

Dina Siegel Vann  
Director- Latino and Latin American Institute  
American Jewish Committee  
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**TESTIMONY OF  
DINA SIEGEL VANN  
DIRECTOR, LATINO AND LATIN AMERICAN INSTITUTE  
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE  
BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND SOUTH ASIA  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TERRORISM, NONPROLIFERATION AND TRADE**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to share with you and with the members of the three convening Subcommittees the many reasons our organization has been following with growing concern the increase of Iran's presence and influence in the Western Hemisphere.

In fact, AJC brought this issue to light in 2005, when Venezuela and Iran made a strategic decision to expand their economic and political relations, which date back to the creation of OPEC in 1964. Since then, Venezuela has become the gateway to heightened cooperation between Iran and other countries within and outside the former's sphere of influence. This seems to have had an impact on the level and intensity of anti-Semitic expressions, on bilateral relations with Israel, and on the quality of the relationship between local Jewish and Arab communities. As we continue to travel throughout the region and raise the issue with Latin American government officials, leaders of Jewish communities and representatives of civil society as a whole, we have found that growing concern for this trend is shared by many.

Some of Iran's main goals and activities in the region became quite evident as early as the 1990s. Iran and Hezbollah are thought to be complicit in the bombings of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and the Argentine Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA) in 1994, which resulted in 115 deaths and more than 500 injuries. Just last July 18<sup>th</sup>, we commemorated the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1994 bombing -- the worst anti-Semitic attack since the Second World War, and an atrocity labeled as a crime against humanity by the Argentine justice system.

While the 1992 attack remains unsolved, an official report on the AMIA bombing resulted in the activation of red alerts by Interpol for the international arrest of several high-level Iranian officials and a Hezbollah operative, who were unequivocally identified as the attack's material and operational masterminds. In fact, among those accused by the Argentinean justice are no other than the new Iranian Defense Minister Ahmed Vahidi

and Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran's so called reformer and spiritual leader, who was president at the time. Also accused is Mohsen Rezei, a commander of the powerful Revolutionary Guards from 1981-97, who ran as the conservative candidate in the recent contested presidential elections and for whom, together with the others, Interpol has activated red notices. As Tehran attempts to expand its influence in our Hemisphere, it's important to understand that, today as yesterday, the so-called moderates in Iran's ruling circles have been directly involved in exporting terrorism and massacring innocents.

Although diversification of bilateral and regional relations is the sine qua non for countries intent on being perceived as global players, the alliances struck in the last few years by many Latin American countries with Iran could be viewed as somewhat problematic. This derives from Iran's confrontational attitude toward the United States and Israel and its apparent attempts to take advantage of democratic rule, competitiveness, and a generalized climate of freedom to advance its agenda. All this comes as it is increasingly clear that a healthy hemisphere depends on nourishing a sense of partnership and connectedness among all its nations to ensure regional stability.

At his June confirmation hearing, the head of the U.S. Southern Command, General Douglas Fraser, reaffirmed his predecessor's concerns about "Iran's meddling in Latin America." General Fraser also underscored that "the real concern is not a nation-to-nation interaction," but rather "the connection that Iran has with extremist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah and the potential risk that that could bring to the region." Indeed back in January 2008, Admiral James Stavridis – then heading the Southern Command, and now the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe – had issued a warning about the potential for Latin American narco-traffickers to partner with Islamic radicals. Recently, credible reports in the media have underscored the ongoing cooperation between organizations such as the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and Hezbollah. Joint efforts could enable terrorist groups to move goods and people across borders without detection.

In October 2008, U.S. and Colombian investigators announced the dismantling of an international cocaine smuggling and money-laundering ring that allegedly used part of its profits to finance Hezbollah. The drugs were purportedly sent via Venezuela, Panama, and Guatemala to the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East. In April of this year, 17 individuals were arrested in Curacao for their alleged involvement in an international drug ring that provided financial support to Hezbollah in Lebanon. According to a statement released by Dutch authorities, the arrests were carried out thanks to a coordinated operation involving police and judicial organs from Curacao, the Netherlands, Belgium, Colombia, Venezuela and the United States. The drug proceeds were allegedly invested in several countries, said the statement.: "The organization had international contacts with other criminal networks that financially supported Hezbollah in the Middle East. Large sums of drug money flooded into Lebanon, from where orders were placed for weapons that were to have been delivered from South America."

Since the 1994 attack against AMIA, Hezbollah has greatly increased its presence and fundraising activity particularly in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) shared by Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, as documented by multiple reports and intelligence.

The most recent U.S. State Department Country Report on Terrorism, published in April 2009, confirmed that pockets of ideological sympathizers in South America and the Caribbean lend financial and moral support to terrorist groups in the Middle East. The report reiterated U.S. concern that Hezbollah and Hamas sympathizers raise funds in the TBA by participating in illicit activities and soliciting donations from backers within the sizable Muslim communities in the region. Increasing links between extremists in Chile's Iquique Free Trade Zone and those in the TBA continue to be monitored by law enforcement officials. The report also noted that Bolivia's political instability, weak legal framework, increasing coca cultivation, and opening of diplomatic relations with Iran make it a possible site for terrorist activity.

The weekly commercial flight linking Tehran and Caracas via Damascus has remained an issue of concern. It has been noted that these flights have been booked to capacity since their inauguration in March 2007, despite the fact that it is virtually impossible to purchase a ticket online through the flight operator Iran Air or its state-owned Venezuelan host, Conviasa. According to a December 21, 2008, article in the Italian periodical *La Stampa*, passengers and cargo on these flights include intelligence and military officials and "materials" banned by the UN, perhaps – including, some have suggested, materials linked to the development of nuclear weapons. Travelers from those Iran and countries Syria to Venezuela are visa-exempt, raising concern about the proliferation of false passports and making border control a difficult endeavor.

Iran has pursued a proactive policy of outreach to other countries in Latin America, exploiting anti-American sentiment and offering sorely needed funding. Since the election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005, Iran has inaugurated, reestablished, and increased its diplomatic representation in eleven nations (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Venezuela). Bolivian President Evo Morales traveled to Tehran in September 2008 to seek Iranian investment in his country's industrial and production sectors. During this official visit, Morales announced his country's intention to move its only embassy in the region from Cairo to Tehran. President Ahmadinejad has already pledged more than \$1 billion in assistance to the South American nation.

Against this backdrop, many of Latin America's 450,000 Jews are feeling quite vulnerable. Of particular concern is the situation of communities in countries, such as Venezuela, that maintain intense bilateral contact with Iran. The use of anti-Semitism as a political tool and virulent anti-Jewish/anti-Zionist expressions in the official media, particularly during the 2006 Lebanon War and the 2008-2009 Gaza operation, seem to have been the result of this alliance. Pronouncements from Presidents Chavez and Morales and other government officials denouncing Israel as genocidal and racist culminated in the severing of relation by both Venezuela and Bolivia with the Jewish State after six decades of warm and constructive bilateral ties. This worrisome trend persisted during President Chavez's latest trip to Libya, Syria and Iran.

There have been several incidents of violence against community institutions, the most recent in February 2009 against the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas. Strained relations and even confrontation between members of local Arab and Jewish communities are another disturbing development, and contribute to the fracturing of society as a whole. This is the result of virulent anti-Zionist rhetoric and media campaigns that reflect a concerted attempt to import political conflicts alien to the region.

Witness what just happened last month in Honduras. Anti-semitism, totally unrelated to the complex political impasse in the country, was utilized in the same way – by President Zelaya and at least one prominent supporter in the media – that it's been done lately in Venezuela and other countries, to scapegoat and to delegitimize. This is a deeply worrying turn of events, and it merits greater attention by all who seek to defend tolerance, pluralism and democracy in the hemisphere.

Although a direct cause-effect relationship cannot be proven, it's most probable that the development of close personal relationships and shared worldviews and agendas, including President Ahmadinejad's stated desire to destroy the Jewish State, have had an impact on the state of affairs in the region. In this context, we are deeply concerned that despite President Lula's best intentions, the programmed visit of the Iranian leader to Brazil on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, will be perceived by many as a gesture of support for his extreme positions. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that the Iranian leader, fresh from his murderous crackdown on political dissent this summer, will perceive it that way.

Three years ago, AJC first published a briefing recording a trend that had escaped most of the region's observers. Today, although the topic is more commonly discussed, evident threats are being ignored or minimized. The mere establishment of relations between sovereign nations does not in itself constitute cause for concern. Nevertheless, the assault on AMIA is a tragic and compelling reminder of the potential dangers posed by Iran and its allies to the security and well-being of the Americas. Unfortunately, many countries have chosen to marginalize this event as they seek expanded commercial and diplomatic. In fact, regional and international double-talk has blocked the Argentine government's efforts to extradite and punish those who masterminded the attack, including members of Iran's current ruling circles.

The generalized perception by some governments that the AMIA attack is far off in time and disconnected from their own reality has provided the necessary conditions for the expansion of Iranian influence and activities. Its growing presence could certainly have strong implications for democracy and security in the region. The growing strategic relationship established between countries in the Western Hemisphere and Iran deserves our attention and concern. Concerted and decisive action is needed to closely monitor the activity of Iran and the groups it subsidizes, to correctly assess their potential for mischief, and to establish mechanisms to prevent potentially dangerous scenarios.