Chavez. Therefore, the changes in leadership precipitated a noticeable wane in the intensity of ties, revealing the inherent fragility of personalistic alliances as opposed to institutional relationships.

Overall, this comprehensive analysis enriches the existing body of literature by offering a nuanced understanding of Iran's geopolitical strategy in Latin America during the Ahmadinejad era, its motivations, repercussions, and subsequent evolution. The findings not only deepen our understanding of the intricate dynamics of Middle Eastern and Latin American relations but also shed light on the broader geopolitical strategies and their potential implications for global politics. Future studies could expand on this research by examining the contemporary relations between Iran and Latin America and how the strategies of the Ahmadinejad era continue to shape their interactions in the evolving geopolitical landscape.

المستخلص

عصر احمدي نجاد: استراتيجية ايران تجاه امريكا اللاتينية و اثارها على الولايات المتحدة و دول مجلس

التعاون الخليجي

حنان الهاجري

الهدف: بناءً على تحليل استراتيجية القوة الناعمة، تبحث هذه الدراسة مدى انخراط إيران في أمريكا اللاتينية خلال فترة رئاسة أحمدي نجاد، وتقيم نجاحاتها وإخفاقاتها. كما تتناول الدراسة استمرار الوجود الإيراني في المنطقة، رغم تعافي إيران سياسيًا وماليًا على الساحة الدولية بعد التوصل إلى الاتفاق النووي مع الغرب.

المنهجية: تعتمد الدراسة على منهج تحليل البيانات الثانوية لجمع وتحليل ظاهرة الحضور الإيراني في أمريكا اللاتينية. **النتائج:** تختتم الورقة بطرح مفاده أن دوافع إيران للانخراط في أمريكا اللاتينية ترتبط ارتباطًا جوهريًا بالعقوبات التي فرضتها الدول الغربية. كما تسلط الدراسة الضوء على الاستخدام الاستراتيجي للقوة الناعمة كوسيلة للتأثير على الهيمنة الأمريكية في المنطقة. وتكشف كذلك أن تصاعد اهتمام إيران بأمريكا اللاتينية يحمل تداعيات علنية وخفية على المجالات الاقتصادية والسياسية لدول مجلس التعاون الخليجي.

الخاتمة: تبرز هذه الورقة أيضًا الجوانب المثيرة للجدل في استراتيجية إيران، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بالتهديد المحتمل للهيمنة الأمريكية واستقرار المنطقة في أمريكا اللاتينية، بالإضافة إلى الانعكاسات الأمنية والاقتصادية على دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: احمدي نجاد ، إيران، الدبلوماسية الثقافية، القوة الناعمة، مجلس التعاون الخليجي.

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¹After the fall of oil prices in 2015 the heads of states of both countries (Maduro in Venezuela and Rohani in Iran) vowed to work together to stabilize falling global oil prices, and accused un-named enemies (presumed to be the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) of "using crude prices as political weapons".

²In a report published by the Wall Street Journal in November 2009 Petrobras international director Jorge Zelada was quoted as saying that the company was considering pulling out due to the lack of commercial viability of the discoveries made in Iran and the concessions that would be returned to the government.

³Mustafa Chamran was a member of Parliament and the first defense minister after the Islamic revolution in 1979. He left his job as a college professor at the University of California Berkley to join the revolution. The military commander was famous for fighting abroad in the name of the Islamic Revolution. He was a US educated engineer who helped found and fought alongside the Amal Movement in the 1970's. He died in battle in Iran's southern Khuzestan Province in 1981.

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