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The Jewish Community in Venezuela: A question of Respect

The Jewish community in Venezuela is among the oldest in South America, dating back to the early 19th century. During the struggle for independence from Spain, Venezuelan revolutionary hero Simón Bolívar found refuge among a group of Jews from Curacao, some of whom later went on to fight in the ranks of his liberating army.¹ Today, the majority of the country's Jewish citizens are descendants of European and North African immigrants who arrived during and after World War II.

Jewish people in Latin America have historically faced prejudice, but Venezuela has been a relative haven of religious tolerance in the region. Although Venezuela's Jewish community numbers only about 15-20,000 (less than 1 percent of the national population), it has long been a prized part of national social, political and economic life. Like many prominent Venezuelans, the current Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro has Jewish heritage.²

Social inclusion has been a guiding principle for the administration of President Chávez, which has enacted new laws to favor equality among all people and worked tirelessly to end all forms of marginalization, whether they be religious, ethnic, economic, or otherwise.

SOURCES OF CONTENTION

Where then, do the allegations of anti-Semitism waged against the Chávez administration come from? One source that has been a subject of distortion is Venezuela's relationship with Iran and its President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Some have accused President Chávez of sharing the views of the Iranian leader, however, the governments of Venezuela and Iran are ideologically very different. Though Venezuela shares strong diplomatic and trade ties with Iran, these are founded on the oil-producing activities of both countries, which were co-founders of OPEC in the 1960s.

On a few occasions, political events in Venezuela have caused concern among the Jewish community, and in particular, the American Jewish community. First, during the brief yet traumatic 2002 coup against President Chávez, police conducted a raid on a Jewish community center after having been informed that it may have been used by the coup plotters to store arms. In 2004, a car bombing caused a Jewish school to be searched. Neither of the two incidents were violent, though, nor did they produce any evidence of crimes. After a U.S.-based Jewish organization called the Weisenthal Center accused the Venezuelan state of anti-Semitism in 2006, the President of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela disagreed. He stated in a letter to the Center

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that by acting “without consulting us, on issues that you do not know or understand, [you have] interfered in the political status, in the security, and in the well-being of our community.”³

Also in 2006, on August 3rd, a decision by the Venezuelan government to withdraw its charge d’affaires to Israel in protest of that nation’s unilateral attacks on Lebanon was another widely contested event, but, the policy measure was in no way motivated by anti-Semitism.

Finally, in the context of the U.S. War on Terror, some have made the empty claim that Hezbollah and other armed groups are allowed to operate in Venezuela. Because there is no proof that this is now or has ever been true, it can only be seen as an attempt to stir fear. This claim has also been categorically rejected by the Organization of American States. “There is no evidence, and no member country, including this one [the United States] has offered the OAS such proof,”⁴ said Secretary General José Insulza in early 2008. The Venezuelan government takes the issue of security – both at home and in the region – very seriously, and condemns all forms of terrorism.

STEPS FORWARD

On August 13, 2008, President Chávez hosted leaders from the Venezuelan Jewish community, the World Jewish Congress, and the Latin American Jewish Congress at the Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas.⁵ The gathering was a meaningful and historic occasion that laid the groundwork for increased cooperation between Venezuelan officials and Jewish citizens.

Perhaps even more importantly, the meeting also served to bury the myth that the administration of President Chávez has had an anti-Semitic orientation, jettisoning false claims that the Venezuelan leader held any religious bias. Attacks on the character and policies of the President occur frequently in Venezuela’s contested political scene. However, the false rumors of anti-Semitism have been among the most damaging and divisive of them. The meeting clarified a key point: President Chávez wants the Jewish community in Venezuela and abroad to be treated with the respect and tolerance that they deserve.



JEWISH LEADERS REACT TO THE MEETING WITH PRESIDENT CHÁVEZ:

“There may be some differences of opinion on some issues on major issues such as Iran and also the Middle East. But when it comes to anti-Semitism, I think we’re on the same page.”

-- *Michael Schneider,*
Secretary General of the
World Jewish Congress

“The Jewish community is more at ease now with President Hugo Chávez, who demonstrated he is a great friend of the Jewish community and who wants to fight anti-Semitism in Latin America.”

--*Jack Terpins, President of*
the Latin American Jewish
Congress

Above, President Chávez meets with Jewish leaders in Caracas.

NEW GROUNDS FOR COOPERATION

The August 13th meeting between President Chávez and Jewish leaders produced some concrete results that will help to brighten the future of the Jewish community in Venezuela. First, President Chávez is considering the reopening of a diplomatic office for Venezuela in Israel. Second, he agreed to join with other Latin American presidents (for example, Argentina and Brazil) in condemning "all forms of anti-Semitism, discrimination against minorities, and anti-Muslim sentiment."⁶

Most importantly, a direct dialogue has now been opened up between the Venezuelan government and the Jewish community. The unfounded claims of an anti-Jewish bias in the Chávez administration was indeed very damaging for all sides involved. However, the progress that has been made in correcting that grave distortion has helped the connection between Venezuela's government and its Jewish citizenry to grow into a much stronger and more positive one.

¹ The Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/venezuela.html>

² "Por un pedido argentino, Chávez recibió en Caracas a líderes judíos," Nestor Restivo, Clarín, August 14, 2008. <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2008/08/14/elmundo/i-01737125.htm>

³ "Misquoting Chávez to Make Him Anti-Semitic," FAIR, March 15, 2006. <http://www.commondreams.org/views06/0315-28.htm>

⁴ "OAS Chief to US Congress: No Venezuela-terrorist link," AFP, April 10, 2008. <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5ipNXwHOq34tlujMgpPj9OZVXwzrw>

⁵ "El presidente Chávez se reunion con el Congreso Judío Mundial," Congreso Judío Latinoamericano. <http://www.congresojudio.org.ar/nota.php?np=331>

⁶ "Jewish Leaders seek improved ties with Chávez," Rachel Jones, AP, August 13, 2008. <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5jvkbVe9mCz6Gty90wukF0wXBKqAAD92HQ1GG0>