

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Jewish communities in Latin America have felt the impact of a series of profound transformations in their social, economic, and political situations. One of the most recent cases concerns the community of Venezuela, under the Bolivarian Revolution led by President Hugo Chávez Frías. This study analyzes the effect of national and transnational factors that have impacted the life of that community.

The central claim of this work is that, under shifting articulations between political forces in Venezuela and between the Venezuelan state and international actors, the Jewish community of that country has been under increasing pressure and subject to unprecedented constraints. These constraints have been the result of both processes of political confrontation in Venezuela and processes generated by the interplay of national and transnational forces, which have greatly affected and will likely continue to impact the Venezuelan Jewish community. Beyond shifting the balance of power in Venezuelan society, these changes and choices have transformed the environment in which the organized Jewish community of Venezuela exists.

While this paper does not support the view that the new Venezuelan regime intends to promote a systematic atmosphere of hostility toward Jews, its findings suggest that its rhetoric, coalitional dynamics, and strategic international positioning have narrowed the public space that the Jewish community enjoys legitimately, have created serious concerns and has already affected that community, which has recently suffered from acts of antisemitic vandalism. The Venezuelan leadership should certainly be more cautious of the social consequences of its statements and the way in which addresses its society's multiculturalism. The ways in which the regime will react to any sign of further verbal and physical hostility toward the Jewish community within Venezuela will be a clear indication of the direction Chávez is willing to take the country in the near future.

This paper starts with a short review of the multiplicity of Jewish Latin American experiences, as background to the analysis of the Venezuelan community before and after the onset of the Bolivarian Revolution. The focus is on the institutional changes, the strategic choices adopted by the state, and their effects on the Jewish community.

VENEZUELAN JEWS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MULTIPLICITY OF LATIN AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCES

Individuals of Jewish ancestry arrived in Latin America during colonial times. In that period, their entrance was mostly “under the radar.” The region then experienced the effects of the Inquisition, which tried to eradicate any vestige of Jewish faith, persecuting and prosecuting those suspected of being crypto-Jews or Marranos—individuals under the guise of being new Christians.

The history of the Jews in Venezuela is paradigmatic of these trends in the entire region. It is likely that Marranos arrived in Venezuela, probably from the Dutch-occupied island of Curaçao in the 17th century. Their small number, in addition to the need to keep their faith disguised, led to their assimilation into the surrounding social milieu. Only after Venezuela became an independent nation and the newly-founded state supported religious freedom, are there records of a very tiny influx of Jews starting in 1820 and becoming more diversified in the early 1840s.

Since then, the community grew through a series of leaps, David Krusch has noted that:

According to a national census taken at the end of the 19th century, 247 Jews lived in Venezuela as citizens in 1891. In 1907, the Israelite Beneficial Society (which became the Israelite Society of Venezuela in 1919) was created as an organization to bring all the Jews who were scattered through various cities and towns throughout the country together.... By 1917, the number of Jewish citizens rose to 475 and to 882 in 1926. Jewish immigration from Eastern and Central Europe increased after 1934, but, by then, Venezuela had imposed specific restrictions on Jewish immigration, which remained in effect until after the 1950s. By 1943, nearly 600 German Jews had entered the country, with several hundred more becoming citizens after World War II. By 1950, the community had grown to around 6,000 people, even in the face of immigration restrictions. With the fall of Dictator Pérez Jiménez in 1958, more than 1,000 Jews immigrated to Venezuela from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Salonika, Turkey, and even from Israel. An unknown number of Jews also migrated from other Latin American countries [to Venezuela], which raised the size of the community to more than 15,000 Jews by the 1970s.¹

¹ David Krusch, “Venezuela,” in *Virtual Jewish History Tour, Jewish Virtual Library, a division of the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise*, in <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/venezuela.html> (accessed 4 Mar. 2009).

Throughout Latin America, the Jewish communities grew exponentially during the last decades of the 19th and early 20th centuries, as the product of the mass transatlantic migration of Jews from Eastern Europe, and to a lesser extent from the Middle East and North Africa. In that period, thousands of Jews crossed the Atlantic from the “Old World” to the Americas, in search of livelihood and better prospects. While many moved to the United States and Canada, others relocated to Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America, where they settled for good, not returning to their countries of origin.

The migrants arrived as part of the mass migration promoted by the ruling elites of the region, especially in the Southern Cone countries and south-southeast of Brazil, regions with a low population density; and to a lesser extent in Mexico, Venezuela, and Cuba. Immigration was seen by the elites as the solution to their problems of development, a major mechanism of nation-building in their proclaimed efforts to “civilize” their countries.

Jews constituted a small minority of the 11 million immigrants who arrived in Latin America between 1854 and 1924. Whereas, for example, 38 percent were Italians, 28 percent Spanish, and 11 percent Portuguese, only 2.6 percent were “Russians,” the term used to refer to Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. Even smaller was the percentage of those Jews known as “Turks,” i.e., Jews who came from the confines of the Ottoman Empire.²

In contrast to the discrimination of colonial times, by the late 19th century and early 20th centuries, the region had opened its doors to Jews, who arrived mainly in the period from the 1880s to the mid-1920s, when the Roman Catholic Church’s monopoly as the predominant legally-recognized faith had loosened. Still, the state encouraged the assimilation of immigrants to the national culture as the only legitimate path towards integration, and thus some of the newly-established Jewish communities encountered initial difficulties, as they had in Eastern Europe, in striving to preserve their Jewish identity while adapting to society.

One of the means Jews adopted, whether reflexively or not, was to congregate in a few countries within Latin America (in descending order of population size): in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Mexico, Chile, and Venezuela. Countries that offered refuge to Jews during the Nazi persecution, such as Bolivia and the Dominican Republic, saw the number of Jews reduced in the years following the end of the Second World War. By the 1980s, from an estimated 454,000 to 490,000 Jews living in Latin America, 427,000 to 469,000 lived in the above six countries, and the rest were scattered in the fourteen other countries in the region. In those

² Magnus Mörner, *Adventurers and Proletarians* (UNESCO/University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 50.

fourteen countries, Jewish communities were negligible, both in terms of absolute size on the basis of their participation in the countries' total populations.

Among the six countries mentioned, only in Uruguay and Argentina did the number of Jews come to represent at their apex 13.9 and 9.1 pro mil of the population. In Chile, they constituted only 2.3 pro mil; in Venezuela, 1.3 pro mil; in Brazil, a mere 0.9 pro mil; and in Mexico, 0.5 pro mil. These figures might seem to reflect a low level of visibility, but in fact, the urban concentration of Jews, and the intense curiosity about them in these Christian societies have led to the opposite effect, even in nations like Argentina, where Jewish agricultural colonization initially flourished.³ In the urban centers, they were inclined to concentrate in certain neighborhoods, which added to their urban and social visibility.

Historically, Jewish immigrants faced socio-economic difficulties on arrival, but these were eventually overcome by the following generation, helped by the Jewish concentrations in urban centers and experience in achieving upward mobility. This process was linked to their access to education and increasing incomes as they engaged in a wide range of occupations in the private and public domains. Educational and occupational mobility transformed the communities, which became predominantly middle and upper-middle class, with a small but influential group of wealthy individuals. Most Jews in Argentina and Uruguay had attained middle-class status, whereas in Mexico, Venezuela, and Brazil, a substantial sector reached what could be identified as the middle-upper classes.

Among the Latin American societies hosting major Jewish communities, Mexico, Venezuela, and Brazil in particular featured strong socioeconomic and ethno-cultural inequalities. [In them,] Jews have been mostly identified with middle to upper classes in countries with vast amounts of poverty. The sense of strong Jewish community identity which generally developed in these societies also reflected such social class polarization and the limited attractiveness of the non-Jewish environment... Sharp socioeconomic differentials as against the total population, and comparatively strong and cohesive links within the Jewish community, have characterized the experience of the Jewish populations of Mexico and Venezuela. Similar situations can be described in several Central American contexts.⁴

³ Haim Avni, *Argentina and the Jews: A History of Jewish Immigration* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991).

⁴ Sergio DellaPergola, "Jewish Out-Marriage: Mexico and Venezuela" (International Roundtable on Intermarriage, Brandeis University, 18 Dec. 2003), 3.

Jewish diversity was enormous. In Venezuela, for example, the community was composed of Ashkenazim (Western Jews, mainly from Europe), Sephardim (descendants of the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 and arriving mostly from Mediterranean and Ottoman lands), and Oriental Jews (arriving from North Africa and Middle Eastern countries), with 15 synagogues, several community centers, and a number of Jewish schools, among them the Colegio Moral y Luces of Caracas, operating under this name since 1964. The Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAIV) was established in 1966, encompassing five major organizations: the Jewish Association of Venezuela (founded in 1930, a Sephardic association with many members from North African origin, particularly Morocco, and including former Spanish Morocco); the Jewish Union of Caracas (its Ashkenazi equivalent, founded in 1950); the Venezuelan Zionist Federation; B'nai B'rith of Venezuela; and the Federation of Venezuelan Jewish Women. Also affiliated with CAIV are several youth movements and representatives from smaller communities in Venezuela. Other organizations include the Orthodox congregation Shomrei Shabbat, the Orthodox Rabbinate of Venezuela, and the Jabad [Chabad] Lubavitch congregation. According to estimates, by the 1990s the number of Venezuelan Jews had reached 35,000.

Despite their upward mobility, or perhaps as a result of it, second-generation Latin American Jews could still be exposed to grassroots antisemitic attitudes promoted by small nationalistic groups, and not sanctioned by the authorities. Such attitudes were a constant source of concern in periods of high social and political unrest, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, when forces of both the right and left alleged that Jews' loyalty to their countries of residence was compromised by an attachment to Israel. In some extreme cases, this suspicion was exploited for political reasons, either by fringe elements or during the escalation of repression, as happened in Argentina under military rule between 1976 and 1983, when antisemitic violence was unleashed. In Venezuela, these trends were less visible until the mid-1990s, although there, too, assimilation was expected, and social suspicion existed along with the ability to freely organize communal institutions.

Research has identified a rather persistent tension between individual integration and collective expression of identity. Writing in the 1970s, David Schers and Hadassa Singer indicated that it was:

very difficult to maintain a balance between increased participation (which leads to structural assimilation) and the maintenance and transmission of Jewish identity. The difficulties of holding this kind of balance were compounded by the nationalistic and homogenizing

drive of Latin American societies, which offer many opportunities for individual upward mobility, but very few legitimate ways for the collective expression.⁵

More recently, Leonardo Senkman was able to offer a long-term evaluation of Jewish life at what he defines as “the frontiers.” Referring to the Jews in Argentina, he estimated that until the third wave of democratization,

Constitutional, civil and social rights were granted to all foreign inhabitants, included Jews, on [an] individual basis, but not as members of an ethnic-religious and cultural distinctive collectivity. Although hyphenated collective identities of immigrants were legalized together with their ethnic and social associations as early as in the 1920s, social legitimacy to collective groups would be granted not before the early 1980s, as result of the ethnicity politics adopted [then].⁶

In recent decades, under democratic regimes, Latin American Jewish identities have been elaborated in ways far more complex and non-exclusive than before. There has been an increasing recognition of pluralism and a celebration of different identities. Tensions that existed before have changed form, but have not disappeared. Jews as individuals have benefitted from opportunities for integration, while as a collective, they have been affected by a host of new factors, ranging from the negative images of the United States and Israel, where the vast majority of their fellow Jews reside today; to the economic and political deterioration of the major centers, and even terrorist attacks.⁷

⁵ David Schers and Hadassa Singer, “The Jewish Communities of Latin America: External and Internal Factors in Their Development,” *Jewish Social Studies* (Summer 1977): 241–25, quote from p. 252.

⁶ Leonardo Senkman, “Klal Ysrael at the Frontiers: The Transnational Jewish Experience in Argentina,” in *Jewish Identities in an Era of Multiculturalism. Latin America in the Jewish World*, edited by Judit Bokser Liwerant, Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Yossi Gorny, and Raanan Rein (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 125–52, quote from p. 128.

⁷ On these trends, see Judit Bokser Liwerant, “Identidades colectivas y esfera pública: judíos y libaneses en México,” in *Árabes y judíos en Iberoamérica*, edited by Raanan Rein (Sevilla: Fundación Tres Culturas, 2008), 319–54, esp. 341–54; Bernardo Sorj, “Sociabilidade brasileira e identidade judaica,” in *Judaísmo para o Século XXI*, by Nilton Bonder and Bernardo Sorj (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2001), 141–46; and Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, eds. *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008). For an analysis of collective identities and their treatment in the social sciences, see Luis Roniger, “Identidades colectivas: avances teóricos y desafíos políticos,” in *Identidad, sociedad y política*, edited by Judit Bokser Liwerant and

Such opportunities for integration reflect a profound change in the nature of Latin American societies. Over a generation many countries have left behind closed and monolithic definitions of citizenship and turned toward multicultural and pluralistic definitions. This transformation is evident in a series of constitutional reforms promulgated throughout the region, and which have expanded since the enactment of the new Colombian constitution in 1991, and now cover a majority of American states. Equally important are laws that penalize discrimination, such as those enacted in Brazil and Mexico, where antisemitism has been defined as a crime with mandatory sentencing.

Contrasting with this process of institutional integration is the increasing vulnerability of the Latin American Jewish communities. First, the communities have declined in size. Latin American Jews are a small part of the 20 percent of Jews who do not live either in Israel or the United States. In addition, based on current trends, demographic analyses have projected that the number and proportion of Latin American Jews globally can be expected to diminish in the next generation. Table 1 below reflects this development over forty years between 1967 and 2007. The number of Jews in Latin America, which is expected to be 394,000 in 2010 (representing 2.93% of the world Jewish population) is likely to decrease to 364,000 by 2020 (2.62%) and further dwindle to 277,000 by 2050 (1.91%).⁸

Second, economic downturns and crises have resulted in the deterioration of the economic standing of various sectors of the Jewish communities. Globalization and economic liberalization has led to an increasing disparity within communities, reflecting the increasing economic polarization of the entire population. Unseen since the first waves of immigration, we now find increased Jewish poverty; and even longstanding institutions such as the Jewish educational networks face closure. Indeed, the economic crisis of the early 21st century has affected the ability of many parents to send their children to private Jewish schools or pay the dues of Jewish clubs. Likewise, the economic problems have also restricted the ability of these Jewish institutions to meet the growing needs of their members. At the same time, Jewish social services are under new pressure to help those in need.

Saúl Velasco Cruz (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2008), 45–68, as well as other contributions there.

⁸ Sergio Della Pergola, *Jewish Demography: Facts, Outlook, Challenges* (Jerusalem: Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2003).

Table 1
Core Jewish Population Estimates, Latin America, 1966–2007

Country	1966*	1975	1984	1995	2007	Jews per 1000
Total Latin America	747,800	522,000	454,000	428,200	392,300	0.8
Bahamas	-		500	300	300	1.0
Costa Rica	1,500		2,500	2,500	2,500	0.6
Cuba	2,100		700	700	500	0.0
Dominican Republic	400		100	100	100	0.0
El Salvador	300		800	100	100	0.0
Guatemala	1,500		100	1,000	900	0.1
Jamaica	600		300	300	300	0.1
Mexico	30,000		35,000	40,800	39,600	0.4
Netherlands Antilles	700		700	300	200	0.9
Panama	2,000		3,800	5,000	5,000	1.5
Puerto Rico	2,000		2,000	1,500	1,500	0.4
Virgin Islands	500		500	300	300	2.6
Other	800		300	300	300	0.0
Total Central America	42,600		47,300	53,200	51,600	0.3
Argentina	450,000	265,000	228,000	206,000	184,000	4.7
Bolivia	4,000		600	700	500	0.1
Brazil	140,000	110,000	100,000	100,000	96,200	0.5
Chile	35,000		17,000	15,000	20,600	1.2
Colombia	10,000		7,000	5,000	2,900	0.1
Ecuador	2,000		1,000	900	900	0.1
Paraguay	1,200		900	900	900	0.1
Peru	4,000		5,000	2,900	2,100	0.1
Suriname	500		200	200	200	0.4
Uruguay	50,000		27,000	23,400	17,900	5.4
Venezuela	8,500		20,000	20,000	14,500	0.5
Total South America	705,200		406,700	375,000	340,700	0.9
[Besides Argentina, Brazil]	[157,800]	[147,000]	[126,000]	[122,200]	[112,100]	

Source: Prepared by Sergio DellaPergola on the basis of the *American Jewish Year Book*, various years, and U. O. Schmelz, "Jewish survival: the demographic factors," *American Jewish Yearbook* 81 (1981): 61–117. (* Unverified data).

These factors have been combined in recent years with media messages highly critical of Israel, and in at least one case Jewish institutions were victims of the internationalization of the Middle East conflict: in July 1994, the terrorist organization Hezbollah, probably linked to the intelligence agencies of Iran and Syria, bombed the seven-story building of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), reducing it to rubble and killing 85 people.⁹

While these are common factors operating throughout the continent, one should be conscious that the range of processes and the nature of the changes experienced by the communities are varied and not uniform across the region. There are internal factors of transformation, which have operated at different rates in the various communities, transforming communities that once were secular or liberal-religious into communities where the weight of the religious Orthodox groups is not indisputable. Similarly, across the continent, there have been complex processes of institutionalization and de-institutionalization of ethnic identity associated with Ashkenazi and Sephardic groups and associations.¹⁰

Last but not least, since the end of the 1990s, a growing disenchantment with the workings of liberal democracy and the process of economic globalization has triggered a series of political transformations in the region, felt in various Jewish communities, from Bolivia to Ecuador, but perhaps most particularly in the case of Venezuela, opening the country and its Jewish community to new perspectives and challenges.

Until the end of the 1990s, most Venezuelan Jews believed that Venezuela would not provide a context conducive to antisemitism. Venezuelan society was open to immigrants and free from some of the problems their ancestors had had to face in the Old World. Popular antisemitism led by right-wing associations as in Argentina appeared to be unique to that country in the Southern Cone. Venezuela, by contrast, was a tolerant society. Moreover, since the 1970s, Venezuelan Jews, especially among the younger generation, distanced themselves from Israel, under the

⁹ Carlos Escudé and Beatriz Gurevich, "Limits to Governability, Corruption and Transnational Terrorism: The Case of the 1992 and 1994 Attacks in Buenos Aires," *Estudios interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 14, no. 2 (2003), http://www.tau.ac.il/eial/XIV_2/escude.html (accessed 3 Mar. 2009).

¹⁰ Judit Bokser Liwerant and Alicia Gojman de Backal, *Encuentro y alteridad. Vida y cultura judía en América Latina* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999). On the process of growing religiosity see e.g., Marta F. Topel, *Jerusalém & São Paulo: a nova ortodoxia judaica em cena* (Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 2005); and Margalit Bejerano, "Etnicidad y religiosidad: Transformaciones en la identidad colectiva de los sefaradies en América Latina," paper presented to the conference on Latin American Jewry in Transition 1967–2007, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 28 Feb. 2008.

impact of post-1967 Israeli policies in the territories and the tarnished image of Zionism in the United Nations and other international organizations.

Whereas a generation or two earlier, Zionism was an anchor of Jewish identity in Venezuela, providing a sense of security, now, cultural identity and Jewish history—a sense of continuity, albeit broken by massacres such as the Holocaust—are the critical factors in community identity, buttressed by the educational frameworks. Fewer youth are attracted to the Zionist movement.

Finally, a new connection to the Venezuelan social and political environment took place, as young Jewish people in the community felt the attraction of general processes and shared other Venezuelans' expectations to be truly involved and show social commitment to the plight of the masses in the country. Older and established strata resisted the idea of structural change, a scenario ridden with tension, yet somehow manageable as long as the community maintained stable contacts with the authorities and the major political parties.

This changed quickly in the 1990s when Venezuela experienced a deep economic crisis with political implications that would soon pave the way for social and political forces outside of the traditional party system, allowing for the rise of Hugo Chávez to the country's leadership. While many Jews at that time shared the social concerns expressed by the Chavista political movement, the gap between Chávez and the Jews would soon open, ultimately turning into a break in the span of just a decade.

CHÁVEZ, HIS RISE TO POWER AND RULING STYLE

Hugo Chávez's leadership and political style are usually defined as populist. This evaluation does not derive from an ideological viewpoint, but rather relies on a series of pragmatic characteristics which have been identified by observers, particularly sociologists and political scientists.¹¹ The range of characteristics that may illuminate such leadership and appeal include: a specific political style that reconstructs politics, collective identities, and the public sphere; the central position of the leader and his relationship with the masses, whom the leader mobilizes in the public domain; multiclass bases of

¹¹ His leadership and style of building the political movement is also reminiscent of previous leaders in Venezuelan history, a trait that the intellectual Laureano Vallenilla Lanz (1870–1936) immortalized in the early 20th century as “democratic Caesarism,” in which the Venezuelan people justified strong leadership as the only trustworthy means to overcome political conflict in their society. Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, *Cesarismo democrático: estudios sobre las bases sociológicas de la constitución efectiva*. 2nd ed. (c. 1919; Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1994).

support; the participatory presence of the masses in the political system; and the bestowal upon them of a new sense of dignity and institutional access.

A populist leader usually promotes certain rhetoric and projects a moralizing antagonism of the traditional centers of power and parties. This is done while transcending liberal institutional formats, and changing the patterns of relationships between state and civil society. Despite the new relationship between the two, the state and civil society still retain hierarchical and authoritarian tendencies, reminiscent of traditional characteristics of the system of citizenship in Latin America.¹²

Social scientists have recognized the recurrence of populist leaders and movements in the region, distinguishing different models and phases of populist leadership.¹³ One may identify an early pattern in the figures of Hipólito Yrigoyen, José Batlle y Ordóñez, and Arturo Alessandri. A classic pattern can be traced in the leadership of Juan and Eva Perón, Getulio Vargas, Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, José María Velasco Ibarra, Arnulfo Arias, and Lázaro Cárdenas. A neo-liberal model more recently characterized the leadership of Carlos Menem, Alberto Fujimori, and Joaquín Lavín. Finally, leadership opposing the neo-liberal turn is usually defined in the literature as “radical populism” or “neo-populism,” which, although similar to the other forms, has some distinctive features:

(a) a participatory focus, critical of the alleged formalism of representative democracy, and demanding alternative mechanisms of intervention, such as referenda which supersede customary law-making without obliterating the core democratic representation of parliamentary democracy;

(b) the emphasis on the state’s role in articulating policies of inclusion of marginalized sectors and resistance to neoliberal globalization;

(c) the positioning of the leadership as the authoritative definer of the common good and the core regulator and controller of policies; and in the

¹² Luis Roniger, “Citizenship in Latin America: New Works and Debates,” *Citizenship Studies* 10, no. 4 (2006): 489–502.

¹³ See, for instance, Alan Knight, “Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, especially Mexico,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30 (1998): 223–48; Michael L. Conniff, *Populism in Latin America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999); Robert R. Barr, “The Persistence of Neopopulism in Peru? From Fujimori to Toledo,” *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2003): 1161–1178; Kenneth M. Roberts, “Latin America’s Populist Revival,” *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 1 (2007): 3–15; Carlos de la Torre, “Por qué los populismos latinoamericanos se niegan a desaparecer?” *Estudios interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 19, no. 2 (2008); and Raanan Rein, “De la Casa Rosada al Palacio de Miraflores: populismos de ayer y de hoy,” in *Pensar Iberoamérica* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2009).

public arena, replacing institutions once dominated by the middle and upper social classes;

(d) the use of a rhetoric of confrontation built around a strategic antagonism to traditional strongholds of political and economic power, which in the current environment has meant an increasing rejection of neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies;

(e) a style of leadership emphasizing, in Rousseau's term, the "general will" over the "will of all," thus replacing a political system built on negotiation and compromise with a political direction that tends to restrict the space of legitimate dissent and internal opposition forces¹⁴; and

(f) through the use of open assemblies and media, the construction of the leader's constant charismatic presence and contact with the masses. In Mario Sznajder's assessment:

Populist leaders have adapted rapidly to mass meetings in central squares, made possible by large networks of urban and inter-urban transportation and later to the use of mass media means of communication. The latest example is the Sunday TV program of Venezuela's president Hugo Chávez, which lasts for hours and allows for direct contact between the leader, the program's audience, and national audiences through phone calls, faxes and Internet messages.... Modernization has brought to Latin America what Sartori (2006) called "videocracy" while analyzing the populist ways used by Silvio Berlusconi, as Prime Minister and leader of Italy's opposition bloc.¹⁵

In contemporary Latin America, Hugo Chávez is indeed the most salient leader in this recent populist wave. Under Chávez, a reformulation of the rules of traditional Venezuelan politics has taken place, with some very innovative lines of democratization, yet in some ways also detrimental to the autonomy of civil society and the liberal expression of pluralist views.

After participating in military coups in the early 1990s and spending time in prison as a result, Chávez turned to the political arena. He came to power

¹⁴ See Ernesto Laclau, *The Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); Luis Roniger, "Global Times Once Again: Representative Democracy and Countervailing Trends in Iberoamerica," *Iberoamericana* (Berlin), 17 (2005): 66–85; and Carlos De la Torre, "The Resurgence of Radical Populism in Latin America," *Constellations* 14, no. 3 (2007): 384–97.

¹⁵ Mario Sznajder, "Globalization and Populism in Latin America," in *Collective Identities, States and Globalization*, edited by Gad Yair and Orit Gazit (Leiden: Brill, 2009). References are <http://www.alopresidente.gob.ve/> and Giovanni Sartori, *Homo videns. Televisione e post-pensiero* (Bari, Roma: Laterza, 2006).

in the December 1998 election with 56.5% of the vote, and has since then consolidated his power through the popular vote.

This process has included:

- the adoption by referendum of a constitutional assembly in April 1999;
- obtaining 121 out of 131 seats in the Assembly elections in July 1999;
- the ratification in December 1999 of a new “Bolivarian” constitution, which introduced institutional changes intended to overcome earlier structures and allow greater government control;
- the mega-election of July 2000, which legitimized the president and elected members of his administration in their positions under the terms of the new constitution;
- the rapid failure of the coup against Chávez in April 2002;
- the successful referendum on the continuation of the presidency in August 2004;
- a series of measures designed since 2005 to add control over both state and civil institutions, such as the Supreme Court, the media and the armed forces;
- the failed boycott by the opposition in the parliamentary elections of December 2005, giving Chávez complete control of the Assembly;
- in the December 2006 elections, the sanctioning of a new presidential mandate until 2012—a victory achieved over a fragmented opposition;
- a year later in December 2007, the opposition reached its first substantial electoral victory in a national referendum that narrowly rejected a package of 69 constitutional reforms, among them a government proposal to remove the two-term presidential limit;
- in February 2009, in a new referendum with a voter turnout of 70.33 percent, 54.85 percent of actual voters approved a constitutional amendment removing the term limits imposed on publicly elected officials by the 1999 Constitution.

Chávez’s rise to power needs to be interpreted in the framework of the deep systemic crisis that faced Venezuelan democracy by the mid-1990s. The Covenant of the “Punto Fijo” established an agreement between Democratic Action (AD), a social-democratic party, and COPEI, a Christian Democrat party, as partners in the administration and control of the state. They held control over state policies and resources for forty years from 1958, but faced a crisis in the mid-1980s as the price of oil decreased in the world market. Oil revenue had been the basis for the redistributive system which sustained mass support for the two parties, and the drop in revenue, along with the increased cost of public administration and a profound weight of public debt limited the capacity of the bi-partisan

system to manage the new challenges. The crisis led to growing fraud and violence to maintain their power.

While in office, Carlos Andrés Pérez (AD, 1988–93) and his successor, Rafael Caldera (COPEI, 1994–99) redefined the government's economic and social policies in order to stay in power, leading to widespread resentment. Pérez adopted neoliberal austerity measures which contributed to the loss of wages and increasing poverty, which led to massive protests from workers, students, and retirees. Forced to resign in 1993, Pérez was convicted on corruption charges in 1996 and served 28 months in prison. Rafael Caldera sought bipartisan support to continue the trend toward privatization, including that of the social security and health insurance systems. There was discontent among beneficiaries who now received decreased payments, and workers whose severance payments were reduced retroactively. Having come to expect the wide-ranging social benefits of recent years, the populace felt betrayed by the government.

Venezuelans attributed the failure of their system to meet the dire situation of the 1990s to the corruption and ineffectiveness of the entire political class, for they imagined the country still to be wealthy from its oil revenue. Hugo Chávez perceived that the traditional political system was on the verge of collapse.¹⁶ Undaunted by the failed military coup of 1992, Chávez chose to compete in the political arena at the end of the decade with program for restructuring the Venezuelan republic. He launched a mass movement (the *Movimiento V República*) that would easily crush the traditional parties and remodel the system of redistribution and social welfare promoted by the AD and COPEI.

Once in power, Chávez also relied on oil revenues and used state patronage and clientelism as much as previous administrations had done. He embarked on major social programs and community organization, launching worker cooperatives in urban slums, drawing up plans to create “social production companies” that would extend to the public sector, and expanding public expenditure in food, education, and medical care to cover previously uncovered populations.¹⁷

In parallel, Chávez created new participatory spaces for those who had been affected by the crisis and marginalized by the previous political system. As indicated above, one of his first measures was the mega-election of all officials, including him. This was a step towards ratifying office-holding

¹⁶ Julia Buxton, “Venezuela’s Contemporary Political Crisis in Historical Perspective,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 24, no. 3 (2005): 328–47.

¹⁷ Michael Shifter, “In Search of Hugo Chávez,” *Foreign Affairs* (May–June 2006), <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20060501faessay85303-p30/michael-shifter/in-search-of-hugo-ch-vez.html> (accessed 24 Jan. 2009).

positions by massive support, reinforcing the popular legitimacy of the authorities and institutions. The constant use of referenda brought Venezuela closer to a plebiscitary system, which the literature of public administration and political science identifies as weakening the principle of horizontal accountability and tilting the balance between the different branches of government.¹⁸

In addition to relying on and controlling the army as a crucial institution to assure the stability of the regime, the government organized unarmed militias and developed plans to mobilize up to two million reservists in the name of national defense. Citizen power, as reflected in government-sponsored “Bolivarian Circles” organized at the neighborhood and local levels, has helped undergird the regime.

The practical and rhetorical emphasis on popular power also contributed to the aggrandizement of presidential power and the reduction of checks-and-balances over executive power by the other branches of government and public institutions. Eventually a convergence in decision making was created and at the institutional level there is now an emphasis on loyalty rather than formal accountability. These institutional changes have created a sense of increasing pressure and constraint among the opposition forces.

As part of the declared struggle for the transformation of Venezuelan society, the legitimacy of the opposition and those critical of the government has been diminished. A well-known case concerns RCTV, forced to end its transmissions in May 2007 when the government did not renew its operating license.

In recent years, even the disclosure of general social problems has been viewed as a sign of disloyalty to the nation and its leadership, as seen in the case of the young filmmaker, Jonathan Jakubowicz, who directed *Secuestro Express*. The film portrays the phenomenon of short-term kidnappings, widely used by gangs that apprehend individuals spontaneously in malls, nightclubs, or bars, forcing the victims to withdraw money from ATMs, or demand money from their relatives or business associates as payment for their release.¹⁹ The film is a testimony to the wider problem of rising criminality, as law enforcement has been reduced in recent years. Accordingly, crime has become a major concern for the entire Venezuelan

¹⁸ Anita Breuer, “Institutions of Direct Democracy and Accountability in Latin America’s Presidential Democracies,” *Democratization* 14, no. 4 (2007): 554–79; and idem, “The Problematic Relation between Direct Democracy and Accountability in Latin America: Evidence from the Bolivian Case,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 27, no. 1 (2007): 1–23.

¹⁹ “Secuestro Express,” directed by Jonathan Jakubowicz, produced by the Escuela de Cine Documental de Caracas (ECDC), 2005.

population. Even as the film industry and the social analysts strongly praised the film, the government—through the vice-president, José Vicente Rangel—who even claimed that Jakubowicz was defaming the country, and promoting a negative image aimed at those who wished to bring an end to Chávez's rule. Similar reactions have been observed elsewhere as well. Some scholars, such as Margaret Canovan in her classic comparative study, have suggested that populist leaderships tend to discredit not only vested interests, but also anyone who supports independent critical analyses.²⁰

This is a crucial issue since it may have adversely affected the Jews and the tendency of some to develop a certain autonomy from the centers of power. It is thus essential to assess the effects that these institutional changes and the increasing pressure on the free expression of dissenting positions have had in Venezuela, particularly on its Jewish community.

INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES AND THEIR EFFECTS

In the past, Venezuelan political parties and their presidential candidates were in contact with the Jewish community before elections to discuss their programs and listen to one another. Under Chávez, such channels of communication have been shut down almost completely for years. Rather than an open confrontation, what characterized the relationship was a disconnect between Chávez and the Jewish community, because he perceives the Jews as part of the traditional elites and hence willing to dethrone him as leader of the Bolivarian Revolution. Likewise, from a socio-economic angle, many Jews (and non-Jews alike) thought that the institutional changes by the new regime represent a seismic shift in the understanding of their position and roles in Venezuelan society and politics. Thus, the gap between president Chávez and the Jewish community opened wider after April 2002, when Rabbi Pinchas Brener expressed support for overthrowing the president. This in turn led some governmental circles to allege—without substantiation—that Israel was providing weapons to the conspirators.

In late November 2004, police forces in combat gear and face masks searched the Hebraica Center in the Los Chorros neighborhood of Caracas, just as parents and school buses were bringing children to the Jewish grade school where preschoolers were already in attendance. The weak basis for the search order may have been an interview with opposition leader Orlando Urdaneta on a Miami television channel, in which he said that Chávez should be removed from power by whatever means necessary. Asked if the Israeli Mossad should not be the one to execute such an action,

²⁰ Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

Urdaneta replied affirmatively. This statement may have led the Venezuelan government to speculate that there was Israeli involvement, especially as the Urdaneta had maintained connections with some Jews. Israel of course denied any connection with alleged plotters in Venezuela, but the idea remained in the air, and was revived weeks later by pro-government circles when the attorney general, Danilo Anderson, who was investigating those who conspired against Chávez, was killed. A program on the state television network argued—again without evidence—that the Mossad could have been behind the murder, and this led to the search of the Hebraica Center.

President Chávez himself added fuel to the fire with some extreme statements. In a Christmas message on 24 December 2005, he said:

The world has an offer for everybody but it turned out that a few minorities—the descendants of those who crucified Christ, the descendants of those who expelled Bolívar from here and also those who in a certain way crucified him in Santa Marta, there in Colombia—they took possession of the riches of the world, a minority took possession of the planet's gold, the silver, the minerals, the water, the good lands, the oil, and they have concentrated all the riches in the hands of a few; less than 10 percent of the world population owns more than half of the riches of the world.

Under criticism, Chávez and his close associates claimed that his remarks were not targeting the Jewish community but global capitalism, an interpretation willingly accepted by Chávez supporters, such as Joe Emersberger, who asserted that “clearly Chávez was not singling out any ethnic group.”²¹

Nevertheless, such statements coming from the highest level of the Venezuelan federal administration did raise concern in the Venezuelan Jewish community. Even if observers such as Emersberger may be correct that Chávez was not referring to a single minority, it is still hard to understand how an audience—or at least marginal sectors of that audience—in a society such as Venezuela would interpret such rhetoric as unrelated to the Jews, when he specifically attacked the minority of “the descendants of those who crucified Christ.” Would common sense not dictate that Chávez was referring to the descendants of Pontius Pilatus or to the Jews, who, according to views prevalent before the Second Vatican Council, were to blame for the crucifixion.

²¹ COHA, “Debate on Chávez and Anti-Semitism Continues,” 12 Feb. 2009, <http://www.coha.org/2009/02/debate-on-Chávez-and-anti-semitism-continues/> (accessed 26 Feb.2009).

In January 2006, Venezuelan Jewish leaders were invited to meet the president at his official residence, the Miraflores Palace. Chávez assured them that he had not intended to attack the Jews in his address. Subsequently, the country's Jewish leaders hoped to promote good relations with the president, and opposed criticism of Chávez by Jewish institutions in other countries, such as the Simon Wiesenthal Center.²²

A few months later, the official reaction of the Venezuelan leadership to Israel's war with Hezbollah in Lebanon in July–August 2006 would lead the local Jews to express their concerns openly. By then, the demonization of Israel had sparked what Freddy Pressner, head of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAIV) described as an explosion of antisemitism in Venezuela.²³

The lack of open channels of communication between Chávez and the Jewish community of Venezuela was only partially remedied through the intercession of foreign personalities, as was the case during the visit in March 2007 of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, then former national senator and wife of the president of Argentina. Around the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Jewish community association (CAIV), the Latin American Jewish Congress held a two-day reunion in Caracas, attended by some seventy Jewish leaders from Latin America, the United States, Canada, Europe, and Israel. Kirchner delivered a speech in which she stated unequivocally her position against any form of antisemitism. Venezuelan authorities, by contrast, were noted by their absence.

Then, in late 2007, General Raúl Isaías Baduel (commanding general of the Venezuelan Army from January 2004 to June 2006, and Minister of Defense from June 2006 to July 2007) argued against the constitutional reform being promoted by Chávez and the National Assembly. Afterwards, his supporters—including members of the Jewish community—instantly became classified as enemies. In the eyes of government, it was not the advocacy of interreligious dialogue with the Jews that motivated them and

²² Marc Perelman, "Venezuela's Jews Defend Leftist President in Flap over Remarks," *Forward*, 13 Jan. 2006 <http://www.forward.com/articles/1874/> (accessed 19 Jan. 2009). The Simon Wiesenthal Center is a Jewish human rights organization working "against anti-Semitism, hate and terrorism, promoting human rights and dignity, standing with Israel, defending the safety of Jews worldwide, and teaching the lessons of the Holocaust for future generations." It is accredited as a NGO at international organizations including the United Nations, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe. Headquartered in Los Angeles, the Simon Wiesenthal Center maintains offices in New York, Toronto, Boca Raton, Paris, Buenos Aires, and Jerusalem. See <http://www.wiesenthal.com>.

²³ Hal Weitzman, "Venezuelan Jews fear for the future," *JTA*, 26 Mar. 2007 <http://jta.org/news/article-print/2007/03/26/100866> (accessed 19 Jan. 2009).

Baduel to establish contacts, but the will to bring down Chávez, a view that automatically transformed “the Jews” into suspected enemies.

This conspiracy theory led to another operation against the main Venezuelan Jewish institution. In December 2007, the vice-minister of the interior, Tarek El Assami, decided to investigate the grounds of Hebraica again, ostensibly looking for weapons hidden by the Israeli Mossad to support a future coup, instigated by Washington. On this occasion, too, security forces found no evidence supporting such an allegation. Connections between Jewish individuals and General Raúl Isaías Baduel, who after being a close collaborator of Chávez became a critic and joined those opposing constitutional reform to permit the president’s perpetuation in power, may have added suspicion toward the Jews. Still, singling out the Hebraica Center reinforced the view that the government had decided to target the Jewish community in a clearly irresponsible and discriminatory way.

The organized Jewish community, for its part, had tried to avoid any explicit criticism of the government as long as it could. It adopted a policy of non-response to verbal attacks by state authorities, and opposed criticism originating in other countries, especially the United States. Only after the police raid on the Hebrew Community Center in December 2007 did the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela decide to openly express concern and condemn the operation.

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Sustaining the disconnect between the leading cadre of the Bolivarian Revolution and the Jewish community of Venezuela is the ideological and developmental alignment of Chávez with Iran—a country whose leaders have openly alluded to the destruction of the State of Israel, demonized Zionism, and promoted Holocaust denial. Chávez’s strident attacks on Israel as a racist and genocidal state and ally of the United States, were clearly influenced by this strategic alignment.

Chavez’s anti-Zionism and anti-Jewish attitude was probably inspired by the thinking of an Argentinean sociologist, Norberto Ceresole, who arrived in Venezuela in 1994, just at the time Chávez was pardoned and released from prison. In the five years of political activity as part of the opposition, Ceresole had enormous influence on Chávez, reportedly spending more than a year in campaigning with him, and promoting his vision of a post-democratic era to be led by a caudillo that would bring together the armed forces and the people in a dramatic journey of emancipation.

Ceresole had come initially from the left, passing through the Peronist Leftist organization Montoneros, but then transformed into a staunch right-wing nationalist who advocated revisionism, anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli positions, denying the Holocaust and equating Israelis with the Nazis. In his book, *Caudillo, Army, People, Venezuela's Commander Chávez*, he calls for a Caesarean and populist leadership, whose central purpose will be to attack the alleged Jewish world conspiracy. Among Ceresole's assertions:

1. an important part of the canonical story of the deportation and death of the Jews under the Nazi system is a myth;
2. the myth has been used to preserve the existence of a colonial enterprise endowed with a religious ideology (monotheistic and messianic-mystical) predicating the dispossession by Israel of Arab Palestine;
3. the myth is also utilized to financially blackmail the German state, other European states and the Jewish communities in the United States and other countries;
4. Israel is "a power realized by the monopoly of monotheism and implemented by an army, police, prisons, torture, murder, etc., that seeks to consolidate a series of ideological manipulations in the bosom of the United States' power hegemony, seeking by all means to be accepted as a master of the world through terror and through dissuasive and persuasive practices."²⁴

Ceresole was received with honor in Iran and Syria shortly before his death in 2003. By then, he had become a close friend and intellectual inspiration for the Venezuelan leader, whose statements in recent years have often resonated with Ceresole's vision of Jewish international conspiracies since Bolívar's time and of Israel as spearhead of imperialism.²⁵

²⁴ Norberto Ceresole, *Caudillo, Ejército, Pueblo; la Venezuela del comandante Chávez* (Madrid: Ed. Al-Ándalus; Caracas, Venezuela: Biblioteca electrónica, 2000). http://www.analitica.com/bitBlioteca/ceresole/ejercitos_caudillo_pueblo.asp (accessed 18 Jan. 2009).

²⁵ In fact, contrary to the litany of a Masonic conspiracy or the contempt expressed toward those who did wrong to Bolívar, among those who supported the cause of independence in the Americas were Jews in the Caribbean islands and in North America. Little known and less recognized by the Chavista establishment has been the assistance given by Jews, led by Mordechai Ricardo, a cousin of the renowned British economist David Ricardo, who selflessly helped Simón Bolívar to survive the hardships of exile. When Bolívar went into exile and his property was seized by British authorities on arrival in Curaçao, Ricardo enabled him to overcome his dire economic situation as he prepared his epic journey for the emancipation of the Spanish territories of New Granada, which a generation later became the independent countries of Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador. Roberto J. Lovera De-Sola, *Curazao, escala en el primer destierro del Libertador* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1992), 23–36, 67–68; idem, "La estadía de Simón Bolívar en Curazao," in *Los sefaradíes. Vínculo entre Curazao y Venezuela* (Caracas:

Other important influences on Chávez's thinking are Marxists who use the language of class struggle, and see the Jews as key members of an anti-Chavista bourgeois coalition motivated by class interests to depose Chávez and demolish the Socialist revolution in Venezuela. True enough, there have been Jews in the anti-Chavista camp, such as the governor of Miranda State, Henrique Capriles Radonski; the provost of Simón Bolívar University, Benjamín Scharifker; and student leaders such as David Smolansky. Needless to say, they were hardly the only ones active in opposition to Chávez. Leading the student movement on the eve of the 2007 referendum were Stalin González, Yon Goicoechea, and Freddy Guevara; and among their successors on the eve of the February 2009 referendum there were Ricardo Sánchez and Juan Mejía, in addition to Smolansky. Nonetheless, in a broadcast of his TV show, "La Hojilla" (The razorblade), in the week leading up to the referendum, Mario Silva, a top ally of Chávez, said: "There are two students—one is Diego Aarón Scharifker, and the other David Smolansky Urosa. Scharifker and Smolansky are last names of Hebrew origin, Jewish last names—you see the problems right now." Silva is part of a select group in the Chávez camp working in public opinion formation, who have targeted Jews in antisemitic terms, accusing them of conspiracy in Venezuela and of being part of a global Zionist and imperialist scheme aiming at preventing the success of the Socialist Revolution led by Chávez.

The broad coalition supporting Chávez is varied and multifaceted, both in terms of class background, positions, and political orientation. Part of it includes a sector of xenophobic individuals who, while part of the Left, have used the Chavista media to spread an antisemitic campaign against the Jewish lobby, "the lies of the Chosen People," and the rich Judeo-Zionist bourgeoisie that, in their view, threatens Venezuela. These individuals express ideas that combine extreme positions of class struggle, anti-imperialism, and ethnic hatred. One of them is Basem Tajeldine, a Marxist whose articles have appeared in various semi-official sites. In the eyes of Tajeldine, who reproduces a vulgar, 19th-century Marxist vision of religion as opium for the masses, Judaism is a device to control people's minds, and Zionism is the most accomplished bourgeois ideological device to accumulate wealth and power:

Undoubtedly, Zionism is the most comprehensive ideology of the decadent European bourgeois society of Jewish faith; of the European capitalists, and the philosophy of human misery.... Since the advent of currency (gold and silver) as a medium of exchange (i.e., the objective materialization of capital) that allows man to

accumulate wealth, heads of tribes, families, etc., found in the alienating and intimidating logic of religion the greatest support for their purposes, the best instrument of coercion over the subconsciousness of people, in order to maintain control of people and seize productive sources of wealth in constant growth. Thus Judaism was born, among other religions. And in 1890, Zionism [started], as a response to the contradictions embodied in the high and petty European bourgeoisie, as the ideology and philosophy of the advanced European bourgeoisie, and as a forged and alienating interpretation of history of the Jazar [sic — Khazar] European people of religious Jewish origin; its religious misery.²⁶

Writing of the opposition to Chávez on the eve of the February 2009 referendum, Tajeldine stated that

For many Venezuelans, the Zionist figures who lead the current demonstrations against the government are well known, among them: the governor of Miranda State, Henrique Capriles Radonski, the irascible president of the University Simón Bolívar (USB), Benjamin Scharifker, the arsonist student leaders David Smolansky and Diego Aaron Scharifker Hochman. Yet, many are unaware of the true interests behind these characters. We know that they are all members of the wealthy Jewish-Zionist bourgeoisie based in Venezuela for some time, members of families that own large properties and businesses and also have major media chains. Naturally, they respond to the interests of Israel. And to achieve their goals they are willing to do anything.²⁷

Among the boldest accusations he made was that the attack on the Maripérez synagogue on 3 February 2009, was part of a Jewish-Zionist scheme to discredit Chávez on the eve of the 15 February referendum. In his eyes, all was part of a Zionist conspiracy replicating what in his mind were self-inflicted terrorist attacks against the Israeli embassy and the AMIA building in Buenos Aires, part of a conspiracy to smear the image of Iran. His interpretation of the events merits quotation at large:

There is no doubt that Zionism has declared war on Venezuela. The desecration of the Maripérez synagogue on February 3, 2009, responded to a plan intended to defame the revolution, and more directly Commander Chávez, in the international arena and, at the

²⁶ Basem Tajeldine, “La disociación mental del ‘Pueblo Elegido,’” *Rebelión*, 26 May 2008, www.rebellion.org/noticias/2008/5/67907.pdf [accessed 27 Mar. 2009].

²⁷ Basem Tajeldine, “Quiénes son y que buscan en Venezuela? La visita del Lobby Judío a Miraflores,” 18 Aug. 2008, www.aporrea.org/imprime/a62319.html [accessed 27 Mar. 2009].

same time, adversely affect the upcoming referendum geared to approve the Constitutional Amendment of February 15. The doubts have already been cleared. The cunning criminals did not leave many revealing traces in their desecration, yet they were betrayed by the clumsy intellectual minds behind the scheme, when they pretended to blame the revolutionary government right away as responsible for this act. Clearly, the evidence points towards Zionist groups.

Moreover, knowing the criminal code of international Zionism and the Israeli Mossad for similar crimes in various parts of the world, and also knowing the urgent need of Israel to launch a moral blow back against Venezuela—since Venezuela assumed a dignified and humane position in defense of the Palestinian people and accused the state of Israel of genocide—the truth maliciously marred emerges clearly today...

Through the Israeli Mossad, international Zionism has sought to repeat in Venezuela what, without doubt, they performed in Argentina in the events of the Israeli Embassy (1992) and through the car bomb that exploded in front of AMIA, the largest Jewish mutuality of that country [in 1994], with the aim of blaming Iran for such acts.²⁸

The leaders of the Bolivarian Revolution have not rejected the opinions voiced by these sectors within their supporting coalition and, accordingly, these conspiracy theories have burgeoned in public opinion, impacting the minds of many Venezuelans. Whether Chávez is unwilling or unable to disengage from such xenophobic opinions and incitement is a matter of speculation, but their social and political implications both in Venezuela and beyond are not insignificant.

Perhaps it is worth reflecting on the situation in Venezuela by comparing it with Cuba, another Latin American society whose revolutionary leadership maintained close relations with the Jewish community. Whereas in the case of Chávez there has been at best a disconnect, the Cuban Jews benefitted from an environment that, while demanding full commitment to the revolution and forcing some public invisibility until the 1990s, recognized their full integration and the contributions of Jews to Cuban society, even though some of Cuba's Jews went into exile. The Cuban regime managed to avoid a totalistic approach to Jews. Illustrative of the close relations of Castro and some Jews was the moral and financial support

²⁸ Basem Tajeldine, “¡No existe crimen perfecto! Descubierto el chantaje sionista contra Chávez,” 11 Feb. 2009, www.rebellion.org/noticia_pdf.php?id=80714; www.aporrea.org/actualidad/a72208.html; www.telesurtv.net/noticias/opinion/627 (accessed 27 Mar. 2009)

provided to the Cuban leadership by Dr. Ricardo Subirana y Lobo Wolf, a German-born immigrant to Cuba, a self-made man who amassed his wealth by developing a process for recovering iron from the residue of the smelting process; Castro named him ambassador in Israel in 1961. The Cuban establishment continued its policy toward its Jewish community even after Cuba and Israel broke diplomatic relationships at the time of the October 1973 war. Even though Cuba began to take anti-Israel positions in international affairs, it refrained from anti-Jewish expressions. Chávez, for his part, has increasingly solidified a strategic alliance with Iran, which, when added to a strategic alignment against the United States and—drawing on the ideas of Ceresole and others—a growing identification with anti-Zionism, has made the environment for the local Jewish community increasingly fragile.

CHÁVEZ'S INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY

Chávez has moved to redefine the international arena, by disputing the longstanding hegemonic position of the United States in the Western hemisphere and beyond. Identifying the weaknesses of U.S. power under President Bush and the worldwide animosity toward him and his policies, Chávez skillfully established himself as a global player and regional leader, by launching new diplomatic coalitions and what some define as a “South-South dialogue,” aimed at challenging the more traditional North-South axis promoted by the United States and other Western nations.

Using every means, from his theatrical rhetoric to oil resources, Chávez was able to construct transnational alliances and defy the perceived U.S. global hegemony with his brash anti-Americanism. As part of this strategy, he developed regional oil initiatives—such as Petrocaribe and Petrosur—geared to provide oil with “soft” financing and bankrolling. Similarly, “he has bought \$2.8 billion in Argentine bonds and \$25 million in Ecuadorian bonds and has substantially underwritten Telesur, a Latin American alternative to CNN.” In November 2005, he blocked the U.S.-led proposal to restart talks on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), and in its place, Chávez put forth the vaguely-defined Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA).²⁹

Within Latin America, he has built strategic alliances, particularly with politically close leaders, such as Fidel Castro (Cuba), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Rafael Correa (Ecuador), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua), and Ollanta Humala (a presidential candidate in Peru). Chávez has also looked to launch

²⁹ Michael Shifter, “In Search of Hugo Chávez.”

cooperative programs with other, politically different countries in the continent, particularly in the Southern Cone and the Caribbean basin.

Beyond the region, Chávez has built ties with Iran and the Arab world, moving from the shared membership in OPEC to various projects of economic cooperation and international relations. He has defended Iran's right to develop nuclear energy and has declared that Iran and Venezuela are like "brothers who fight for a just world." The two countries have also negotiated a series of economic agreements.³⁰ In parallel to enhancing these connections, the Venezuelan president has become ever more vociferous against Israel, equating the country with the Nazis, both during the Second Lebanon War and the more recent military confrontation in the Gaza Strip. Similarly to what happened in many nations, this has generated waves of popular anti-Jewish sentiment, something unheard of in Venezuela's past.

To evaluate this wave of condemnation toward Israel, which has been rather common throughout the region and not unique to the Venezuelan leader, one must keep in mind that, beyond the positioning of Chávez against the United States and its allies, all Latin American societies have a deeply ingrained legacy of opposition to the use of force in international relations. This legacy was first expressed in the early 19th century, in support of the principle of *uti possidetis* of the initial Bolivarian doctrine, and further developed and formalized in international law by the doctrine of the jurist Carlos Calvo.³¹

Such understanding and widespread support were nurtured initially by the fear of a possible Spanish military intervention to recover the lost colonies. This was further solidified by the close presence of a powerful neighbor to the north, with an expansionist doctrine that led to territorial aggrandizement at the expense of Mexico, and many interventions in Central America and the Caribbean, in which the territorial sovereignty of sister-nations in Iberoamerica was ignored.

As a corollary of this position and widespread feeling against war interventions, the conflict in the Middle East has resulted in a gradual deterioration in diplomatic relations with Israel. In the words of Adrián Bonilla, director of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) in Ecuador,

³⁰ Dina Siegel Vann, "Iran's Latin American Power Play," *In Focus* 1, no. 1 (2007). <http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/article/26> (accessed 20 Jan. 2009).

³¹ Arie Kacowicz, "Latin America as an International Society," *International Politics* 37 (2000): 143–62. *Uti possidetis juris* is the principle that the borders of the newly-formed sovereign states should inherit the administrative boundaries these territories had in colonial times.

There is a tradition in Latin America of rejecting violence to solve any international conflict. There is also a tradition of supporting the weakest country in a conflict since most Latin American countries have been part of the Third World network. Another factor is that Israel is a close ally of the United States.³²

Diplomatic relationships between Venezuela and Israel reached a nadir in January 2009. As a correlate of the war in the Gaza Strip, Venezuela expelled the Israeli ambassador in Caracas, and Israel reciprocated by expelling the Venezuelan ambassador in Israel.

Alongside this gradual escalation, what were the effects on the Venezuelan Jewish community of such a strategic international repositioning and of the actions and pronouncements of the authorities?

First, as stressed above, there is now an almost complete lack of access to centers of power and decision making on the part of the Jewish organized community leaders.

Second, an environment of fear resulting from macroeconomic Socialist reforms and the incremental climate of hostility has led to the piecemeal exodus of members of the Jewish community (with varied socioeconomic standing) out of Venezuela. This mass migration reduced the number of Venezuelan Jews by almost a third, to an estimated number of 12,000 to 16,000. While some of those relocating were persons of means, many decided to move abroad due to the sense of public delegitimization. Those who, like the Jews, have links with coreligionists in countries that Chávez antagonizes, such as the United States and Israel, have been victims of this hostile atmosphere. Many sensed that their public voice was marred as they were accused of being strangers and peons of anti-national agendas.

From a transnational perspective, Jewish migrants have joined a growing number of other Venezuelans living in the Diaspora in the last decade. As thousands of Venezuelans moved to South Florida, communities of exiles of different faiths have formed, supporting the Organization of Venezuelans in Exile (ORVEX) and organizing committees to protest political arrests in their country of origin. This Venezuelan expatriate wave has virtually doubled the size of the Venezuelan diaspora in the United States. According to U.S. Census data, their number rose from 91,507 in 2000—a year after Chávez took office—to 177,866 in 2006.³³ It is clear

³² Tyler Bridges, “Israel’s Gaza invasion provokes protests throughout Latin America,” 7 Jan. 2009, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/world/AP/story/842304.html> (accessed 23 Jan. 2009).

³³ Manuel Corao, director of one of several Venezuelan opposition newspapers published in South Florida, said that the main factor behind the rising tide of exile is “the fear of loss of private property, the loss of civilian versus the government, fear of

from the numbers that this exodus has involved far more non-Jews than Jews. Still, its effects have been enormous for a community that at its peak had only about 35,000 members.

As indicated here, the exodus of Venezuelan Jews involved individuals from all socioeconomic strata. However, the exodus of some of the wealthier members of the community has had an impact beyond their numerical weight. Their flight has intensified the financial burden borne by the remaining members of the community, who struggle to keep its institutions alive and also to assist the growing number of Jews in need.

Finally, the negative image of Israel as the Jewish state has created a disincentive to bring unidentified Jews to the bosom of the organized community. This is reflected in a decline of about one-third in the number of children in Jewish schools and in the number of members of the Hebraica Center, in comparison to the mid-1990s levels.

Many individuals in the Jewish community continue their activities in Venezuela. Since the government enacted laws that inhibit the transfer of money abroad, even those who spend part of the year outside of Venezuela maintain commercial and financial activities in the country. Moreover, the Chávez regime has created new economic opportunities, such as in housing projects for marginalized people, thus keeping entrepreneurial individuals engaged.

THE CURRENT SITUATION AND PROSPECTS

The principle of citizenship involves not only rights and duties, but refers to and serves as a basis for the existence of an autonomous social fabric and civil society and, more recently, for a politics of recognition. In societies where coexistence is the norm, differences anchored in religious, ethnic, or dynastic commitments do not preclude the integration of diverse members and sectors as co-citizens of a self-constituted political entity. In the modern world, the principle of citizenship is constructed from a double separation: the partial separation of politics from religion and the partial separation of ethnic and civic identities. This has led in democracies to an increasing—although not irreversible—process of the autonomy of civil society and a recognition of pluralism, as implicit in the existence of complex societies.³⁴

loss of constitutional rights and individual freedoms.” This dynamic resembles closely that of other communities of exiles. For an analytical treatment of the general issues involved in the relocation abroad of oppositions, see Mario Sznajder and Luis Roniger, *The Politics of Exile in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁴ Dominique Schnapper, *The Community of Citizens* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

The present dilemma of the Jews in Venezuelan society is how to strengthen pluralism in the country without suffering attacks as an enemy of the Bolivarian Revolution and the people— a dilemma exacerbated by the dynamics of the radical populist rhetoric and style of governance. While at the level of representation, the populist leadership aims at deepening democracy and is perceived by its supporters as profoundly democratic, through its rhetorical advocacy of “the people” and its mobilization practices, it generates a series of social and political costs. Those who are seeking to preserve their autonomy and their critical views of the process and their government are debilitated by this. The measures taken by Chávez to control all branches of government, public spaces and civil society, certainly reduce the space for critical dialogue and can, under certain circumstances, transform pluralism into open confrontation. At the rhetorical level, Chavismo has polarized the nation in terms of supporters and “enemies of the people.” It is a well-known, although still debatable phenomenon that the president and his supporters try to deflect criticism by accusing his detractors of being politically motivated, hiding their complicity in efforts to overthrow the government.

Such polarization is seen by international observers of Chavismo who find it difficult to assess the situation in Venezuela without being involved in highly polarized political debate. Recently there was a sharp dispute between U.S. professors who support Chávez and those who defended an extensive report by Human Rights Watch that highlighted serious human rights shortcomings in contemporary Venezuela.

The main claim in the HRW report is that the 40-hour coup of 2002 against Chávez “has haunted Venezuelan politics ever since, providing a pretext for a wide range of government policies that have undercut the human rights protections established in the 1999 Constitution.” This has led, according to the organization, to political discrimination, an open disregard for the principle of separation of powers, an absence of credible judicial oversight, measures affecting journalists’ freedom of expression, workers’ freedom of association, and civil society’s ability to promote human rights in Venezuela.

The 230-page report, drawn on interviews with government officials, judicial authorities, jurists, academics, human rights advocates, trade unionists, and journalists during various visits to Venezuela, particularly between December 2006 and July 2008, identified a long list of problems affecting human rights in the country. Most of these problems seem to be directly derived from the state’s concentration of powers and interference in the autonomous workings of civil society. Among the problems cited: the granting or denial of access to social programs based on political opinions;

the blacklist of political opponents from some state agencies and from the national oil company; discrimination toward media outlets, labor unions, and civil society in response to legitimate criticism or political activity; the expansion and toughening of the penalties for speech and broadcasting offenses; the undermining of workers' right to freely join the labor organization of their choice by engaging in favoritism toward pro-government unions; and the penalizing and subjection of rights advocates to criminal investigations on groundless or grossly exaggerated charges.³⁵

On 15 December 2008, more than a hundred 100 U.S. and Latin American scholars sent a letter of protest to the Board of Directors of Human Rights Watch, which the Council of Hemispheric Affairs endorsed, criticizing the

the needlessly venomous tone resorted to by HRW's head for Latin America, José Miguel Vivanco. In his charges, HRW's lead researcher and writer of the report used intemperate language and patently disingenuous tactics to field a series of anti-Chávez allegations that are excessive and inappropriate.³⁶

In the letter, the researchers find the HRW report's claims unsubstantiated, bereft of scale and accuracy, and uncritical regarding the sources used. As part of their rejection of the HRW findings, they claim that

the report does not show that there was any organized or systematic effort to purge the government of anti-government employees. Indeed, as anyone who is familiar with the government of Venezuela knows, after nearly ten years since the election of President Hugo Chávez, the civil service is still loaded with employees who are against the government.

[Moreover, concerning] the credibility of the HRW report, it is profoundly misleading for the authors to argue that "political discrimination is a defining feature" of a government that is not willing to risk the continuing employment of people who have carried out such a strike.

The major media in Venezuela to this day are practically unmatched in this hemisphere, and indeed most of the world, for their vehement,

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, *A Decade under Chávez. Political Intolerance and Lost Opportunities for Advancing Human Rights in Venezuela* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008).

³⁶ "Taking Human Rights Watch to Task on the Question of Venezuela's Purported Abuse of Human Rights: 100 U.S. and Foreign Scholars Take Issue with the Head of HRW's Latin American Division," 18 Dec. 2008, <http://www.coha.org/2008/12/taking-human-rights-watch-to-task/>, (accessed 18 Dec. 2008).

unfettered, and even vicious, libelous, and violence inciting attacks on the government. While the HRW report presents a number of valid criticisms of existing law and a few cases of unwarranted intervention by government officials, it serves no legitimate purpose to hide or distort the actual state of Venezuela's media.³⁷

Responding to the accusation of political partisanship of his organization, Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, pointed to the Chavista tactic of attacking those who identified failings in the Bolivarian system:

For example, local rights defenders who have pressed for reforms in the country's notoriously inhumane prisons have repeatedly been denounced by top Chávez officials, who accuse them of conspiring to "destabilize the country." When prison inmates went on hunger strike last March, the then interior and justice minister publicly suggested that these rights advocates had incited the strike under orders from Washington. More recently, when the highly respected Venezuelan nongovernmental organization PROVEA raised the issue of prison conditions in its annual report (which it released on December 9), the current interior and justice minister declared on national TV that they were "liars" who were "paid in dollars" and should have had shoes thrown at them when they presented their findings. The health minister meanwhile questioned the timing of PROVEA's report, claiming it was intended to undermine the government's efforts to reform the constitution to allow Chávez's indefinite reelection. (PROVEA has been releasing its annual report on or around the same date, International Human Rights Day, for more than a decade.)³⁸

Two months later, several dozens of scholars sent a letter of rebuttal, attacking Roth's arguments and stating that the HRW report's treatment of the situation in the Venezuelan courts, the major media, and labor is "laced with prejudice and exaggeration," and that José Miguel Vivanco, the report's lead author, have misrepresented Venezuelan democracy in comments he made to the press:

³⁷ "More than 100 Latin American Experts Question Human Rights Watch's Venezuela Report," 15 Dec. 2008, <http://www.coha.org/2008/12/taking-human-rights-watch-to-task/> (accessed 18 Dec. 2008).

³⁸ Kenneth Roth, "Head of Human Rights Watch Responds to Scholars' Criticism of Venezuela Report," 29 Dec. 2008, <http://www.coha.org/2009/01/head-of-human-rights-watch-responds-to-scholars-criticism-of-venezuela-report/> (distributed by COHA on 7 Jan. 2009).

Mr. Vivanco paints an overwhelmingly negative and exaggerated picture of Venezuelan democracy, even more than in the report. It is also one that does not conform to the opinion of Venezuelans themselves. In opinion polls conducted by the respected Chilean pollster Latinobarómetro, Venezuela has consistently ranked among the highest in Latin America in terms of citizen satisfaction with the state of their democracy and government. We reference these polls not to rebut specific findings in the report, but to question HRW's unrelenting portrayal of Venezuela as a country in which democracy has steadily diminished.³⁹

Critical assessments of Venezuela's leadership and the Bolivarian Revolution have generated heated debate by critics and supporters. In such a politically charged atmosphere, any claim or counter-claim is easily suspected of reflecting a hidden political agenda or motivation, aimed at reinforcing or weakening one side or the other in the Venezuelan public domain.

One should be aware that the Bolivarian Revolution has entered a stage in which those who preach the revolutionary transformation of Venezuela have prevailed over the supporters of "soft" Chavistas who sought to promote the progressive transformation of the country through a participatory mass politics, as analyzed by Steve Ellner.⁴⁰ This dynamic has promoted an incremental strategy of political control at the national scene as well as international alliances of confrontation with the United States, which in turn have encouraged the deepening of the process.

Radical rhetoric and mass mobilization leave room for extreme groups at the margins willing to engage in violence against whoever is identified as the "internal enemy" or ally of the "external enemy." Jewish community members have been unable to escape this threatening dynamic, and have faced increasing pressures in the polarized political environment of Venezuela.

On 7 January 2009, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) accused Venezuelan President Chávez with "fostering an atmosphere of intimidation and fear within the Venezuelan Jewish community" by his statements comparing Israel's military offensive against Hamas to the Holocaust and by his call on Venezuelan Jews to condemn Israel's actions. Abraham H.

³⁹ "Scholars Respond to HRW's Kenneth Roth's Riposte on Venezuelan Human Rights" <http://www.coha.org/2009/01/scholars-respond-to-hrw-directors-riposte-on-venezuelan-human-rights/> (distributed by COHA on 12 Mar. 2009).

⁴⁰ Steve Ellner, "Revolutionary and Non-Revolutionary Paths of Radical Populism: Directions of the Chavista Movement in Venezuela," *Science and Society* 69, no. 2 (2005): 160–90.

Foxman, ADL National Director, indicated in his statement that “President Chávez should have used this opportunity to put into practice the “Declaration against Racism,” which he and the Presidents of Argentina and Brazil recently signed, to stop the dissemination of antisemitism cloaked in anti-Zionist terms, rather than to endorse and propagate his anti-Israel views.”⁴¹

The Venezuelan government is probably unwilling to foster xenophobic hatred, such as that generated by populism in several European contexts in the twentieth century.⁴² However, our analysis has shown that due to its dynamic transformations, its polarizing rhetoric, and the international alliances it has undertaken, Chavismo has easily reinforced some popular chauvinistic attitudes identifying Jews as allies of the “anti-people” and of enemy countries, whose demonization can also open the door for the actual victimization of Jewish institutions and individuals by antisemitic elements in society.

Opinions found on the website www.aporrea.org, a pro-Chavista forum which in 2006 in Venezuela received the National Prize for Alternative Journalism, are symptomatic of the levels of hatred and open antisemitism that have penetrated various layers of Chávez’s supporters.

Defined as a space and forum of “popular communication for the construction of socialism in the XXI century,” in its official statement, Aporrea.org indicates that

In these forums we do not accept opposition or coup-promoting propaganda, especially any racist, sexist or homophobic declarations. Any rude or racist message, or propaganda for the opposition, will be deleted... Respectful criticism will always be welcome, but not the sabotage!

In spite of such professed policy of moderation, the site contains vicious messages smearing and demonizing Jews, which clearly incite to violence. The following is a short selection of excerpts from such statements:

[You are] insensitive beasts and slaves of the cursed money, feeling supported by the demon of the largest and most vicious criminal nation on earth, of all times. Such strength and backing was enough to do the worst and most atrocious genocide known to mankind. A palpable and real genocide, worse than the one they say was

⁴¹ “Chávez Fosters Atmosphere of Intimidation and Fear for Venezuelan Jewish Community,” [http://www.adl.org/PresRele/IsIME_62/5434_62 .htm](http://www.adl.org/PresRele/IsIME_62/5434_62.htm) (accessed 4 Mar. 2009). According to its own definition, “the Anti-Defamation League, founded in 1913, is the world’s leading organization fighting anti-Semitism through programs and services that counteract hatred, prejudice and bigotry.”

⁴² See Canovan, *Populism*, 225–59.

committed against the Jews, from the hands of Hitler and Nazism, and that occurred with your complicity and in their service, denouncing Jews who did not share your cursed wishes [typical] of an evil demonic sect. You managed to fabricate a lie, with which to deceive the world to create a state serving a mercantilist religion. Today this deception came to an end. The Palestinian Holocaust will bury you.⁴³

Of those phony murderers, [stand out] the Hebrew “school” of greed, sustained by the sect of Judaism and its ramifications of dissimulation, including the Sadducees of Nero, the Russian Bundists-Stalinists, and in the last five centuries, the Witnesses of “Jehovah.” These latter [were] to “testify” about the false “holocaust” suffered by the Jews, who with the huge capitals that they stole from the German manufacturers using the story of defending them against the threat of the British and French empires, reinforced the capitalism and imperialism in the making of America where, off stage, they founded the United Nations Organization (UNO) according to their ambitions, then secluded beneath a dog-eared banner, stained by the hairy hands of fake propagators of crematories of individuals who lived with their lies and with “the great whore of the Diaspora (not wandering) that was disseminated throughout the world and that has confused the Church through his false apostles who infiltrated the Christian people to bring them to apostasy, and that, in addition, are sons of the father of lies”(John 8:44) .⁴⁴

⁴³ Javier Monagas Maita, “The Palestinian Holocaust will bury you. You, Zionists, Jews, Fascists, Murderers, Failed,” published 15 Jan. 2009, www.aporrea.org/tiburon/a70440.html (accessed 5 March 2009).

⁴⁴ Pedro Méndez, “Jews, plotting and murderers,” published 7 Jan. 2009, www.aporrea.org/tiburon/a69910.html (accessed 5 Mar. 2009). As the wording may sound confusing, and it is indeed, let me reproduce the Spanish original wording: “De esos farsantes asesinos la ‘escuela’ hebrea de la avaricia, apoyada por la secta del judaísmo y sus ramificaciones del disimulo, entre otras, los saduceos de Nerón; los bundistas-estalinistas rusos y desde V (cinco) siglos a hoy los testigos de ‘Jehová.’ Estos últimos para ‘testificar’ lo del falso ‘holocausto’ sufrido por los judíos, quienes con los inmensos capitales que le robaron a los industriales alemanes con el cuento de defenderlos de la amenaza de los imperios londinense y francés, reforzaron el capitalismo y el imperialismo en ciernes de Norteamérica donde, tras bastidores, fundaron la Organización de Naciones Unidas (ONU) a la medida de sus ambiciones, solapadas entonces tras el estandarte manoseado por la mano peluda de los farsantes propagadores de crematorios de individuos que vivieron con sus mentiras y con ‘la gran ramera de la diáspora (no errantes) que fue diseminada por todo el mundo y que tiene

The letter that follows, also posted in Aporrea.org, betrays the extent to which demonization of the Jews has become widespread. Especially since the author claims to advocate a strategy of universalism of love, it is so discouraging that he shares the demonic vision of Jews as standing beyond the pale of humanity:

Hunting Jews should be a task of peace and love. Every Jew whom you manage to hunt, catch him with a net of love and affection. Tell him that we humans know that they too can become human and that if we achieve this noble purpose, they will be able to respect, love, feel solidarity, have feelings and love for others. Tell him that these feelings exist and are characteristic of some humans. Tell him that this world is about to blow and collapse into a huge hole because of the pollution and wars in which many resentful Jews are involved, putting the world at the brink of this huge hole.⁴⁵

On 31 January 2009 intruders broke into the Tiferet Israel Sephardic synagogue in Caracas, Venezuela. The assailants—eight of whom were later discovered to be police officers—vandalized the place of worship, scattering sacred Torah scrolls on the floor, destroying religious paraphernalia, and painting “We don’t want Jews here,” “Jews get out,” and “Death to all” on the walls. In a report for the Council of Hemispheric Affairs, COHA Director Larry Birns and Research Associate David Rosenblum Felson indicated that

such gangs recently have stepped up their intimidating attacks on elements of Chávez’s opposition; it is uncertain the degree of control that the Venezuelan president or his United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) party has over their violent-prone behavior, or, for that matter, the full details of the attack on the synagogue.

They concluded that this attack was the culmination of statements by the President that were

unquestionably dipping into the lore of anti-Semitism. With this kind of unquestionably trash rhetoric coming from the presidential palace, Venezuelan Jews have good reason to feel vulnerable when their head of state authors such simple-minded crudities. These are not the words of a classy or even relevant analysis, but the kind of gutter bigotries that have insulted and terrorized minorities throughout

confundida a la iglesia a través de sus falsos apóstoles infiltrados para llevar al pueblo cristiano a la apostasía y, además, son hijos del padre de la mentira’ (Juan, cap.8. Vers. 44).”

⁴⁵ Evaristo Marcano Marín, “To hunt Jews,” published 9 Jan. 2009, www.aporrea.org/tiburon/a70050.html (accessed 5 Mar. 2009).

history, including Jewish populations which actually experienced the Holocaust.⁴⁶

Birns and Rosenblum Felson criticized Chávez for “the lack of a capacity for self-censorship and self-restraint,” which according to their view “ultimately jeopardizes the revolution, far more so than the country’s local disloyal opposition or complots coming from the U.S.” This assessment by COHA officials generated debate, and COHA published various letters of protest, including one by Gunnar Gundersen, of Salem, Oregon, who claimed that

the attack on the synagogue was a black op by the so-called opposition. Street vandals are not going to be able to get into this facility—and any cursory check of this situation would have made that perfectly clear to you. It had all of the classic signs of being a U.S.-backed operation, as have the many “tear gas” attacks on “Opposition” leaders.”⁴⁷

President Hugo Chávez and his Foreign Minister, Nicolás Maduro, promptly condemned the vandalism of the synagogue and specifically condemned antisemitism. The investigation led to the detention of some of the probable authors of the attack. Nonetheless, a new case occurred shortly after, when unidentified individuals threw a grenade at the Jewish Community Center in downtown Caracas on 26 February 2009, before dawn. Without speculating about the possible perpetrators of the hate crime, the president of the Center, Abraham Garzón said that, even though happily there were no physical injuries, the act, which according to him was not done by chance, was a “spiritual blow” inflicted upon the institution by those who try to spread terror in the country.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Larry Birns and David Rosenblum Felson, “Venezuelan Synagogue Vandalizing Takes New Turns in Culmination of a Number of Anti-Semitic and Anti-Israeli Incidents” <http://www.coha.org/2009/02/venezuelan-synagogue-vandalizing-takes-new-turns-in-culmination-of-a-number-of-anti-semitic-and-anti-israel-incidents/>, 11 Feb. 2009 (accessed 26 Feb. 2009).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Watch Garzón’s declarations to the Globovision network in http://globovision.batanga.com/mm/video/Globovision/CentroJudio_all.asf (accessed 27 February 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

Venezuela is a society in which dynamic interaction between individuals and groups of different ethnic-religious or ethnic traditions were traditionally tolerant. By the mid-1990s, developmental model of the “Punto Fijo” administrations had diminished and led to wider socio-economic gaps and generated an increasing disdain for traditional politicians and a rejection of liberal democracy. This provided the background for the rise to power of Hugo Chávez and the widespread support of his plebiscitary style of democracy. Once in power, the populist leader launched a series of institutional changes and constitutional reforms that have enjoyed the support of broad sectors of the population, while being resented by those sectors that in the past had access and proximity to the centers of political power and economic markets.

At the same time, reinforcing the state-centered vision of politics and the centrality of the leader as the spokesman of the people, the radical rhetoric has generated a polarized public domain that has been characterized by intolerance and a lack of dialogue. The current situation creates difficulties and dilemmas for the Venezuelan Jews, who suffer from the incremental consequences of the strategic choices, alliances, and priorities of the current Venezuelan administration.

In the current international constellation, local Jews have been pressured by a series of processes that constrain their ability to sustain their collective self-identification and public presence as Venezuelan Jews with full voice and institutional access. Such processes have been generated by the close relationship of Chávez with countries like Iran, which denies the legitimacy of the Jewish state of Israel; and by the domestic resonance of the conflict in the Middle East. The strident anti-Israel rhetoric of the regime has been exacerbated by xenophobic expressions by extremists at the margins of the mass movement and by hate crimes committed against Jewish institutions. These processes, due to the new forms of articulation of Venezuelan politics and the country’s international strategies, have created a situation which is increasingly hostile and poses serious challenges to the future of Jews in Venezuelan society. As suggested above, the ways in which the government will react to any sign of further verbal and physical hostility toward the Jewish community within Venezuela will be a clear indication of the direction Chávez is willing to take the country in the near future.